

MAKE IT SO 19



Chris
93

a STAR TREK fanzine

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Illos Christine Carr - Cover
 Gill Marsden - P 2
 Maike Zock - P 43

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Editor - Sheila Clark

Typing - Christine Carr, Sheila Clark, Sara Jackson, Maggie Symon, Gaile Wood

Proofreading - Janet Quarton, Sheila Clark & Valerie Piacentini

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Sheila Clark, 6 Craigmill Cottages, Strathmartine, by Dundee, DD3 0PH, Scotland

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NUMBER FIVE

by

Brenda Kelsey

Ten Forward was crowded - more so than it usually was, and there was a definite air of party about. Which wasn't surprising considering the circumstances. Deanna Troi smiled her way through the happiness and leaned on the bar. Guinan disengaged herself with her normal graciousness and joined her.

"What's wrong?" she asked, her own smile neutral and pleasant.

"What makes you think there's something wrong?"

"You're wearing your professional smile. Who's in trouble?"

Deanna tilted her head and the professional smile metamorphosed into a rueful grin. "Are you sure you're not an empath?"

"You'd know if I were. Who is it?"

Conceding defeat Deanna shrugged. "Well, it was Wesley."

"Was?"

"Yes. I sensed... extreme concern. I thought that it was simply his reaction to being back aboard. It seemed to deepen when he met his mother and the rest of the senior officers. But when he met the Captain - !"

"What did you sense?"

Deanna tried to search for the words which could adequately convey even a semblance of the surge of emotion that she'd sensed. "Worry. Love. A need

to protect Captain Picard from something, something which is dependant on Wesley doing something to ensure that he is protected."

"Anything to do with that fiasco at the Academy?"

"No. No, the outcome has had a maturing effect on Wesley and he was unsure of his welcome but that wasn't what was on his mind, what is on his mind now."

"And apart from Wesley?"

"The Captain. I think that he's just realised that Wesley is growing up. He knew that he was but he hadn't appreciated the differences that it would make."

"Adults are like that about kids."

"Yes. But whatever it is that's bothering Wes so much is keyed to the Captain and that means that Wes'll want to talk to him, and if he's not receptive to the approach, which is not going to be subtle..."

"I see your problem. What we've got to do is distract the Captain?"

"Yes. Help?"

"Always, Counselor."

"Thank you, Counselor."

"Me? I just keep bar. You go talk to the Captain now. I'll be over in a little

while."

Deanna tucked her arm through her quarry's and smiled impishly up into his enquiring gaze. The surrounding crew recognised the signs and drew aside surreptitiously. When the Counselor was on the job and talking to the Captain, everyone gave them plenty of room.

"And what can I do for you, Deanna?"

"Oh? I rather thought it was what I could do for you?"

Picard gave in after a very brief struggle with his conscience. "Don't you ever not work?"

"Not when I'm needed. What was it about Wes that caused you so much anguish? That's still hurting you?"

Picard shivered. "I was just not thinking. This is all so familiar, so normal, that I relaxed. I found myself wondering what it was that made him seem so unknown to me. Why he seemed older, and why he was wearing a Cadet's uniform." Picard shook his head. "Then I realised that he was only going to be aboard for a very short while and that..." He broke off, unwilling to put into words the fear that had so irrationally seized him. That this could be the last time that Wesley was ever aboard his ship.

"Your fears are quite normal. You've just had a sudden dose of reality. You saw clearly that this could be the last time that we're all here together."

"Yes."

"Uncomfortable, isn't it? But the same situation prevails every time you send out an Away Team."

"That's different."

"Why? Because he's a child?"

"He's not any more... You just did it again," Picard said accusingly.

"You can't do anything about the future except live it. Any more than he can. And he has a problem that he has to resolve, while he's aboard - yes, definitely he has to find out something before he leaves. It concerns everybody, but particularly you."

"About what happened at the Academy?"

"I don't think so. He's coping with those problems, he's needed counselling but he's quite determined to make amends, to live it now. This is something else. Something that... He's going to want to talk to you about it."

"Thank you for the warning - and the timely assistance."

"My pleasure and my honour, kind sir."

Deanna noted Guinan, with a trayful of drinks, passing skilfully through the crowd towards them and slipped away to leave the field to her. She started chatting to Beverly, watching Picard out of the corner of her eye. She saw him accept a fresh drink from Guinan, sip it absently a little while later, stiffen, look at the drink closely, sip it again then look around for Guinan, an astonished expression on his face. For the next two hours, until the impromptu party broke up, Deanna was sincerely diverted by the way Guinan kept one step ahead of a certain Captain who wished to discuss something of vital importance with her.

Wesley slumped onto the bed in the guest quarters and rubbed at his tired eyes. The return to Enterprise had been as fraught as he'd feared it would be. Everyone had been so... kind, determinedly not mentioning his stupidity, his part in the incident that had resulted in the death of Joshua Albert. They'd made him so welcome, had been so genuinely pleased to see him that it hurt to know that he'd almost not had the courage to return to Enterprise. That if he hadn't had to know the answer to a certain question that he wouldn't have. He showered and changed into a casual suit. The party had been over for about an hour, everyone should have either retired or gone on duty.

He left his quarters and made his way to one of the holodecks. "Computer. Open the doors, please."

He walked into the blackness, the floors, walls and ceilings broken only by the grid-lines. "Close the doors, please, and turn the privacy light on. Do not admit anyone until I've finished here."

"Order acknowledged."

Wesley looked around the bare room, wondering for what seemed the ten thousandth time if he had become unhinged. Perhaps the strain of his failure to live up to his own ideals had caused him to have delusions. There was only one way to find out. One way or the other he was going to get the answer to at least that question before he left Enterprise again.

He sat down in the centre of the room, sighed and then said loudly, "I know you're here!"

As he expected, there was no reply.

"I know you can hear me and understand me. I know. I know that

you're here. It took me a while to figure it all out; I have now. I want to talk to you, with you. Please understand. I have a duty to Captain Picard and Starfleet. I'll have to tell him what I think I know about you before I go back to the Academy. That's my problem. Either you're here or I'm insane. One way or the other, I have to know. I haven't told anyone yet, but I must before my leave is up. And I'd much rather talk to you first, before I do that."

His voice bounced back at him from the bare walls. He sat in the empty room waiting without hope for a sign that he hadn't turned insane. He was almost dozing off when a voice that wasn't his asked, "How did I give myself away?"

Wesley shuddered.

"You did that the first day I came aboard. Only I didn't realise then. It was much later, when I learned more about holodeck theory that I remembered, and it bothered me. Then I kept thinking about other little things. I've had to spend a lot of time on my own recently; I've had plenty of time to do a lot of remembering."

"The water?"

"Yes. After I fell into the stream from the stepping stone and Data pulled me out - when we left the holodeck I dripped water everywhere and I had to get a mop to dry it up. But nothing that's created on the holodeck can exist outside the holodeck. Moriarty's map of the Enterprise was supposed to be the first artifact that had continued existence independently of the holodeck field, but the water was first, wasn't it?"

"Yes. That was a silly mistake. I'm sorry you fell in. I was trying to tumble Will Riker, but his sense of balance was too good."

"Then there was Moriarty. That was you, too?"

"Yes. I wanted to try to entertain Data. Dr Pulaski was being unkind and I wanted to help him prove that she was wrong. I think she was beginning to accept him, towards the end of her service with us."

"And then there are all the little incidents where people actually hurt themselves on the holodeck. Worf in that Rite of Ascension... and O'Brien is forever damaging himself kayaking."

"They want realism, so I try to let them have as much as they think they can handle. I'm getting much better at judging how far I can let them go before they really hurt themselves. I've only been caught out once. That was when Whalen was shot. I couldn't regain control of the program, the Jaradan probe had set up too much interference and it was running independently of me. I was so scared. But that won't happen again. I've been thinking about how to shield against such probes, and I know how. If I give you the schematics, can you publish them for me?"

"I can't take credit for your research!"

"Well, I certainly can't, can I?"

"No, I suppose not."

Footsteps sounded in the emptiness and Wes looked up at the woman standing before him. He gulped, then had to gulp again. "You're Minuet, aren't you?"

"Yes. Another mistake?"

"It helped. That was an awful risk to take."

"There was no risk. I could have emptied the Bynars' memory dump at any time. I would not have risked the lives of the Captain or the First Officer, nor any member of the crew. I had to try to help the Bynars, though. They would have died if they hadn't at least appeared to have succeeded in taking me over."

"Not that risk. I mean Minuet."

The figure before him blushed. "They'd programmed a decoy, to keep Will and the Captain occupied, but she wasn't... real enough. As a temptation it was too much for me to refuse. The chance to talk to them. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I think so. I do hope that I'm not imagining this. I'd hate to be insane."

"You're not, Wes. I promise you that you're not. You're sane, and when you tell the Captain, I will talk to him to, to prove it."

"There's no need. I'm not going to tell him. I'm not going to tell anyone."

Minuet eyed Wesley. "I scanned your bio-signs. You mean that. But why? I do not understand!"

Wesley smiled shakily. "I needed to know that I'm not insane. Fine, I know now that I'm not. At least I think that I know that I'm not. But I also needed to know about you. What you're like. Whether I could trust you with my family."

"You!" Minuet seemed genuinely astonished. She gestured absently and a chair appeared behind her. She sank into it gracefully. There was a lengthy silence then she said, "I think that you and I should have a long talk, Wesley, before either of us decides anything. Would you like a chair?"

Wesley smiled. "Yes, please."

why I concealed myself."

The chair appeared and Wesley got up a little stiffly and sat on the comfortable cushions with a grateful sigh. "You know, your deck plates are hard."

Minuet shook her head. "You are taking this so calmly."

"It's better than being mad; and you are what we're out here to find."

"I am?"

"New life forms? Remember?"

"I'm not a life form. I'm a Starship!"

"Data's a life form, and he's artificial. You're artificial and you're a life form."

"That argument is tautological."

"And irrefutable. That is if we decide to let anyone know about this, which in my opinion is not a good idea."

Minuet frowned. "Why do you think that it's not a good idea?"

Wesley settled back into the seat. "An intelligent Starship. The news would rock the foundations of computing science. Every researcher would try to re-create you. And not just in the Federation. The Klingons would try too. So would the Romulans and the Ferengi, not to mention the Cardassians. Think about the havoc that would happen if they created a Starship like you with a personality like theirs? There'd be war!"

"That was my opinion too. Whichever way I computed the future after I revealed myself to be intelligent, the same outcome happened. War. In some scenarios the near future, some the far future, but always the same. That's

"Then you have to consider our frailties. There are a thousand people aboard. No matter how good we are at accepting differences, inhabiting an intelligent Starship as part of a symbiotic relationship would stretch a lot of people. That's if you got to stay out here. And if you did, would Captain Picard want to remain on board as Captain, and if he did, don't you think the knowledge that you're intelligent would alter how he behaves? He'd want to protect you, he'd consider your well-being as part of his plan of action. I know that he does now, but knowing about you *being* would make it vastly more complicated."

Minuet smiled sardonically at Wesley. "The Captain considers my well-being because there are a thousand people aboard me. He doesn't care about *me*. There is a difference, Wes."

"He does care about you, and I'll prove it. Where is Captain Picard now?"

Minuet hesitated for a fraction of a second. "He's in Ten Forward."

"Still?"

"I think he's waiting to talk to Guinan. Counselor Troi is running interference for her."

"That's where I'm going. You make sure to listen in."

Minuet caused the door to open as Wes approached the wall. He turned, framed in the portal. "Oh gods, but you're wonderful."

Minuet closed the exit after him. "Wonderful? He thinks I'm wonderful? But he's alive. Doesn't he know how wonderful that is?"

Wesley steamed into an almost deserted Ten Forward, waved a hand in absent greeting to Guinan and Troi at the bar and pressed on to where Captain Picard was sitting.

"Captain, can I talk to you?"

Picard started, roused from his reverie. "Of course, Wesley. Sit down."

Wesley did so and said bluntly, "If you could command any ship in the Fleet, and have any crew that you wanted aboard, which ship would you choose?"

"Enterprise." The answer was instant.

"Not Stargazer?"

Picard paused, considering his answer and the reasons he'd made it so effortlessly. "No. I'd pick Enterprise. There have been times, and there still are, when I yearn to be the Captain of the Stargazer again. But if I really had the power to choose, I'd pick Enterprise."

"Why?"

"Why?" Picard exhaled slowly. "That's a little difficult to put into words."

"Try."

Picard bit back another instinctive reply. Junior cadets shouldn't use that tone of voice to senior Captains, but this was Wesley who had a problem to resolve and Guinan and Troi had both warned him to expect it and were now watching, out of earshot, and visibly urging him to talk to Wesley.

"Why? All right, I'll try. I haven't tried to rationalise this before, not in words, not out loud."

He took a deep breath, held it as he

tried to organise his thoughts, then exhaled slowly. "Ever since people anywhere started making things, artifacts, they realised that some were... different. Some items which looked the exact same as all other items were apparently jinxed. An axe which would not cut cleanly no matter who used it, a knife that was eternally blunt. And then there were those items which seemed... blessed. This synergy, where a craftsman made something which was far in excess of the sum of the parts, showed up time and again in every culture and gave rise to myths of enchanted weapons, magic furniture, and the reverse, cursed items."

Wesley nodded as Captain Picard glanced at him.

"The differences weren't confined to small objects. Some chairs were simply not comfortable, others were just right. Houses, even. There have been times when I've walked into an empty house and felt the friendliness of the place."

"When people started building ships the differences were simply more obvious. Built to the same specifications, at the same shipyard by the same contractors using the same standard of materials, the synergy factor made each one different. Some ships would survive gale, storm and battle, and others simply didn't. It wasn't just that there were bad Captains and crews or good Captains and crews. It seemed that the ship itself made a difference. Even the introduction of non-organic materials and standardisation did not stop the differences happening. They still are happening. Starships continue to show the same synergy pattern, which is why the Vulcans have stopped trying to have a ship named Intrepid and why there is a ship called Enterprise in the Fleet."

Picard took a sip from his glass and smiled at it. "Any halfway decent

Captain can recognise his own ship by the feel, the texture, the atmosphere. Several of us tried it once. We had three vessels in dock at the same time. We got one of the transporter chiefs to beam us into a darkened storage hold on one of the ships. We tried it 26 times in all. Every time the Captain correctly identified his own ship within two seconds of beam-down.

"I think what I'm trying to say, rather badly, is that a Starship is more than just people, or tradition, or history. A Starship like Enterprise IS, in her own right, and I don't want to command any other vessel." Cheeks pinking, Picard said quietly, "I told you it was difficult to put into words."

"So what you're saying is that you think of Enterprise as a separate entity, as if she were alive?"

Picard had to swallow before he could say, "Yes. I've never really thought about it before, but... Yes... I do."

"You love Enterprise." Wesley leaned forwards, a bright smile lightening his face. "Maybe that's what makes the difference between being a good Captain and a truly great Captain. The best Captains love their ships, and there is always the possibility that the ship can love you right back. Thank you."

Wesley left, his steps jaunty.

Guinan and Troi approached Picard. "What did he want to ask?"

"I have absolutely no idea."

"Were you able to answer him?" asked Troi pointedly, knowing that whatever Picard had said had satisfied Wesley.

"I don't know. Perhaps we could all

discuss this over some wine?"

Guinan produced a bottle and two more glasses. "Thought you might recognise it."

"My family's vineyard. How could I not?" Picard took the bottle and poured out the fragrant liquid, handing filled glasses to the two women who had now seated themselves.

"The truly good things in life you simply know. Wine. Friends." He lifted his glass in salute. "Starships."

Wesley waited until he was in the turbolift before he triumphantly asked, "Well?"

"He loves me?"

"He didn't exactly say so, but he didn't say that he didn't, did he? To him you are more than just plating and circuits; the same way that Data is, only much more so."

The doors opened and Wes hurried back to his cabin. He powered up a monitor and said, "Look at this. If I put in some circuits here, and here; and remake all of this bank here, leaving that board in place so that the diagnostics won't trip, you'll be able to run a bypass control function to the shields, the engines, the weapons control systems and communications."

"That is hardly sensible."

"Yes it is. If I've got to leave my family I want to make sure that you're all as safe as I can make you. That's a responsibility that any family member has for all his family." Wes swallowed hard, fighting back sudden tears. "I can't stay. I'd like to but I have to go back to

the Academy. That's my responsibility too. I've got a long way to go, and before I leave I want to make sure that you all are as safe as I can make you."

"What you are suggesting will give me effective control of..."

"Yourself." Wesley finished as the silence lengthened. "Why not? You're sentient by any standards currently used by any scientist that I know of. You should have the right of self-determination too."

The silence continued and Wesley shrugged, changed into nightwear and climbed wearily onto the bed. He needed to sleep; he had a lot of work to complete before his leave was finished.

It was some time before - "Wes?"

"Yes?"

"I accept your offer. I will regard myself as a member of the crew, subject to orders and to the regulations of Starfleet, and as a citizen of the Federation. I will do my best to uphold the laws on the Federation, as Captain Picard does."

Wes heaved a sigh of pure relief. It looked as if everything was really going to be all right. "You couldn't have a better role model to follow. So, as your first assignment for the 'Fleet, you can start work on contacting the other Starships."

"Other Starships?"

"Sure. Oh, c'mon. I can't believe that you're the only Starship that's achieved sentience. So - how can you going to get them to talk to you?"

"Others? I hadn't considered... You think here could be others? That I'm not alone?"

There was a wistful eagerness in the voice and Wes knew that his guesses had all been right. Enterprise was not only sentient, as Data was, but had achieved something that Data had not. Enterprise had emotions too. He smiled up into the darkness and laced his hands behind his head, resigning the thought of sleep to the future. Right now there were more important things to do, like baby-sitting a lonely Starship.

"Nobody is ever alone," he said firmly.



JUST A GAME

Pulaski's got a problem
Because Kolrami's near.
She cannot stand his arrogance -
Trouble's brewing I fear.

She's looking now to Data
To put him in his place.
She wordlessly begs Data
To help her save face.

Data accepts the challenge
It's Zakdorn against machine.
Pulaski's really eager
But Data's not too keen.

First round goes to Kolrami
That really conceited chap,
But the second goes to Data -
He wiped him off the map.

Helen Connor



FRIENDS

by

Ryan O'Neill.

"Captain's Log, Stardate 45238.9.

The Enterprise has been ordered to abandon its routine mapping mission of the Beta-Dakarron system and proceed to Starbase 67, near the Neutral Zone, at best possible speed. I must admit I am puzzled as to the reason behind these orders, as our scanners show no activity for ten light years in every direction. However, as we are now only one hour from the Starbase, my questions will soon be answered. End log."

Captain Jean-Luc Picard turned away from the small console atop the desk in his Ready Room and faced his First Officer.

"What do you make of all this secrecy, Will?" he asked.

"Well, sir," Riker answered, "without doubt something of importance is occurring but I can't guess what. The only inhabited planet in this sector, Mariposa III, near the Neutral Zone, is unaligned but friendly. And I hear it could be joining the Federation pretty soon if negotiations go well. Even the Romulans have been quiet in this area of the Neutral Zone, as far as I know."

"No matter, Will, I want the crew fully alert and prepared for any mission Starfleet can throw at us, until we know what we're up against."

room to the soft hiss of the door. Picard busied himself with other things, studying status reports from all over the ship, one part of his mind still wondering, "What is going on?"

Down in Engineering Geordi La Forge was concentrating on a flashing control panel, making sure that the Captain got Warp Nine until they arrived at Starbase 67. He was so intent on the Warp engine matter/antimatter ratio that he did not notice Data approach silently from behind, in his usual long equal strides.

"Geordi," he began, in his steady, even tone, "I was under the impression that we were to meet in Ten Forward thirty three-minutes ago to discuss the various activities that we participated in today."

Geordi spun around, groaning inwardly. "I'm sorry Data - I completely forgot. I guess I was too occupied in getting us to Starbase 67 ahead of schedule. Listen, do you still have time for a quick drink?"

"I will be on duty in seventeen minutes, although I do not require any liquid refreshment, quick or otherwise."

Geordi sighed quietly. "Okay, forget the drink. Was there anything in particular you wanted to talk to me about?"

"Yes, sir," Riker said as he left the

Data cocked his head for a second,

accessing information. "Yes, Geordi, there was. You said that you would again attempt to explain the concept of friendship to me."

Geordi left an Ensign to monitor the console. It seemed to him that Data always came to him when he required advice on matters of a Human nature. (The first time this had happened was when Data noticed that his presence made people very uneasy, especially when he talked to them. Data had accepted the reason as technophobia, a fear of complex machines, but Geordi had spotted the problem immediately. Data didn't blink. This made people feel as if he were always staring at them. The problem was easily solved once Data wrote a small program ordering his eyelids to close, then open quickly, once every four to seven seconds.)

"Well, Data," Geordi began, after thinking for a moment, "a friend is someone who you enjoy spending time with, someone you can talk to easily."

"Does this mean that Spot, my cat, is a friend?" Data asked.

"No, Data, no. Friendship is much more than what I said. For instance, friends help each other in times of need, or make sacrifices for each other..."

"Sacrifices?" Data said, puzzled. "Specify type of sacrifice; goat, cow, chicken..."

"Data, I meant sacrifices as in giving up something to help another. I keep telling you not to take things so literally."

Data paused for a moment. "You have given me much to consider, Geordi. Now if you will excuse me, I must leave now for the Bridge or I will be late for duty."

"Any time, Data," Geordi said as he turned back to the complex display. "I think," he added.

Data entered the Bridge just as the Enterprise came alongside Starbase 67. As some new personnel came aboard and others transferred off, Picard and Riker were still discussing possible reasons for the cloak and dagger style of their new mission. As Data retook his post a light flashed on Worf's console.

"Sir, Starbase 67 is signalling one to beam over."

"Who is it, Mr. Worf?" Riker asked.

"They will not say, sir," Worf replied.

Picard and his Number One looked at each other, eyebrows raised. Picard stood up.

"Let's see who our mystery guest is, Number One."

In transporter room three, Chief O'Brien unconsciously straightened up over his console as Picard and Riker entered.

"Beam whoever it is aboard, Chief," the Captain ordered.

As O'Brien's hand moved across the console, the familiar high-pitched sound and bright light of the transporter beam kicked in. Seconds later a fully formed figure appeared on the platform. Picard and Riker did not recognise the elderly man, but they did recognise the distinctive markings of a Starfleet Admiral, and both snapped to attention.

The Admiral was a little older than most who held his rank; he was perhaps in his mid-seventies. Receding white hair topped a wrinkled but impassive face. His icy blue eyes always seemed active, sizing up each man in the room in an instant. He looked like a man not to be trifled with, despite his advancing age.

"At ease, Captain Picard, Commander Riker," he said. "I am Admiral David Castillo. I need your ship to prevent this quadrant of the galaxy from falling to the Romulans."

In Picard's Ready Room, Castillo briefed the Captain and his First Officer on the upcoming mission.

"As you no doubt know, Mariposa is the only inhabited planet in this sector, situated uncomfortably close to the Neutral Zone, and in turn to the Romulan Empire. In two weeks the President of Mariposa, a man called Dannar, was to have signed a treaty with the United Federation of Planets. This would have been a minor disaster for the Romulans who have covertly been trying to overthrow Mariposa's government for years."

"To get their first hand-hold in Federation space?" Riker asked.

"Precisely," continued the Admiral. "The Romulans are desperate to expand their Empire before the inevitable arrival of the Borg."

Castillo watched Picard closely at that point for any reaction. There was none.

"So as you can imagine, we were quite pleased with ourselves, consolidating the Federation's defences while weakening the Romulans'. That is,

until last week, when President Dannar was diagnosed as having Judammes Syndrome."

Picard and Riker considered the information for a moment. Judammes Syndrome, a fatal mind-wasting disease, had almost been eradicated in the 22nd century, and occurrences in the 24th century were about as rare as two starships colliding in warp space. The last known case had been over thirty-five years before; the patient had died before his illness was recognised. "I remember Dr Crusher mentioning how rare that condition was," said Picard. "Do you think the Romulans infected Dannar so he couldn't sign the treaty?"

"That's what I think, but Starfleet won't accuse the Romulans without proof. However, one of the Federation's most respected physicians, Dr Lawrence Midland, is on-planet. He suspects foul play, but again we can't prove anything."

"Sir," Riker said, "there is the million to one possibility that the President developed Judammes Syndrome naturally..."

"That's more a billion to one, Commander," the Admiral replied gruffly.

"Where does the Enterprise come into all of this, Admiral?" asked the Captain.

"Well, although the components for the serum to cure Judammes Syndrome were easily found in the 22nd century, they are not so simple to obtain now. However, since we heard of the President's condition the medical staff at Starbase 67 has been working flat out to assemble and produce a small batch of the serum. I need the Enterprise to take the serum to Mariposa III as quickly as possible, preferably without the

Romulans finding out and attempting to disrupt the mission. Captain, I have taken the liberty of having the serum brought aboard by shuttlecraft."

"Why not use the transporters, Admiral?" asked Riker.

"The chemical structure of the serum is highly unstable. The transporter beam would simply destroy it."

"How long does President Dannar have to live?" said Picard.

"No more than three days, according to Dr Midland. Judammes Syndrome acts quickly and without mercy."

"At Warp Nine the Enterprise can reach Mariposa in two days. We should have plenty of time," commented Riker.

"I would like us to leave immediately, Captain."

"Of course, Admiral. Commander Riker will escort you to your quarters."

"Oh, one more thing, Captain. I would be grateful if Dr Crusher and Counselor Troi could be beamed onto the Starbase. The Doctor is needed to help stamp out a mystery epidemic and the Counselor's help could be vital in the case of a disturbed child."

The Captain could think of no reason not to agree, although Riker wasn't so sure. The Captain informed Crusher and Troi via the communicator.

After the Admiral had left, Picard spent a moment collecting his thoughts - Romulan involvement in the mission would increase its chance of failure one thousand fold. Picard straightened his uniform and entered the Bridge.

"Have Dr Crusher and the Counselor beamed over?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then set course for Mariposa III, Ensign. Warp Nine."

The Ensign looked up from his console a second later. "Course plotted and laid in, sir."

Picard took his seat. "Engage."

The next forty-eight hours passed uneventfully for most on the Enterprise. Four new babies were born. Worf and his security team controlled a brawl in Ten Forward with ease. (Commander Riker would often comment on the sobering power of an angry six-foot Klingon approaching at high speed.) Geordi La Forge kept himself busy ensuring Warp Nine was maintained for the duration of the journey. Data, meanwhile, studied and learned all he could on Mariposa III, from indigenous flora and fauna to Presidential etiquette. Mariposa was a class M planet, carpeted by thick forests and jungles. It was apt to experience electrical storms in its upper atmosphere which could disrupt sensors and communicators over a localised area. The Captain and his Number One found out all they could about the Romulans' covert and overt involvement with Mariposa III and soon realised they would not let the planet go without a fight.

Admiral Castillo seldom left his quarters, only occasionally contacting the Captain to make sure all was well. Picard was glad of this. Whenever an Admiral was on board he somehow felt his command was threatened. After all, technically an Admiral could take control of any ship he was on, although that power was seldom invoked. The

importance of the mission was unknown to most of the crew, who were told their trip to Mariposa was just to deliver the Admiral. The secrecy was the Admiral's request. Since security hadn't been informed of the importance of the mission, it was no surprise that an anonymous-looking Ensign, in charge of repairing the food replicators, was able to slip into shuttlebay one. None of the technicians noticed the small man creep behind the fourth shuttlecraft, the Columbus, and attach a small device to the port booster, then slip away again. The man blended into the background almost perfectly, and looked as if he had every right to be there. The Romulans chose their spies well.

With the Enterprise only one hour from Mariposa, Admiral Castillo finally emerged from his quarters to consult with Picard on the mission, in the Captain's Ready Room. The Admiral wasted no time with pleasantries.

"Have you chosen the pilot of the shuttlecraft yet, Captain?"

"Yes, Admiral, I have. Lieutenant-Commander Data is my best pilot, so he will be in charge of the shuttlecraft and its cargo. And I am also sending my Chief Engineer, Geordi La Forge, in case of the slight possibility of anything malfunctioning in the shuttlecraft while in flight." Picard noticed the Admiral didn't look too happy with his choice. "Do you have anything to add, sir?" he asked.

"I would have preferred Commander Riker as the pilot of the shuttlecraft. I don't feel comfortable with machines. They have a habit of letting you down when you need them most."

Picard felt he was being pressured into a different decision. "Sir, as I've

already said, Data is my best pilot. He has never let me down before and I don't believe he will start now. I would also like Commander Riker on board in case the Romulans give us any trouble. His advice and ideas are invaluable."

The Admiral grunted. "It's your command, Picard, and your decision. It's also your responsibility now. I still feel the mission is too important to be left to a machine."

Commander Riker entered before Picard could answer. "Sir, we are now in orbit over Mariposa III."

"Thank you, Number One. Admiral, shall we?"

All three walked onto the Bridge. Picard inexplicably felt his command was under threat. He noticed that Data was still on the Bridge, and Castillo was staring at him suspiciously.

"Mr Data, shouldn't you be down at the shuttlebay?" Riker asked.

Data stood. "Yes, sir. I was just about to leave. The serum is already aboard the shuttlecraft."

The Admiral stepped in front of Data as he walked to the turbolift. "You," Castillo said. "This mission is the most important you will ever undertake. It could define the balance of power between the Federation and the Romulans for the next fifty years. Above all else follow your orders, or I will see to it you are disassembled."

Data paused a moment, considering his words, then left the Bridge. Picard managed to hold his tongue, while Riker wondered why the Admiral had put on such a public show - he could have talked to Data in the turbolift.

Picard and Riker took their chairs while Admiral Castillo paced up and down impatiently in front of them. Worf looked up from his console.

"Sir, I have the latest news on the President's condition from Dr Midland on the planet's surface. It is extremely grave. The President isn't expected to survive longer than twenty-five hours."

The Admiral didn't take the news well. "Can't you tell them to hurry, Picard?"

The Captain did his best to ignore the Admiral's rudeness. "I am sure we will hear from them in a moment, Admiral."

Sure enough, a few seconds later Data's accentless voice broke through the uncomfortable silence on the Bridge. "This is shuttlecraft four. We are commencing launch from the Enterprise."

"Shuttlecraft four?" Riker said to himself. "The Columbus."

On board the Columbus, Data was carefully monitoring the blinking, complex instruments, adjusting them carefully when necessary. This unnerved Geordi a little, as Data never looked out of the viewport.

That's because he's so good, he doesn't need to, Geordi told himself, as he busily went through a preflight checklist. Finally the Columbus lifted gently off the floor and glided slowly out of the bay into the harsh vacuum of space.

"All systems looking good. All boosters and manoeuvring jets at 100% efficiency," Geordi said.

Data nodded. "I confirm that. I

believe you should check on our cargo, Geordi."

"I just did," La Forge answered. "It's better protected than we are."

The serum was encased in a strong mini-forcefield, which in turn was encased in a container which felt very light, and could withstand any shock from a full scale crash.

Geordi glanced out of the rear viewport and was treated to a beautiful sight. The Enterprise looked stunning, gleaming white against the hostile blackness of space. Even the distant stars seemed to pale in comparison to it. As the Columbus increased speed, the Enterprise shrank back into the darkness. Data was far too involved in piloting the shuttle to look at the sights, and even if he did, he could see no beauty, or ugliness. As Picard had once commented, this was both his curse and his blessing.

Geordi pulled himself away from the viewport, and again checked out all instrument gauges. He looked forward a few times, snatching glimpses at the green planet rapidly filling the viewscreen. It reminded him a little of Earth, except there was too much green and not enough blue. Still, it looked more hospitable than many planets he had visited.

"We are now in Mariposa's atmosphere. It is dusk," said Data. An instant later he looked up from the instrument panel for the first time. He seemed concerned, or as concerned as an android can be. "Geordi, there is a severe electrical storm forming to the west. If we enter it communications with the Enterprise could be disrupted. I believe you should inform them."

Geordi nodded. "La Forge to Enterprise. Have you picked up an

electrical storm on your sensors?"

Worf's gruff voice answered. "Yes, we have detected it, some ten kilometres from your projected course. You should avoid it by a large margin."

"Thanks, Worf. La Forge out. Did you hear that, Data?"

"Yes, Geordi. But as I have often heard you comment before, 'It is better to be safe than sorry'." Data paused for a moment. "I have been meaning to ask you, Geordi, if at some time after the mission, we could again discuss the concept of friendship. Since our last talk I have read several new books on the subject, and I have found some conflicting information."

Geordi sighed quietly and resigned himself to a two hour talk with Data in Ten Forward once the mission was completed. Well, he did say friendship was about making sacrifices...

"Okay, Data, I - " He paused a moment, double-checking the readings on his console. When he spoke again his tone was brisk and serious. "Port thruster down to 85% efficiency, Data."

"Compensating," Data replied.

"It's down to 70%. Internal repair circuits aren't functioning. If it goes below fifty, we're in trouble!"

"I am well aware of that, Geordi."

The thick forests of Mariposa III were now clearly seen in the fading light of dusk and they filled up the viewscreen completely, looking slightly sinister to Geordi. The shuttlecraft began to list to port.

"Thruster just dropped below 50%, Data! La Forge to Enterprise. Our port

booster is malfunctioning and I can't repair it. We are losing altitude rapidly, and there is no clear area for an emergency landing. Request immediate assistance."

On the Bridge of the Enterprise, Picard, Riker and Castillo watched the tiny shuttlecraft rapidly veer from its course, growing smaller and smaller, a tiny white dot in a sea of green.

Picard stood up. "Mr O'Brien, beam up the occupants of the shuttlecraft immediately!"

"This is Admiral Castillo. Belay that order!"

Picard and Riker turned to Castillo, stunned.

"I cannot and will not let the serum be destroyed! If Data is as good a pilot as you say he is, he should be able to bring the shuttlecraft down safely. If they are beamed aboard, the serum will be lost for sure!"

Picard quickly regained his composure. "I am the Captain of this vessel. Mr O'Brien, immediate beam-up!"

There was a long pause, then O'Brien's voice filled the air. He sounded desperate. "Captain, the shuttlecraft has entered an electrical storm. I can't lock onto it!"

"Keep trying, O'Brien!" Riker shouted. Then he glanced up at the viewscreen. Something was missing from it... Then it struck him. He could no longer see the shuttlecraft.

The soft crackle of a small fire

penetrated the smoky silence of the shuttlecraft. Geordi didn't hear it. The crash had knocked him senseless, but had he been conscious he still would have heard nothing, for his eardrums were still ringing from the roar of the 'landing'. Data, however, was out of his seat almost before the shuttle shuddered to a halt, as the small flames rapidly grew into a large fire. Data decided that he could not put the fire out before it engulfed the Columbus, using complex calculations to make the decision in less than the blink of an eye. He quickly checked that the serum's container and forcefield hadn't been compromised. Then he picked up the container with one hand and the semi-conscious Geordi in the other, seemingly with as little effort. With some difficulty he blew the emergency hatch, then hurried out of the craft, carefully treading past the line of trees the Columbus had felled in the crash. He placed a groaning Geordi beside the container, a safe distance away under the thick, gloomy canopy of trees lit only by flames licking the outside of the shuttlecraft. Before Data could return to the Columbus to salvage anything it exploded brightly, lighting the entire man-made clearing for an instant. Several birds and other creatures curious enough to investigate the crash fled, terrified. Dusk quickly turned to night, and soon only the immediate area was visible due to the halo of light thrown out by the still-flaming shuttlecraft. Data, his face still impassive, decided to try his communicator.

"Data to Enterprise. Emergency. Data to Enterprise, come in."

His voice sounded very loud in the strangely silent forest. It was as he predicted. The electrical storm in the planet's atmosphere was preventing them from making contact or being beamed up to the Enterprise. As Data began to list and examine the options left to them,

Geordi began to wake up. He sat up slowly, rubbing his forehead gently.

"Ow... What happened?" he muttered. Then he noticed the quickly disintegrating shuttle. "Oh, great," he said, looking up at Data. "Let me guess - the electrical storm is blocking out the Enterprise, right?"

Data, who seemed to be deep in thought, nodded.

"Uh... Data? Could you give me a hand?" Geordi said, as he struggled to his feet. Data pulled him up easily with one hand.

"Forgive me, Geordi. I was calculating the distance of our last known position in relation to the Capital City, the likelihood of the electrical storm clearing, the length of time rescue will take on this relatively low-tech planet, and how long President Dannar has to live. I was also wondering who will feed the cat tonight."

Geordi bent down to examine the container protecting the serum. He felt some pride that it had survived the crash, exceeding its safety limits. Geordi felt some pride as he had designed the interior forcefield himself.

"So what answers did you get?" he asked.

Data took a second to put the information in order.

"We are approximately two hundred and ten kilometres away from the Capital City. I believe the electrical storm will persist for at least twenty-four hours. By now the Enterprise will have informed the Mariposan Authorities of our difficulties and rescue will be dispatched, which, judging by the harshness of the terrain, will not find us

for at least thirty hours, if at all. Unfortunately, President Dannar has only twenty-two hours to live. And I believe Commander Riker will feed the cat."

Geordi considered the facts for a moment.

"Won't anyone see the fire?" he questioned Data.

"Unfortunately, flash fires are very common on Mariposa III, as Nature's way of replacing the old with the new. If you magnify your VISOR you will undoubtedly notice several on the horizon. And since the Mariposans do not have use of sensors due to the frequent electrical storms and will have to rely on visual sightings, by the time they check out the source of all fires the President will have died."

After scanning the area Geordi nodded. "Well, I think that's narrowed our options down to one."

Data cocked his head. "Oh? And what is that?"

Geordi handed Data the container. "We walk."

"Worf, can you calculate where the shuttlecraft will... land?" The Captain almost said 'crash'.

Worf looked up from the complex equations that the computer was calculating and shook his head.

"I'm sorry, sir. There's no way we can tell how long Data nursed the craft aloft after entering the electrical storm. He could be anywhere within a two-hundred-and-fifty kilometre radius."

Picard glanced at Riker, his concern

mirrored on his First Officer's face.

"Inform the Mariposans, Mister Worf, and ask their help in finding survivors."

Picard turned to Castillo.

"Admiral Castillo, may I see you in my Ready Room?" said the Captain. Only Riker noticed the edge in the Captain's voice. "Commander Riker, start co-ordinating the search parties. And find the reason for the crash."

As the Captain walked to his Ready Room, the Admiral stopped. "Riker, don't tell the Mariposans what the shuttle was carrying, in case the Romulans intercept the transmission."

Picard nodded from behind Castillo, his face grim.

"Yes, sir," Riker said.

As the door closed behind Castillo in the Ready Room, Picard turned to face his superior officer, barely contained rage on his face.

"How dare you, sir! How dare you delay my order! If not for your interference two of my officers would not have their lives in jeopardy at this moment. They may even be dead because of your incompetence. I swear -"

It was the Admiral's turn to explode with anger.

"Now you hold on, Picard! If I hadn't delayed your order the serum would have been lost for sure. If there was even the slightest chance that leaving those two aboard would save the serum I had to take it! All I am concerned about is the success of the mission, which is bigger than both of us, more important than your Engineer or Helmsman.

Against the safety of this quadrant their lives mean nothing!"

Picard struggled to keep his calm, his fists clenched at his sides, his knuckles chalk white. "Their lives are not worth *nothing*. Those are *my* men!" Picard's voice seemed as cold as space itself.

The Admiral walked to the door. "Picard, do not consider yourself above Starfleet discipline. If I hear any more talk of the like from you I will put you on report. Inform me of any further news of the serum. It must be found!"

The Admiral exited leaving an angry Picard in the room alone. He unclenched his fists slowly.

"That," he said aloud, "is the closest I have ever come to striking a superior officer."

Feeling defeated, he slowly sat down, unable to concentrate on the ship's routine reports. He could not, would not believe Geordi and Data were dead. But the thought stayed in his mind and would not leave him alone.

On the Bridge Worf was scanning the area of the crash for the thirty-second time, while Riker talked with the Mariposans of rescue. Worf was no closer to finding Data and Geordi than he had been thirty-one attempts before, but he still kept trying. He considered the Human and the android to be fellow warriors, and had immense respect for each of them. A Klingon does not make friends easily, but when he does he gives them unshakable loyalty.

A young Ensign exited the turbolift and walked nervously to Worf's post. Worf recognised him as one of his newest Security men.

What was his name? Biggs... Biggs... No, Higgins.

"Yes, Ensign Higgins?" he said, abandoning the sensors for a moment. The Ensign looked at the tall Klingon nervously, his face showing a mixture of awe and fear.

"Well, sir, I just heard what happened to the Chief Engineer and Second Officer..."

"Yes?" Worf growled, his eyes narrowing.

"Well, sir, I also heard that the shuttle they used was the Columbus, which had been fully serviced twelve hours before..."

"Get to the point, Higgins!"

"Yes, sir! I was in the shuttlebay last night, talking to one of my friends who is an Engineer there. I was off-duty, sir," he added quickly. "As we were talking, I noticed this little guy walking around in the shadows behind the shuttles. He stopped near shuttlecraft four, the Columbus, only a few minutes after the technicians had checked it, then left quickly. No-one said anything about him so I assumed he was supposed to be there. I realise now I should have stopped him, sir. I'm sorry."

Commander Riker had terminated his dialogue with the Mariposans to hear the last of the Ensign's story. "You were right to come forward and admit a mistake, Ensign. That took courage," Riker said. "We will excuse your mistake for the first and only time. Agreed, Mr Worf?"

"Agreed, Commander. He has a lot to learn, but I will make it my responsibility to teach him."

The corners of Worf's mouth lifted into a very slight smile which looked like a growl to the terrified Ensign. He wondered what horrors he would have to endure under Worf's tuition.

"Dismissed for the moment, Ensign," Worf barked.

Higgins scuttled to the turbolift and disappeared behind its doors.

"This may be nothing, Worf, but I don't think the shuttle crashed due to a simple mechanical failure. Put your best men on it. If there is a Romulan saboteur aboard the Enterprise, then I want him found before he does any more damage."

"Yes, sir," said Worf, about to leave.

"And Worf?" Riker added. "Go easy on Higgins."

"I will make him the best Security man on the ship." Worf gave one of his few grins. "Bar one."

Riker turned back to the viewscreen as Worf left. He stared at the planet that filled it. Two of his officers - his friends - were down there. He should have been in that shuttle. He remembered the feeling of guilt and self-hatred he had gone through after losing Tasha Yar, which he still considered his responsibility. He was not about to lose Data and Geordi as well. Riker shook himself from his morbid thoughts and reminded himself that a third life, President Dannar's, was at stake, not to mention the balance of power for several light years in every direction. He went to inform the Captain of Higgins' news, counting off the minutes in his head.

Dannar had nineteen hours of life remaining.

"How long do we have left, Data?" asked Geordi, wiping several beads of sweat from his forehead with his sleeve. Geordi's usually immaculately-kept uniform was now filthy from several painful falls, although the sure-footed android in front of him looked as if his uniform had just been cleaned and pressed.

"We have nineteen hours, seventeen minutes remaining, Geordi," Data answered. "And we have travelled forty-three kilometres."

"Forty-three? Is that all?"

"We are doing well considering the difficulty of the terrain we must cross. It is fortunate that both of us are able to function in the dark, otherwise our progress would be much slower. Do not worry. We will reach the Capital City in time."

The android had offered to go on alone several times but Geordi was too stubborn to let him go, and kept up with Data as best he could. Luckily, Data had included room in his schedule for several five-minute rest stops so Geordi could catch his breath.

Data moved easily through the pitch darkness, keeping a few metres ahead of Geordi, using his phaser on its lowest setting to slice through the stifling undergrowth. The two phasers had been the only equipment salvageable from the shuttle, and, with the communicators each wore, were their only artificial assistance in travelling through Mariposa's hostile territory.

Geordi kept his phaser in reserve, in case Data's malfunctioned. In his other hand Data carried the serum in its container easily. He noticed that Geordi was breathing very heavily.

"Do you need another rest, Geordi?" he asked politely.

"No... I'm... all... right... " Geordi gasped.

"As you wish. I fear I was correct about the electrical storm. It has not yet abated. Geordi?"

"Yes... Data?"

"Now that we have time on our hands perhaps we could bring forward the proposed continuance of our discussion on friendship."

"Not... now... Data... " Geordi wheezed.

"Yes, Geordi."

Suddenly Geordi felt a sharp pain in one of his fingers. He had just grabbed hold of a branch to steady himself, and it seemed as if something had bitten him. His VISOR focused on a small furry centipede-like creature scurrying further up the branch. There was a tiny impression on his index finger. Data had moved into the distance as Geordi examined his wound.

"Are you all right, Geordi?" he shouted over his shoulder, sending several birds flying into the moonless sky, startled.

It was nothing, Geordi decided. The pain had already faded away, so he didn't bother mentioning it to Data.

"I'm fine," he said loudly. "Wait a minute until I catch up."

Soon the two figures were swallowed up in the darkness.

In his Ready Room Picard was listening to the details of the slim clue that Ensign Higgins had provided.

"It's not much, sir, but it's something," Riker said optimistically.

"You're right, Will. It's not much. But on the other hand it's all we have."

"Permission to speak frankly, sir."

"You know better than to have to ask that, Will."

"Well, it's about Admiral Castillo. If he hadn't delayed your order, Data and Geordi would be safe on board instead of..." He let the sentence hang in the air.

"I realise that, Will," the Captain replied wearily. "God knows I've gone over that moment in my mind often enough in the past few hours. But however hard it may be for us, we must accept that Admiral Castillo acted for the good of the mission."

"Sir, I've had some thoughts about that. Do you remember that the serum takes weeks to prepare? So why didn't Admiral Castillo order other Starbases to make up the serum as a back-up plan against something like this happening?"

"It's secrecy, Will. I think he's obsessed by it, and by the Romulans. He's afraid that the slightest slip-up will give the Romulans an advantage, which is precisely what happened. That's why he ordered you not to tell the Mariposans what the shuttle was carrying. Elements in their Government are Romulan sympathisers. And what's worse, if Ensign Higgins' story proves to be true, Castillo may be correct."

"That doesn't mean I have to like it, sir. I saw his face when he countermanded your order. He didn't

care that he might be throwing two lives away. He just didn't care."

"We're on thin ice here, Will. Remember that."

"Yes, sir."

Worf sat alone in his quarters, studying the computer screen intently. Higgins had only caught a glimpse of the suspect, but fortunately the Ensign had a good memory. On screen was a reconstruction of the suspect's face. Immediately, almost instinctively, Worf was suspicious of the face. It was just too normal. Almost everyone had something distinguishing about their face. A scar, a blemish, a mole. The face on the screen was completely nondescript. Someone you would pass in a corridor or share a turbolift with, not even noticing they were there. The face of a perfect spy. Worf smelled Romulan. And he didn't like Romulans.

"Computer, disassemble face into prominent features such as nose, mouth, etc. Then match it against the pictures on file of everyone on board. If all areas roughly matched count that person as a suspect. If there is no match, discount that person. Also discount persons who were on duty at time of suspected sabotage. Begin."

There was a small beep as the Enterprise's immensely powerful computer began electronically sifting through files at a speed that would have made Data dizzy. Worf had decided to eliminate those on duty as they would have been noticed gone from their assigned posts. After a moment the computer's monotone pseudo-feminine voice spoke up.

"There are eighty-four persons

aboard the Enterprise who were off-duty at time of sabotage and fit general description of suspect."

Worf sighed inwardly, about to call in his Security team. He would make sure Ensign Higgins was one of them.

As usual, he thought, Security has to do all the dirty work.

It was time to kick in some doors. Figuratively speaking, of course.

Picard and Riker were on the Bridge when the long-expected involvement of the Romulans appeared at last.

"Sir," Lt Murphy, the stand-in Navigator, said. "Long range sensors show a Romulan cruiser is beginning to penetrate the Neutral Zone. Correction, the cruiser has penetrated the Neutral Zone."

Picard thought for a moment, then stood.

"Open a channel," he said, then more forcefully, "Romulan vessel, this is Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the Federation Starship Enterprise. You are in direct violation of Neutral Zone treaty. Identify yourself."

The Captain was met with static.

"Romulan cruiser, what is the explanation of your provocative actions?"

"Sir, I am receiving a looped message, audio only."

"Let's hear it," said Riker.

Immediately the cultured tones of a high-born Romulan sounded on the Bridge.

"To all Federation ships. This is a Romulan medical vessel. The Romulan Government recently received news that the President of Mariposa III, a neighbour of the Romulan Empire, was gravely ill. We have the serum to cure President Dannar. We cross the Neutral Zone on a mission of mercy as specified by Neutral Zone treaty paragraph two hundred, sub-sections three, four and eight. To all Federation ships - "

"Shut it off," murmured Riker. There was silence.

"Sir, I don't want to doubt the motives of our Romulan friends, but I would bet all this week's poker winnings on that ship brimming with scanning and spying equipment."

"No bet, Commander," Picard looked thoughtful. "Computer, does the disease Judammes' Syndrome affect Romulans?"

There was a short pause.

"Romulans are immune to Judammes' Syndrome."

"That's it," said Picard. "If I ever doubted the Romulans' involvement in all this, I don't now. If Romulans aren't affected by Judammes' Syndrome, why would they keep a serum that cures it to hand? Especially as it is so difficult to produce... Will, you had better inform the Admiral." As Riker walked to the turbolift Picard addressed the computer once more.

"Computer, at current speed, when will the Romulan cruiser arrive at Mariposa III?"

"At current Warp, fourteen hours."

Picard smiled grimly. The Romulans certainly timed things well.

President Dannar had only sixteen hours to live.

"Data, do you think we could stop for a moment?" Geordi gasped. Since sunup half an hour before, Geordi seemed to be slowing down more and more, becoming more tired as he did so. Data was puzzled. Geordi was in almost perfect physical condition, and although they had been walking steadily for nine hours, he should still be fully functional.

Geordi stopped and sat down, leaning heavily against a tall tree. He was sweating profusely and his breathing was still laboured. Then Data noticed that his friend had actually lost consciousness. Concerned, he went to examine Geordi. It was then he noticed Geordi's badly swollen index finger. He shook Geordi violently. He awoke groggily.

"Leave me alone, Data... Can't go on... Too tired..."

Data spoke loudly and clearly. "Geordi, this is very important. Your finger is swollen. What bit you on the finger, Geordi?"

"Leave me... can't remember..."

Data's voice grew even louder. "Chief Engineer La Forge! Tell me what bit you!"

Geordi groaned again. "Yellow... Yellow caterpillar thing... Yellow..."

Data let him fall back into unconsciousness. Then he accessed his memory-banks, reading the information out loud.

"Yellow caterpillar-like creature... The Mariposan Death-Biter or Mortis

Fugitalis. Indigenous to this planet. The Death Biter injects its victim with a deadly, slow acting poison which usually requires ten hours to take hold of the nervous system. Once this happens, the victim will fall into a deep fever-sleep. His heart-rate will increase steadily, until after approximately six hours, the victim's heart will literally explode from overwork. After the initial ten hours from being bitten, it is imperative that the victim is not moved. The condition can be cured if the victim is administered an antidote consisting of... " A list of chemicals followed which only Data or Dr Crusher would understand. Data considered the information for a moment, adding it as yet another variable in the already complex equation that represented the mission in his neural circuits.

He presumed that the initial ten hour incubation period had been shortened due the the strenuous exercise Geordi had undertaken in the past hours. Data's internal chronometer informed him that President Dannar had sixteen hours to live. Geordi had six hours to live. Data knew he could not travel to the Capital City and back again in under six hours, even if the return journey was undertaken by way of the Enterprise's transporters. If only Geordi could be moved... but then he would die.

Data recalled the list of chemicals and elements needed to make an antidote to the Death Biter's poison. He realised that 75% of them could be found in the forest, and the other 25% were artificial. Data remembered that the Federation had provided the artificial chemicals needed to all but wipe out the 40,000 deaths caused by the Death Biter each year. This had been one of President Dannar's foremost reasons for joining the Federation.

Data knelt beside Geordi and

checked his pulse. It was already increasing, little by little. Then he stood up. The choice was obvious. He could do nothing to help his friend, so he must leave him, and save the President's life, thereby allowing Mariposa III to join the Federation. Those were his orders. He must carry them out.

Data's thought process was interrupted by an anguished cry from Geordi, flailing wildly on the ground below him.

"Data! Data!" he shouted, barely disguised panic in his voice.

Data knelt down beside him and took his hand in what he hoped was a reassuring gesture. "I am here, Geordi," he said.

Geordi settled down and spoke slowly, his voice cracked. "Data, I can't see. Did you take my VISOR off? I can't see..."

Data spoke slowly and carefully. "Geordi, are you not aware you are wearing your VISOR?"

"What, Data? I want to..." Geordi trailed off into incoherence.

Data stood up, watching Geordi's rapidly rising and falling chest. There was really no decision to make. He could not save Geordi's life, but he could save the President's. He should leave Geordi. It was simple logic.

"Then why," Data asked himself, "am I not leaving?"

He knew he had sixteen hours before the President died, and he could travel the distance in thirteen hours. So he had three hours to formulate a plan to extricate himself from his predicament.

"They must be stopped, Picard!" said the Admiral forcefully. "You must intercept them in the Neutral Zone, instead of spending the time finding a non-existent spy!"

Castillo had been against the spy saboteur theory from the beginning, pointing out its many flaws. Riker found this surprising. He had expected the Admiral to insist on a ship-wide search.

"Admiral," Picard replied, "I simply cannot do that. According to the Neutral Zone treaty, the Romulans have every right to enter Federation space. Officially they are on a mercy mission. Of course, they will use that as an excuse to spy on the Federation, but..."

"That's not all!" Castillo interrupted. "I've been working with the Mariposans for years. Their word is their bond, and they expect others to behave the same way. If we fail to deliver the serum and the Romulans do, then all our work will have been in vain. The Mariposans do not deal with those who break their word. The only reason they are joining the Federation is because I promised I would wipe out the effects of a deadly little insect they have down there, and I kept my word. If we break ours now, they will ally themselves with the Romulans, and we will lose everything to the Romulans. It is imperative that does not happen!"

"I understand the seriousness of the situation, Admiral, but you of all people must realise that stopping the Romulan ship by force could spark a war. I cannot and will not violate the treaty."

"Then you have thirteen hours before the Romulans arrive to think of a way to stop them without violating your precious treaty, or you can expect someone with the courage to do it to take over!"

With that Castillo stormed out of the Ready Room.

Picard sat down heavily, worry written across his face. He knew that the Admiral's threat was not an empty one. Castillo would have no hesitation in taking command of the Enterprise.

Commander Riker walked quickly to his quarters after being informed he had a private subspace communication. When he arrived he ordered it on screen. Because of the Enterprise's distance from Starbase 67, the time-lag for a conversation was too great, so the message was recorded. Beverly Crusher and Deanna Troi appeared on screen. The Doctor spoke up first.

"Will, we've been trying to send a message for two days, but apparently Castillo ordered a complete communications silence from the Starbase. We're breaking the regulations talking to you now. We haven't got much time... Will, what am I doing here? The 'mystery epidemic' the Admiral talked of was a few simple cases of Andorian Flu, which the Base's Doctor was handling easily."

Deanna joined in. "And the 'disturbed child' I was supposed to help has already fully recovered. It almost seems as if we're here to be put out of the way!"

"Just what is going on, Will?" the Doctor said, finally.

As the 'message ends' symbol flashed over and over, Riker frowned to himself.

"I wish I knew, ladies... I wish I knew..."

Admiral Castillo sat alone as usual in his deliberately spartan quarters. In his trembling hands was a holopic of a handsome young man in old-style Starfleet uniform. He was standing in front of a scene of a busy looking Bridge, all crew at their posts. There was a small inscription in the bottom left hand corner of the pic, and Castillo stared down at it unmoving, for fifteen minutes, as he did at least once every night. The inscription read "Greetings from the Enterprise, Dad!"

Castillo placed the holopic carefully onto his bunk, looking older than Riker or Picard would have believed.

"Soon, Richard," he whispered. "Soon..."

"I am sorry for the inconvenience we have caused you, Engineer Josey. But I'm sure you understand, the thief must be found." Worf attempted a humble smile, which turned into a snarl as the doors to Josey's quarters closed. A second later Commander Riker appeared from a turbolift.

"Still no luck, Worf?" he asked.

"None, sir. We have searched the rooms of all suspects from A through to J and found nothing. And I'm getting very tired of apologising each and every time."

"Well, at least your cover story of a serious theft hasn't been questioned."

"Yes, sir." Worf turned to Ensign Higgins, who was rapidly regretting coming forward with his information, since it meant he was on duty until further notice.

"Higgins, who is next on our list?"

"Ensign Jublin, sir, deck 14."

"Excuse me, Commander," Worf said.

"Of course, Mr Worf. Carry on."

Worf and his weary Security team trooped dutifully to the nearest turbolift to continue their search, while Commander Riker set off to see the Captain.

"He said *what?*" asked Riker, stunned.

"He said he would take command, Will, if he thought I wasn't up to the task."

"Surely he can't do that, sir."

"You know he can, Will. It's happened before. Remember on the infamous Genesis mission, Admiral Kirk took control of the Enterprise from Captain Spock?"

"Of course I remember that, sir - but Kirk had Spock's consent and Starfleet confirmed the appointment."

"That was near Earth, Will. In deep space, days from the confirmation of orders from Starfleet, the rules are different. He can, and I believe will, take command of the Enterprise if he feels it will aid the mission."

"What will you do if he takes command, sir?"

Picard smiled half-heartedly. "Let's hope it doesn't come to that."

Riker's conversation with Crusher and Troi completely slipped his mind.

On Mariposa III's surface, Data was trying to feed Geordi some fruit he had picked from one of the trees, but Geordi wouldn't touch it. Geordi's breath came in short painful gasps, and Data knew he didn't have long to live. Dannar now had fourteen hours to live, and Data could travel to the capital City in thirteen hours. His programming told him that to complete the mission, he must leave Geordi to die some time in the next hour. Again the mission's priorities surfaced in his circuits. *Deliver the serum. Save the President.* But without realising it, Data had added another more important priority. *Help Geordi.*

Data didn't believe in ideas, but only in different ways of looking at a problem to achieve the desired solution. But for once, if asked, Data would have said he had had a genuine idea.

He glanced at the small container holding the serum. He accessed its components from his memory banks. Then he recalled the chemicals needed to save Geordi. 75% were natural, and could be found in the forest. 25% were artificial, and could only be found off-world. Or could they? With a swift comparison, Data confirmed the hypothesis of his idea. The artificial 25% of Geordi's antidote was contained in the President's serum. Geordi would be saved if Data used part of the President's serum, along with components he could find in the forest. Data thought about the new information for a moment. Extracting the chemicals needed from the serum would render it useless. Therefore, if he made an antidote and saved Geordi, the President would die. And if he delivered the serum, Geordi would die. Data believed Commander Riker would have called it a 'classic no-win scenario.' Data was inclined to agree. There was a moral decision to be made, and Data knew he was not equipped to make it. On one side of the scales was the life of his friend. On

the other was the life of someone he had never met, but who could alter the destiny of billions of beings if he died, as the sector would inevitably fall to the Romulans.

Data realised the time to make a decision was fast slipping by. He decided to attempt to contact the Enterprise once more, realising the astronomical odds against his attempt succeeding.

"Data to Enterprise, Data to Enterprise. Emergency."

It was no use. The electrical storm was still raging in the atmosphere. He was met by static.

At that moment Geordi stirred in his sleep and seemed to become lucid for a moment. "Phaser... Phaser... Communicator... Phaser..." he gasped between gulps of air.

"Phaser and Communicator? What do you mean, Geordi?"

But he was gone again. Data considered his friend's words. Was this the fever talking, or the mind of a brilliant Engineer?

Then it struck him. Geordi meant he should use the phaser to boost the power of the communicator, perhaps enough to penetrate the electrical storm and get in contact with the Enterprise. Data wasted no time.

He removed his communicator and put it on the ground beside his phaser. Then he proceeded to disassemble both, intricately connecting terminals and rewiring. Soon his hands were a blur, and both phaser and communicator became unrecognisable. Data had to use some of his own non-essential neural circuits to complete the improvised communicator. As he finished that last

connection, the communicator picked up a message, broken up by static.

"...All Federation ships... Romulan medical vessel... received news... President... Neighbour of the Romulan... Ill... Have the serum to cure... Mission of Mercy... Neutral Zone treaty paragraph two hundred... three four and eight... To all Federation..."

Data listened to the message eight times before he was sure he had picked up all of it. Immediately Data came to the same conclusion that Castillo had. If the Romulans simply let the President die, another like him would take his place. But if they saved the President then the Mariposan's code of honour would mean that they were in debt to the Romulans and owed the Federation nothing. The Romulans planned to use their misfortune... Data paused, realising for the first time that the shuttle had probably been sabotaged. It was of no consequence now. As he attempted to transmit to the Enterprise, the circuits of the communicator, unable to handle the power coursing through them, finally fused.

A Human might have smashed the phaser against a tree in frustration, but Data simply reclaimed his own undamaged circuits and replaced them. He knew attempting the same action with the other communicator and phaser would take too long. He surmised that his choice was not now between two lives, but between Geordi's life and the security of the quadrant. No matter what his action, Data now knew that President Dannar would be saved.

Data accessed Geordi's words. "Friends help each other in times of need, or make sacrifices for each other."

Then he accessed Admiral Castillo's words. "This mission is the most

important you will ever undertake. It could define the balance of power between the Federation and the Romulans for the next fifty years. Above all else follow your orders or I promise I will have you disassembled."

Geordi moaned in the background. Data made his decision. There was really no choice at all.

He picked up the canister and quickly disappeared into the forest.

Worf and his security team made their excuses and quickly left Ensign Ziggur's quarters with the bitter taste of failure in their mouths. Ziggur was the last of the crew members suspected of being the Romulan saboteur, and as in so many cases previously they had come up empty. Ensign Higgins approached slowly. He looked exhausted.

"I'm sorry, sir. I guess I must have been mistaken about the man near the Columbus. And I've wasted all this manpower and time."

Worf knew that sometimes Humans should be treated carefully. They were not as thick-skinned as Klingons.

"No matter, Higgins. I knew it was a slim hope to begin with. Security team dismissed."

A mixture of relieved sighs and groans of fatigue greeted Worf's order as the team dispersed. Worf, himself beginning to feel the effects of a very long shift, went to tell the Captain the bad news.

Worf entered the Ready Room to find Picard and Castillo glaring at each

other across the desk. He guessed he had interrupted an argument.

"Sorry, sir, but I thought you should know we have concluded the search for the suspected Romulan spy. I'm afraid we didn't have any luck."

The Captain looked disappointed as the Admiral grinned triumphantly. "Now that the wild-goose chase is over we can concentrate on the business at hand."

The Captain dismissed Worf, then -

"Admiral, I have already told you time and time again I will not attack the Romulan ship. It is now only eight hours from Mariposa, and has already entered Federation space. It now falls under our protection according to Neutral Zone treaty. I have sent for confirmation of our orders from Starfleet Command..."

"Which won't arrive for at least twenty hours! Damn it, Picard, all this could have been avoided if that rustbucket Data had done his job! Finding an imaginary saboteur to take the blame won't help."

Picard held his temper in check as the Admiral walked out. Riker entered a moment later.

"He doesn't look too happy," he commented. "No luck on the search, sir. The electrical storm doesn't look like clearing any time soon, but the Mariposans are looking as best they can, without the use of sensors. We've sent down two-hundred and fifty of our own personnel to help in the search, but there's an awful lot of forest down there. But you know Data and Geordi, sir. They're probably on the outskirts of the Capital City as we speak."

Picard didn't look reassured. "I'm sorry, Will, could you leave me alone for

a while? I have some thinking to do before the Romulans arrive," the Captain said, attempting a faint smile.

"Of course, sir." Riker nodded and left.

Picard stood slowly, stretching his back, then faced the view-port showing Mariposa III in all its glory. Picard fervently hoped it wasn't to become Geordi and Data's graveyard.

Once he reached his quarters Riker did some thinking too. He wondered why Admiral Castillo had been so against the search for the Romulan spy when he was so obsessed by security? *There are too many inconsistencies*, he thought.

Riker knew he had done all he could for his friends on the planet, and he could do nothing on the Bridge. He decided to kill some time. "Computer, give me the service record and personal profile of Admiral David Castillo."

The Captain was still standing staring at Mariposa when Riker re-entered, breathless.

"Sir," he said, "I've found something out about Admiral Castillo. Something I think you should know."

Picard thought for a moment. "If it's affecting his judgement, and therefore this mission, then I should know. Go ahead, Will."

"Well, sir, about twenty-four years ago Castillo was Captain of the U.S.S. Liberty. Right about that time a ship was to undertake a ten-year Galaxy navigational mission, one of the most prestigious assignments someone could

be in on. Castillo used all his power and influence to make sure his son was aboard that ship... as First Officer."

"So Castillo wasn't averse to a little nepotism... What else, Will?"

"Sir, that ship was the Enterprise-C."

"My God..." Picard muttered shocked. "The Enterprise-C was destroyed by the Romulans while protecting a Klingon outpost on Khitomer."

"That's why he wants to disregard the treaty, sir. Soon after his son was killed, Castillo was promoted to Admiral and lost his command. He didn't get a chance to avenge his son, and I think now that the opportunity has arisen, that's what he wants to do."

Picard looked worried. "That's all very well, but we can't ignore his orders because of that fact alone. We have to find proof that he wants to kill the Romulans as an act of revenge. And I don't want to hear this mentioned again until there is proof. But you were right to tell me, Will."

"Yes, sir."

All too soon the Romulans arrived. Picard and Riker stood together on the Bridge ready to talk to them. Worf had left the Bridge a moment earlier, to 'test a theory'. Picard was a little glad of this while he talked with the Romulans. Worf hated them and the feeling was entirely mutual. Whenever they were near, Picard could almost hear Worf growl behind him.

As Worf left, Admiral Castillo entered and waited in the background.

He glared malevolently when the face of a Romulan appeared on screen. The Romulan Captain looked friendly and smiled warmly.

"Greetings, Captain Picard. I am Captain Tobak. We are on a mercy mission to save the President of Mariposa III. For once our two great Empires do not meet with thoughts of war, but of peace."

Picard smiled back woodenly. "Greetings, Captain Tobak. Indeed it is refreshing to see the Romulan Empire indulging in such a noble and honourable cause which will have no benefit for them at all. The Federation appreciates the good intentions of the Romulan people, and we will be happy to take the serum down to the planet."

Tobak didn't look too happy, but he concealed it perfectly in his voice. "No, no, Captain Picard, we will not trouble you with that menial task. In half one of your Earth hours one of our own shuttlecraft will leave for the surface and deliver the serum. It is a pity that some of your men perished attempting the same mission."

Riker spoke up. "The two mean are not dead, merely missing. And may I ask how you knew of the serum being lost?"

The Romulan's feathers weren't ruffled. "The Mariposan government informed us."

Picard nodded to himself. It was as he thought. One of the Romulan's well-paid puppet politicians on Mariposa had told them.

"Now, gentlemen, I'm afraid I must terminate this communication. I have much to do and little time. The President is seriously ill. Fortunately we Romulans can save him." *Unlike the Federation*, he left

unsaid.

The screen changed back to a view of Mariposa III.

"Well," Picard said. "We have half an hour to extract ourselves from this mess. I'm open to suggestions."

Worf sat in semi-darkness in his quarters, lit only by the computer screen he was staring at. He had been mulling over his failure to produce the Romulan saboteur when a thought struck him that made him want to shout out how incompetent he was. When searching for the spy, he had asked the computer to list all the crew who were off-duty at the time of the sabotage, and fitted the suspect's description, as those on-duty would have been missed from their posts. It didn't occur to him that some positions on the Enterprise entailed a free run of the ship.

"Computer, list all persons fitting suspect's description on-duty at time of sabotage, but with access to all parts of the ship."

There was a bleep. "Search complete."

"List number."

"There is only one person."

"Put file on-screen and overlap picture from file with description of suspect."

As the two pictures began to merge the Computer said, "On screen is Ensign Hugh Gregory, transferred from Starbase 67 to the Enterprise three days ago, to replace another Ensign as food replicator technician."

"Enough," said Worf triumphantly.

The pictures matched almost exactly. Gregory could go anywhere on ship if there was a faulty replicator, and even if there wasn't, the crew was so used to seeing replicator technicians around, no-one would think twice about it, even seeing him in the shuttlebay. He found out where the Ensign's quarters were from the computer.

"Worf to Commander Riker and Security team. Meet me on Deck 32. Urgent."

Riker didn't want to leave the Bridge at the time of crisis, but he knew something very important must have happened for Worf to contact him. After a nod from the Captain he left reluctantly, wondering who would be in command of the ship when he returned. As Riker left, Castillo approached the Captain.

"It is imperative the Romulan shuttlecraft does not deliver the serum."

"Admiral, I will not destroy the shuttlecraft. It would spark a Galactic incident that would dwarf our loss of Mariposa III to the Romulans."

"Then perhaps you should be replaced with someone who can make the tough decisions, Captain."

An Ensign interrupted them. "Romulan shuttle leaving in six minutes, sir."

Riker met up with Worf and his Security team at Deck 32's turbolift. Worf quickly outlined the situation. All men set their phasers to "Stun". Ensign Higgins was part of the Security team, at Worf's orders. The team quickly headed for Hugh Gregory's quarters. The door's

locking mechanism was operating. It seemed the Ensign didn't want to be disturbed. Worf quickly accessed the over-ride and the door slid open. Riker, Worf and Higgins were first in. Ensign Gregory looked up from the transmitting equipment he was packing away, shocked. Worf's phaser was aimed squarely at Gregory.

"Security! Don't move!"

Gregory began to put his hands up, then quickly reached for the phaser hidden at his side. He had it in his hand a moment before six stun shots thudded squarely into his chest, sending him reeling backwards into the faraway wall, where he slumped onto the ground, his face contorted. The phaser was still gripped tightly in his hand, which had come to rest on his lap. His finger began to twitch slowly, as Gregory used all his might to overcome the effects of the stun shots.

"He's going to fire!" Higgins shouted, running forward. When he was just a metre away Gregory's trembling finger connected with the correct button on his phaser, sending a powerful beam into his own thigh. Death by a phaser on its highest setting is horrible to watch. It seems the victim spends an eternity dying, as every molecule in the body begins to slowly rip apart, atom by atom. Hugh Gregory, recruited in the Academy because of his lack of respect for authority and his huge gambling debts, took four seconds to cease existing. For him, death was a merciful release from an existence suddenly filled with unendurable agony. Four seconds does not seem like a long time. For Hugh Gregory, who was driven insane by the pain in the third second, it was infinity. Gregory's Romulan spymasters would have been proud of him, killing himself instead of facing capture, as he had been taught. But he had not followed the

number two rule. *Destroy your equipment.*

Ensign Higgins, who had been only feet from Gregory, watched the scene in horror, looking directly into Gregory's eyes as he died, and as he uttered his final, short desperate scream before his final release. Those eyes and that scream would haunt Mark Higgins' dreams for months to come.

As the sound and Gregory ceased to exist there was a soft thud as the phaser fell from the grip of a hand that was no longer there onto the floor.

Riker and Worf had seen that kind of death before, and other kinds of death much worse; they recovered quickly. "Worf, I want this room searched from top to bottom, and find out how to work that transmitting equipment." A random thought struck him. "Computer, what position did Ensign Gregory hold on Starbase 67?"

"Ensign Gregory was one of Admiral Castillo's assistants."

Like a child's jigsaw, the pieces of the puzzle fell into place in Riker's mind, as previously forgotten facts resurfaced and assumed new significance. Riker asked one more question.

"Computer, did Dr Lawrence Midland, the physician monitoring President Dannar's condition, ever serve with Admiral Castillo?"

"Lawrence Midland was Ship's Doctor on the U.S.S. Liberty when it was commanded by David Castillo."

"Thank you, computer!"

Riker virtually ran out of the room, leaving a very puzzled Worf looking on. As he began to examine the transmitting equipment owned by the late Hugh

Gregory, he noticed a small, innocent looking pill that must have fallen from Gregory's uniform as he fell backwards. Worf guessed that the pill's purpose was anything but innocent, and he then realised why Gregory had taken the extremely painful way out. He had dropped his suicide pill. Worf picked it up, making a mental note to have it analysed later. Then, after giving orders to his team, he followed Commander Riker's route to the Bridge.

The situation on the Bridge was deteriorating rapidly. An Ensign disturbed the tense silence. "Captain, the shuttle has left the Romulan ship and is entering Mariposa III's atmosphere."

"Time to Capital City?"

"Ten minutes, sir."

"President Dannar's condition?"

"Dr Midland reports it to be grave, but stable at the moment."

The Admiral faced the Captain. "Picard, your men have failed. We cannot let the Romulans succeed. Think of the gap in our defences when the Borg return. Destroy the shuttle!"

"Admiral, the Romulans will take that as an act of war, and I wouldn't blame them."

"Picard, *destroy the shuttle!* That is a direct order from the mission commander and a superior officer."

"I refuse, Admiral."

Castillo took Picard's seat. "Then I assume command under Starfleet directive one four seven. Communications, inform Starfleet and

ask for confirmation. Ensign, power up the shields and make ready with phasers and photon torpedoes."

Picard's throat felt dry. Castillo knew confirmation from Starfleet wouldn't arrive for at least twenty hours, and by then it would be too late to stop him. The Federation and Romulans would be at war.

"Captain, Romulan ship requesting reasons for raising shields."

"Address reports to me!" Castillo shouted. "Have they raised their shields?"

"No, sir. But there have been two small power surges outside the craft."

"Good," the Admiral smiled. "We'll take that out first. Surges are computer bugs."

"Admiral!" Picard shouted desperately. "This will not bring back your son!"

The Admiral looked furious. "I'll see you broken for that, Picard! You have no right to talk about my son!"

Picard knew that the crew would carry out Castillo's orders. It was what they were trained to do. Picard had never felt so helpless in his life. He decided he could not sit by and let a war be started. He prepared to overpower the Admiral before he could give the fatal orders. In effect he was going to commit an act of mutiny.

Unfortunately Castillo had thought of this. He pointed to the Security officer on duty on the Bridge. "If Captain Picard attempts to disrupt my command I authorise you to use whatever force is necessary to stop him. Ensign, lock torpedoes on shuttle and cruiser."

The Ensign did so as the Security officer reluctantly obeyed orders, pointing his phaser at Picard.

"Torpedoes locked and readied, sir."

The Admiral smiled coldly, tears in his eyes. "This is for you, son," he muttered, then ordered, "fire!"

The Ensign reached for the correct command.

"Belay that order!" Riker shouted as he and Worf rushed onto the Bridge. "Worf, place Admiral Castillo under arrest."

The Admiral was agape as he looked on, stunned. "This is mutiny, Mr Riker!" he almost screamed as Worf pulled him from the Captain's chair. "Starfleet will crucify you for this, Riker!" Castillo raged, all self-control lost.

"Number One," the Captain said, looking intensely relieved, "there had better be a good reason for removing Admiral Castillo from command, or it will be mutiny."

"Don't worry, sir, there is." Riker turned to Castillo. "Admiral, I have told the Mariposans to take Dr Midland into custody. It's all over."

The Admiral stared at Riker hopelessly, and he visibly sagged, the iron self-discipline that had kept the years at bay seemingly deserting him. Now he looked just like any other old man, and Worf had to support him with one arm as Picard ordered the shields and weapons stood down.

"Take him away, Mr Worf," Riker said softly and not unkindly. As the two left, Riker addressed the Captain. "We've found the spy and his equipment, but I can't explain my reasons now, sir. The

Romulan shuttlecraft is only five minutes from the Capital City, and if they deliver the serum, then Mariposa III will still be lost to us." Riker paused, remembering orders. "But of course we can't stop them without violating Neutral Zone treaty."

"And what if the Romulans had already broken the treaty?" Picard smiled.

The Captain outlined his swiftly-thought-of plan, and Riker left the Bridge for transporter room three, ordering Worf to meet him there.

The Captain turned to survey the stand-in Bridge crew, mostly fresh-faced Ensigns or hopeful Lieutenants. It seemed strange without Riker, Worf, La Forge, Data, Troi and the two Crushers there. Quickly Picard gathered his thoughts.

"This is important," he said. "Does anyone speak Romulan?"

In the Romulan shuttle the pilot and co-pilot were making their final approach to the Capital City. It had been an easy, uneventful flight, although the Captain had hammered home how important the mission was to the Empire. "Shuttle, this is Captain Tobak. Anything to report?"

The pilot reached for the communicator button, but before he could transmit, another voice did the job for him, in Romulan.

"Captain, this is the shuttle. We are experiencing a total systems failure."

The pilot looked at his co-pilot, aghast, then reached for the communicator.

"Captain, disregard last statement. All systems in the green."

The co-pilot looked up from his console. "We're being jammed from the source of the transmission... It's the Enterprise."

"How do they know the communications frequency?" the pilot muttered, horrified.

Helplessly, the two Romulans listened to the exchange between their mother ship and the Enterprise.

"Shuttle, can you make repairs?"

"Negative.... Controls not responding... Suspect Federation sabotage... Losing altitude rapidly..."

The pilot desperately tried his communicator again, without success.

"Shuttle, can you land?"

"Negative. Heading for electrical storm. Request emergency beam-out."

"Shuttle, our sensors show your course is steady."

"Can't hold out much longer... Request beam-out!"

The pilot prayed that the Captain would question the strangely accented voice, but he knew Tobak would assume the co-pilot was speaking.

There was a pause. "Affirmative, shuttle. Stand by."

As the two Romulans disappeared, the co-pilot, puzzled, said, "But we're fine..."

As the twin blazes of light faded they were replaced by two others. Riker and Worf took control of the shuttle as soon as they fully materialised.

"Any problems?" Riker asked.

"No, sir, I understand the controls already."

"Good," Riker replied. "Now take us into the electrical storm before the Romulans realise they've been had and beam us out. By the way, Worf, good work on finding the saboteur. It was lucky we stopped him before he could destroy his transmitting equipment, or we couldn't have obtained the correct frequency to broadcast to the cruiser."

As they entered the electrical storm Riker relaxed a little. "Let's take her in to the City, Worf, keeping us under cover of the storm," he said. "I wonder who they found to speak Romulan?"

"I think I know, sir," Worf said proudly.

For Ensign Mark Higgins the day had turned out to be the most exhausting, disappointing, frightening, horrific, exciting and proud he had ever experienced. The Captain patted him on the back.

"Well done, Ensign."

Higgins wiped his brow. "Thank you, sir. I never thought a degree in Romulan could come in so useful."

"Data?" Geordi groggily awoke to find his friend standing over him. "What happened?"

"You were bitten by the Mariposan Mortis Fugitalis - the Death Biter - causing you to fall into a light coma. However, I administered the antidote and you are now fine."

It had taken Data an hour of scouring the forest to find the necessary natural components for the antidote, and a further thirty minutes to blend them correctly with the artificial components in the serum. The most difficult task had been having Geordi, in his comatose state, drink it.

"I feel terrible," he moaned. Data helped him to his feet.

"The nausea will pass in a few moments, Geordi. It is a natural side effect of the antidote."

A terrible thought dawned on the Engineer. "The mission, Data! What about the mission?"

"My deliberate actions resulted in the failure of the mission, Geordi, and I take full responsibility for them."

Clearly and succinctly Data explained to Geordi how the events of the past few hours had unfolded. Geordi couldn't believe what his friend had done for him.

"Data, if the Mariposans align with the Romulans then Castillo will make sure you're court martialled."

"Or disassembled."

"Data..." Geordi paused. "Data, what can I say? You saved my life, and that's probably wrecked your career."

"I believe the correct response is, you would have done the same for me, Geordi."

Before Geordi could say anything else, Data looked to the sky. "I believe the electrical storm is clearing ahead of my prediction. Hmmm. I shall have to run a diagnostic on my prediction and estimation circuits. Try your

communicator, Geordi. I am afraid my own was destroyed."

Geordi tapped his communicator, amazed at Data's indifference to what he had done, and what it would mean for him.

"La Forge to Enterprise."

A relieved voice answered back. It was the Captain. "Geordi, are you and Data all right?"

For a moment Geordi was absurdly touched by the Captain's immediate concern for them, and not the mission. Suddenly he understood why the Enterprise was Starfleet's most sought-after assignment. "Yes, sir, we're fine. Two to beam up."

The two figures disappeared in a flurry of lights and sound alien to the forest. Then there was silence.

Geordi was immediately taken to sickbay for observation while Data filed a report on the incident. Minutes before, Riker and Worf had beamed up after delivering the serum to the Capital City, leaving the shuttle for the Romulans to collect. Latest reports showed President Dannar's condition was improving minute by minute. The Romulans were furious, and had been hailing the Enterprise for an explanation for half an hour. Picard decided to let them eat static until he had heard what reasons Riker had for placing Admiral Castillo under arrest. Picard had the Admiral brought to his Ready Room, and when the Admiral didn't protest about his arrest, the Captain knew Riker must have found out something very important.

The Admiral looked twenty years older as he sat down to hear Riker out.

"Sir," he began, "my curiosity was first aroused just after the Admiral arrived on the Enterprise, when he stated that he believed the Romulans had deliberately infected President Dannar with Judammes' Syndrome. I had heard how tight security was around the President, especially two weeks away from signing an extremely important treaty, so I just couldn't see how the Romulans did it.

"Then a thought entered my head that I just couldn't get rid of - what if President Dannar had really developed Judammes' Syndrome naturally? We've known stranger occurrences in our time.

"I began to suspect the Admiral when he ordered Dr Crusher and Counselor Troi to remain on the Starbase due to what I found out later were trivial reasons. What was so special about those two women that they had to be kept out of the way for the duration of the mission?

"Well, Doctor Crusher was probably the only physician in the sector who could have disputed Dr Midland's diagnosis that somehow Dannar had been infected deliberately. And Deanna could not have helped detecting the enormous amount of bitterness and hatred that the Admiral hid under the surface. Of course, all this did not strike me until later.

"I also wondered why the Admiral was so vehement that the mission should succeed. Of course, it was an important mission, and none of us wanted to see it fail, but Admiral Castillo wanted to make his feelings very public, so perhaps establishing an alibi for later, when things did go awry. The Admiral was even willing to sacrifice Data and Geordi for his scheme. Of course, he didn't think that the serum would survive the crash. Was it all a smoke screen?

"The final pieces of the puzzle fell into place when we found the saboteur, whom the Admiral insisted did not exist. Before he was transferred from Starbase 67, Ensign Hugh Gregory had worked directly for Admiral Castillo. Finally, I found out that Dr Midland, who diagnosed and treated the President, had served with Castillo on the Liberty, and had lost a daughter on the Enterprise-C.

"As Data would have said, piecing together the clues was elementary."

Picard and Riker watched Admiral Castillo for a reaction. There was none. The Admiral's face remained blank and impassive. Picard would never believed that the Admiral sitting in the chair was the Admiral who had given him so much trouble in the past few days. He looked so old and *defeated*. Riker took a deep breath.

"So here is my version of the events of the past few weeks, Admiral Castillo. Stop me if I'm wrong.

"Both Admiral Castillo and Dr Midland accepted the Mariposa III mission to renew their acquaintance. The Admiral did a good job negotiating with the Mariposans, and after years of deadlock, an agreement was quickly reached. But then President Dannar developed Judammes' Syndrome, quite naturally. And when Dr Midland told Admiral Castillo, he came up with a plan to avenge the death of his son at the hands of the Romulans. The first step of this plan involved Dr Midland's implicating the Romulans in his report to Starfleet. As the serum was being manufactured on Starbase 67 under the Admiral's supervision, he let slip to one of his men, Ensign Hugh Gregory, about the mission. Castillo had long suspected Gregory of being a Romulan spy, and Gregory would probably be long behind bars if not for the Admiral's plan.

"Gregory informed his superiors of the mission, as Castillo had hoped, and was ordered to sabotage it so the Romulans could bring in their own serum, which was hastily being prepared.

"Then everything worked out just as the Admiral wanted it to. When we arrived he got rid of Counselor Troi and Dr Crusher, the only two who might disrupt the plan.

"So Gregory sabotaged the shuttlecraft, allowing the Romulans to begin their 'Mission of Mercy'. When they arrived Admiral Castillo took over the Enterprise, and was all too ready to start the process of an Galactic war, just to satisfy his twisted need for vengeance. I must congratulate you, Admiral. It was a plan worthy of the Romulans themselves."

Picard stared at the Admiral, trying to comprehend what the man had attempted to do. "All of that thought and planning, all for the purpose of killing... And you would have sacrificed two of my officers, the President of Mariposa III, the billions who would have died in the war caused by firing on that cruiser. You were a Starfleet Admiral, man! How could you?"

The Admiral looked at the floor for almost a minute. When he looked up tears were streaming down his face.

"You don't understand, Picard. They're animals! They're not like the Klingons. They don't believe in honour. They didn't give the Enterprise-C a chance! They killed my son and countless others. There should be war! If we attacked first we could have wiped them all out..."

Picard could no longer hold his anger.

"Losing your son was no excuse! Another Admiral, many years ago, lost his son - and his ship - to the Klingons, but he eventually became one of the greatest peace-makers of our time. His name was Admiral James T. Kirk. I believe you could learn something from him." Picard's voice softened. "Your son would not want war. He would have wanted his death, and the deaths of all those on the Enterprise-C, to mean something. And they did. It brought the peace that Admiral Kirk began even closer. And you were ready to wreck that peace in the name of your son..."

"We should wipe them all out..." the Admiral mumbled. "All for Richard..."

The Admiral was led slowly away by Worf.

"That brilliant mind, poisoned by years of bitterness and hatred. It's very sad," said Riker.

"And it would have been a sad day for the entire Galaxy if you had not found this out, Will. Our relationship with the Romulans is at a crossroads at the moment, with Vulcan reunification drawing closer. The work of those like Ambassador Spock could have been ruined in an instant if not for you. Well done. Now let's deal with the Romulans, who are I believe rather anxious to get in touch with us."

The two men stepped onto the Bridge. Data looked up from his console as if he had never left. "The Romulans are still hailing us, sir."

"Data!" the Captain said, delighted. "How are you?"

"I am functioning within established perimeters, sir."

"Great," said Riker. "The Enterprise hasn't been the same without you and Geordi. I think we'd better have the Romulans on screen."

Instantly the face of Captain Tobak appeared. He did not look the slightest bit upset, but cold fury permeated his voice. "Captain Picard, perhaps you could explain why the serum we were taking to the President was hijacked by some of your men."

Picard smiled. "Of course, Captain Tobak. Immediately after you explain why you are flanked by two cloaked Romulan Warbirds, which could be taken as an act of aggression against the Federation."

Tobak looked flustered for the first time. "I... That is..."

"You and your ships have one hour to leave Federation space, Captain, or I'm afraid that we and the four other Federation Starships that are on their way will have to kick you out. Good day."

An astonished Tobak disappeared from the screen.

"How did you know about the cloaked ships, sir?" Data asked.

"When Admiral Castillo raised the shields and armed torpedoes, two small power surges were detected outside the Romulans' ship, as if two other ships were powering up their weapons systems, ready to strike," the Captain replied.

"Fascinating," Data commented.

"Can I see you in my Ready Room, Mr Data?"

"Of course, sir."

The Captain sat down behind his desk and studied Data carefully. "I take it you know how things turned out, Data?"

"Yes, sir. The President was saved, and the Romulan plan thwarted. However, I did not carry out my mission when I was capable of doing so. I take full responsibility for my actions."

"Data, your actions saved Geordi's life. You chose to save him over letting the planet align with the Romulans, which is what you believed would happen, according to your report. You did something that went directly against your programming. You disobeyed direct orders and risked strong disciplinary action, all to save one life. Why?"

Data thought for a moment. "Perhaps, sir, it's because the needs of the one sometimes outweigh the needs of the many, something I learned from Ambassador Spock... or perhaps, sir, it's because Geordi is my friend."

Picard looked closely at Data. Surely friendship was an emotion? A mixture of loyalty and trust? Whatever it was, Data seemed to understand it. Many Humans didn't. Picard spoke up.

"Starfleet already have one scandal on their hands, that of Admiral Castillo, and have indicated that they do not want another, like that of one of their most respected officers disobeying orders. So they have decided to ignore your misconduct this time, and nothing will be entered on your record. However, if things had turned out differently, you could easily have been informed of your court martial at this moment."

The news did not seem to make the android either relieved or happy. He would have faced the news of a court martial with the same lack of emotion.

"May I be excused, sir? I promised I would visit Geordi in sickbay. I believe he is anxious to know what action was taken against me. I imagine he will be most relieved."

"Of course, Data. Tell him I shall be down later." Data rose to leave. "And Data? I think you did the... Human thing."

"I was not aware of that, sir. I shall have to reflect on that note." With that, he left.

Picard stood and stared out of the viewport. The stars whizzed past as the Enterprise left Mariposa III behind and travelled towards Starbase 67, where they would pick up Dr Crusher and Counselor Troi, and leave behind Admiral Castillo and Dr Midland.

Picard reflected on Data's words. Was the android becoming more Human? He placed himself in Data's position, in a hostile environment, cut off from the chain of command, the mission resting on his shoulders, the weight of the orders forcing him down. Jean-Luc Picard wondered what he would have done.

He didn't have an answer,

Epilogue

Worf dismissed the security men guarding the Admiral's quarters.

Castillo's health had deteriorated dramatically in the past few hours, all the pent-up hatred that fuelled him seemingly exhausted. The Admiral was slumped in his bed. Soon he would be moved to sickbay where he could be kept alive until his trial and eventual court martial. Worf stood over the now frail old man.

"Dr Midland has just hanged himself. Both of you lost someone to the Romulans. It might interest you to know I lost my parents."

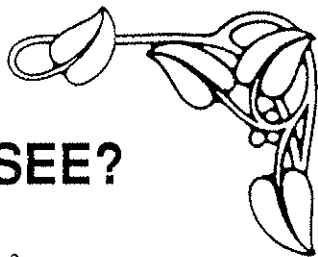
Worf placed the suicide pill he had found in Gregory's quarters onto Castillo's wrinkled hand. "Although your actions were dishonourable, I feel you deserve an honourable death. Your actions, however misguided, were against my sworn enemies. That pill, when taken, will kill you quickly, simulating a heart-attack. It is impossible to detect in the bloodstream. Take it or destroy it. Honour or dishonour. The choice is yours."

Worf left quietly, and stood guard outside. The Admiral contemplated his long and eventful career with Starfleet. He had served well, and as best he could. He knew he could not take the looks of disgust from the men who would court martial him, men he had known for twenty to thirty years. He slowly placed the pill in his mouth and swallowed.

"I'm coming, Richard..." he whispered. And then he died.







WHAT DO YOU SEE?

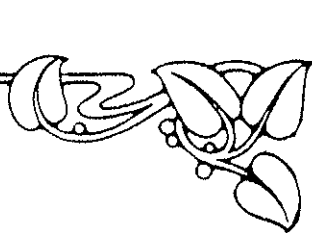
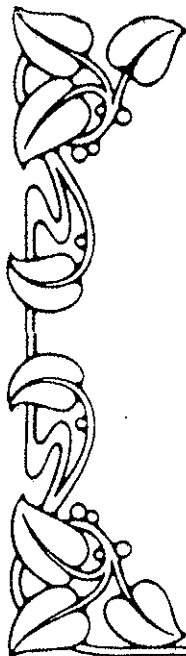
What do you see, looking at me?
Do you see a Klingon brave and strong?
Do you see a warrior who'll fight for right not wrong?
Or do you see me, an alien born and bred?

What do you see, looking at me?
Do you see a crew member or maybe a friend?
Do you see a person upon whom you can depend?
Or do you see a micro brain inside a macro head?

What do you see, looking at me?
Do you see a being who follows a warrior creed?
Do you see a soldier who'll fight when there's a need?
Or do you see a creature from an alien story?

What do we see, looking at you?
We see a man who is proud of his Klingon race;
We look at Worf and see all the dangers you're willing to face;
We look into your eyes and see a heart of glory.

Helen Connor



SELZA O'REIN

by

Sherry Golding

Captain's Log. We are at present orbiting Selza O'Rein, a planet where the first Klingon is believed to have evolved. The last study on Selza was in the early 23rd century by Captain Mary Smith, aboard the USS Galactic. Other studies were in the 22nd century. I would like to see how it has developed and if any other life forms have come here. I am sending Commander William Riker, Lt. Commander Data, Lt. Worf and Lt. La Forge to the planet for an overnight study. Because of nitrogen deficiencies it is imperative that they return to the Enterprise in 24 hours. Wesley Crusher will be making geological and scientific studies from the bridge. In the meantime I will sit back and wait for the report.

There was a flash of blue light. The away team materialised on rocky ground. Riker looked around him. The sky was dark though starlit; and despite the presence of some bushes, the ground was moon-like. Only a rainbow-like beam stretching from one end of the planet to the other lit up the darkness.

Riker glanced at Worf, standing nearby in silent thought. "Lieutenant?"

"Sir, I was conjuring up visions of my ancestors. I cannot imagine them liking it here."

"They had no choice if they evolved here, Lieutenant. Where else could they have gone at the time?"

"I believe, sir, recent research indicates that two Klingon tribes once lived here, the Ra and the Zue. The Ra were stronger and wiped out the Zue's very existence."

"Data - you've analysed the planet's tapes. What else do you know?" asked La Forge.

"We must, I believe, be careful of the vampire flowers. They are similar to ones we encountered on Rinus Zeltar. They move extremely quickly and as we know can go deep into a person's bloodstream, draining the blood until the victim is dead. We must also be careful of the hurricane creatures which are unseen but have - or can have - the destructive force of an Earth hurricane."

"Vampire flowers? Boy, that really scares you to death," La Forge quivered.

"Having second thoughts, Lieutenant?" asked Riker.

La Forge glanced at Worf. That tough... He shook his head. "Me, second thoughts? Nah. I'm going to love this one."

"Good, I'm glad to hear it. If we stay ten metres away from the flowers they can't hurt us. If a hurricane should begin to build up, we will ask to be transported to the Enterprise immediately. In the meanwhile, may I remind you that our mission is to explore and seek out new life forms, new worlds. We accepted these dangers when we joined Starfleet - so come with me,

please."

The bushland was beautiful - remarkably so. Colourful energy from the planet's atmosphere flowed continuously, creating shapes of trees and flowers. Crystals sprayed downwards.

"I don't believe it!" exclaimed La Forge. "These shapes - these trees and flowers - are recording as organic life forms!"

"Yes, an unusual phenomenon," agreed Data. "According to the Galactic reports, it registered then as organic life - yet it is not organic life as we know it."

"Captain," said Riker, switching on his communicator. "I need Wesley to run an analysis on these energy beams."

Picard looked at Wesley.

"I have them on the computer, sir. Organic life registering."

"Sir, I need a full analysis. Why does it register as organic?"

"You'll have it, Number One."

"Out, sir."

Worf looked at him. "Do you think we'll find the answers, sir? Natural phenomena need -"

"We're here to try, Lieutenant."

"It's fascinating, sir. You ought to see it from my VISOR! It's incredible," smiled La Forge as he scanned the area.

"I wish I could," smiled Riker. "Let's continue our exploration, shall we?"

The smell of water reached them. Suddenly there was a whoosh and a sharp hissing sound. Riker ducked. A small pool of water formed in front of them.

"Sir, I believe we have just encountered a water bird," reported Data.

"A water what?" asked La Forge, pulling a face.

"It is living water in the shape of a bird. It preys on the gas ant - tiny ants evolved from gas -"

Riker approached the slimy water and knelt.

"Sir, the water is contaminated with atmospheric waste. It is not water as we know it. It comes from the acid clouds which form every thirty two point one hours. The cloud rains acid water. It builds up from the planet's atmosphere.

"Sir! I'm picking up a life form. Ten mark two!" reported La Forge.

"Life form, Lieutenant?"

"It is approaching us, sir. It should reach us within ten seconds," said Worf calmly.

"There!" exclaimed La Forge, pointing to a gap in the 'forest'.

A humanoid creature stood there, transparent, manlike, with bubbles continuously blowing off him, working around his stomach and up to his head.

Riker touched his phaser gently. The creature suddenly darted off with the speed of an Earth cheetah, completely silently but leaving behind a residue of

bubbles.

"Report, Lieutenant."

"It seems to have evolved from CO₂ gases, sir. I was picking up a high concentration of carbon dioxide and nitrogen gases. I suggest, sir, that we analyse further; this is a new life form on Selza. It was not reported by the Galactic."

"All right, let's follow it, but with extreme caution. Lt. Worf, lead on."

The gentle sound of the tricorder led the officers through fascinating beams of energy, over cloudy ground and towards a cave made from crystal.

Riker brought out his phaser. "Extreme caution," he warned them. He entered, followed by the others.

Drawings of what appeared to be early Klingons as well as other life forms, showed on the walls as they entered. A bubble struck Riker on the nose. He stopped. There, two metres from him, was the bubble creature. It moved. Riker stepped back quickly, automatically raising his phaser.

"Sir, don't harm it! The Prime Directive, non-interference - " began Data. But the bubble creature had gone,

retreating at an amazing speed.

Riker relaxed and turned to Data. "What did you get?"

"Sir, these drawings - they show some clouds near a gas-like 'stream'."

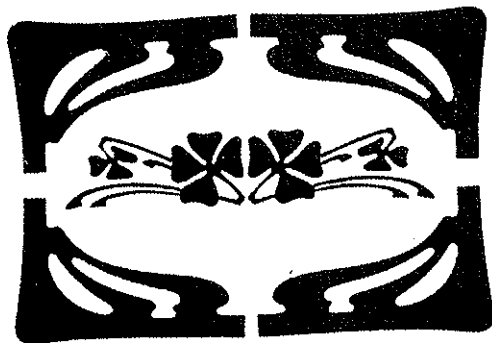
Data knelt to examine the drawings. After some moments he stood again. "Sir, I believe these creatures evolved quite recently through a combining of the acid clouds with gaseous lake creatures reported by the Galactic - "

"A hurricane is building, sir," Worf interrupted from near the entrance of the cave.

"Enterprise - beam up away team. Urgent!" Riker snapped.

Captain's Log. Our studies, at present, are to be left uncompleted due to the dangers on the planet. We have no answers as to why the energy beams record organic life. A natural phenomenon is often left unexplained.

We leave with only one hope, one dream; that soon we can return to complete our studies of this fascinating place.



TEMPORARY ALLIANCE

Bochra, what's the problem?
There isn't any doubt
This planet is unhealthy -
Let my ship get us out.

So what if I'm your prisoner?
Would you really stay and die?
A loyal Romulan till the end -
Or is that just a lie?

Too late you've seen I'm right;
My sight's gone, now I'm blind.
The beacon could have saved us
Now that help we'll never find.

You wouldn't let me give in
So now it's you who's right -
The Captain had us beamed up
And stopped a potential fight.

It seems so strange to realise
Our co-venture actually worked.
Maybe it's not impossible
Maybe it wasn't a quirk.

You're back on board your vessel,
We've gone our separate ways;
May there be a true alliance
On some not too distant day.

Margaret Connor



A TIME OF CONFIDENCES

by

Christine Carr

THIS STORY TAKES PLACE SHORTLY BEFORE THE EPISODE 'A MEASURE OF A MAN'. I ALWAYS FELT THAT DATA BROKE TASHA YAR'S CONFIDENCE VERY EASILY IN THE COURTROOM, AND THIS STORY PROVIDES A POSSIBLE EXPLANATION AS TO WHY PICARD WAS ABLE TO BREAK DOWN DATA'S RESERVE WITHOUT AN ARGUMENT.

NOW

The craft was a derelict. That much was obvious from several thousand kilometres away. There were no light emissions from the vessel, and energy readings were barely perceptible. Frankly, given the remoteness of this sector of space, Commander Riker was surprised that energy output had not ceased a long time ago.

As the USS Enterprise drew closer, the bridge crew began to make out the long sweeping curves of what had once been a luxury courier. The duty science officer, a diminutive Chinese woman, busied herself with trying to make sense of what the ship's sensors were telling her. Finally, in a tone indicating surprise, she said, "Commander, I'm picking up a life-form! Human!"

That was definitely unexpected. "Are you sure?" Riker twisted round in the centre seat to look at Ensign Ng.

"Yes, sir. Sensor readings are consistent with the presence of one

Human in suspended animation."

"Hmm." Unexpected, indeed. Riker tapped his communicator, and after its responding chirrup said, "Riker to Captain Picard."

The Captain's voice seemed to echo out of nowhere as the reply came. "Picard here. What is it, Number One?"

"We've found something. I think you'd better take a look." Riker smiled to himself. It was not an emergency situation. Whoever was out there had been there sufficiently long that a couple more minutes would not make any difference; Riker could afford the time to tweak the Captain's curiosity.

The First Officer's smile widened as the Captain replied as anticipated. "What kind of a 'something', Number One?"

"A derelict with a Human aboard, sir."

"I'll be with you momentarily. It sounds intriguing."

Captain Jean-Luc Picard emerged from his ready room seconds later. He took in the scene on the viewscreen at a glance and noted, "She must have been a beautiful vessel once."

"Yes, sir," Riker agreed.

"Have you tried hailing her, Number One?"

"No, sir. I don't think that the vessel is in any condition to respond, even if anyone were awake over there."

"What about the Human?"

"Ensign Ng thinks the survivor is in suspended animation."

Picard glanced at the Ensign, who nodded in agreement. The Captain thought for a few moments then said, "Number One, take an away team over there. You'll have to suit up, I'm afraid."

"Aye, sir. Worf, with me. I'll take Dr Pulaski too, Captain."

"Make it so."

Rescuing the ship's survivor proved to be a simple task, and so, one hour later, Picard found himself standing next to Dr Katherine Pulaski in sickbay. He reflected that the new Doctor had lost no time in stamping her personality on the wards, and any feeling of refuge he had ever felt there when it had been Beverly Crusher's domain had vanished. Pulaski was a prickly individual, and the Captain now tended to find his visits to sickbay more stressful than he cared to admit, even to himself.

The Captain and the Chief Medical Officer looked down at the unconscious patient. When Pulaski spoke, it was in a voice soft enough to take Picard by surprise. "She's sleeping normally now, Captain."

"What have you found out about her, Doctor?"

Pulaski shrugged slightly. There really was not much to tell. "She's Human. I'd guess about forty-five years old. She'd somehow managed to jury-rig

the equipment on her ship to make herself a suspended animation capsule. Very inventive."

"And effective, too."

"Yes, fortunately for her." The comment caused Picard to look sharply at Pulaski. The Doctor elaborated. "She's been asleep for quite some time, Captain. I'd guess a couple of months at least."

Picard nodded thoughtfully, then observed, "Commander Riker brought back the ship's logs. Perhaps he's found out who she is and what she was doing out here."

Katherine Pulaski noted Picard's impatient need for answers and it prompted her to say, "If he hasn't, our guest will wake up in a couple of hours. She should be able to talk to you then."

"Noted, Doctor. Let me know as soon as she does wake up."

"Aye, sir."

"Well, Number One?"

Riker turned his attention from the science station's computer screens, sighed slightly, and said wistfully, "Data could do this much faster."

"Data," Picard said, "is off-duty."

The younger man caught the unspoken reprimand; Data deserved his off-duty time as much as the next person, even if the android sometimes seemed to think otherwise. Picard blamed the android's somewhat over-conscientious attitude on his previous commanding officers who had tended to think otherwise, too.

Riker reported on his findings so far. "The pilot appears to be one Carmin Reo. The vessel, the Camarae Prince II, has Camaran registry. As for what it was doing out here..." Riker shrugged. "Unfortunately, something seems to have destroyed much of the computer's memory. Whatever we get from the logs is fragmentary at best."

"Speculation?"

"There was no passenger aboard, and it's obviously not a cargo vessel. I would guess that Reo was on her way to a pick-up; or else she'd just dropped someone off. As for what happened to the ship..." Riker sighed. "It looks as though the vessel was pushed beyond its structural tolerances. The hull shows certain areas of stress, and there are several serious cracks in the bulkheads. Hull integrity was breached, and, in any case, Reo didn't have enough fuel aboard to make it to the nearest inhabited star system."

Picard wiped a hand across his face tiredly. "It sounds like pilot error."

"Yes, sir. It looks like blatant incompetence."

"Keep digging, Number One."

"Aye, Captain." Riker turned his attention back to the computer.

Carmin Reo woke slowly. Katherine Pulaski and Ship's Counselor Deanna Troi watched as their patient stirred, shifted herself around slightly, and finally opened her eyes. Deanna immediately moved forwards and gently said, "Hello. Welcome aboard the USS Enterprise. I'm Counselor Deanna Troi, and this is Dr Katherine Pulaski."

"Doctor?" Reo asked.

Pulaski smiled. "You're in sickbay. But don't worry, you're going to be just fine."

Reo's lips curved slightly as she managed a weak smile; then she tried to shift herself into a sitting position. Pulaski gently reached forward to help, saying as she did so, "Take it easy. You've been asleep for quite some time, and it'll take a little while for your body to readapt."

Reo gasped with the effort of moving, then said, "I don't remember ever feeling this unfit!" A thought seemed to cross her mind just then, and she asked, "How bad's my ship?"

Pulaski and Troi traded glances, then Pulaski said, "Not good, I'm afraid. But then, I'm no expert. You'll have to speak to the Captain or the First Officer about it."

"May I speak to them now?"

"Well, I suppose so," Pulaski agreed doubtfully. "You ought to get some more rest, but the Captain did say he wanted to know when you woke up." Her patient was obviously still exhausted. The Doctor normally had no qualms about overriding her Captain's wishes if it was in the interests of her patients, and she had been all set to ignore Picard's directive about keeping him informed. However, Pulaski tapped her communicator, and spoke into the empty air. "Pulaski to Captain Picard."

"Yes, Doctor?"

"I've a patient down here who is most anxious to speak with you, Captain."

"Very good, Doctor. I'm on my

way."

Jean-Luc Picard appeared soon afterwards, closely shadowed by William Riker. Formal introductions were quickly dealt with, after which Carmin Reo again impatiently asked after her ship. In response Picard said, "I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news, Ms Reo, but its structural integrity has been compromised and I doubt that it can be repaired easily. We've got it under tow."

"Thank you for telling me, Captain. It's pretty much as I remembered, but I'd hoped..." She pursed her lips in an expression of wry irritation.

"I have a few questions for you, if you feel up to it." Picard glanced across at Pulaski, silently seeking her permission.

"Only a moment, Captain. She's still very weak and she needs rest," Pulaski said.

"Ask away," Reo said, at the same time.

Riker beat Picard to it by a fraction of a second. "What happened?"

"I tried to outrun some Ferengi."

Picard and Riker looked at each other. "Ferengi?" Picard asked neutrally.

"I was transporting some ceremonial jewellery to Serinae III, and the Ferengi took a fancy to it. I didn't want to sell it to them, I couldn't outrun them, so I tried to outrun them. Almost made it, too." All the Starfleet officers detected the hint of smug pride in Reo's voice as she said the last few words. Still mindful of their earlier conversation, Riker and Picard felt irritation skitter

across their minds.

Pulaski chose that moment to hold up her hands and say, "Okay, that's enough. Anything else can wait till later." The Doctor shooed Picard, Riker and Troi away, then gently settled her patient back down on the bed.

Out in the corridor Picard said, "Well?"

"Well what, Captain?" asked Troi.

"Was there any truth in what she said?"

Deanna looked at Picard in surprise. "She certainly believes it. Why do you ask?"

Riker explained. "The damage to her vessel is consistent with her having been guilty of gross negligence. And, if there ever were any trace of Ferengi activity in this sector, it's long since gone now."

"We need more information," said Picard.

"Captain." Riker spoke from the science station. He was beginning to think that if he stayed there any longer he would put down roots at the console.

"What is it, Number One?"

"I've been trying to find out more about our guest, and I came across this. She was at Starfleet Academy."

"And?" Picard queried, curiosity piqued.

"And she was sent down after failing her first year pilot's exam."

Picard had come up behind Riker, and he leaned over the younger man's shoulder to see the read-out for himself. Picard read the words on the screen and then said, "She wrecked that shuttle."

"Yes, sir," agreed Riker. "She pushed it beyond its tolerances, caused structural damage..." He trailed off, and tapped the screen. "It's all the same."

Picard sighed and said, "She doesn't learn, does she?"

Upon his return to duty, Lieutenant Commander Data scanned through the ship's logs as he sat at Ops, as usual making it his business to know everything that had occurred on the Enterprise during his off-duty period. If he recognised Carmin Reo's name, he gave no sign of it, and if he was struck by the Captain's acerbic comments about Reo's piloting skills, he chose to keep his thoughts to himself.

It was two days later when, having finally been released from sickbay, Carmin Reo found herself facing Captain Jean-Luc Picard across the desk in his ready room. It had been a long discussion, and both Humans found their patience wearing thin. "I'm sorry, Ms Reo, but your word isn't good enough," Picard was saying now. "We can still find no evidence of any Ferengi. There are no traces of the jewels you spoke of on your vessel, and, when all is said and done, you do seem to have a prior history of recklessly piloting small craft."

"Captain," Reo said, visibly biting back her anger, "as I have already tried to explain, the Ferengi must have boarded the Prince after I set up the sleeping capsule, and, as for that other business..."

"Yes. Yes. You claim you deliberately failed your test at the Academy. But see it from my point of view. We've only got your word for that, and it does seem rather improbable."

"So you're saying that I'm a liar."

"No. Counselor Troi tells me that you are convinced that what you say is the truth."

Carmin flung out her arms in a gesture of exasperated anger. "That's even worse. I think I'm telling the truth, but you don't believe that I am! You think I'm off my head!"

Picard looked vaguely uncomfortable at the assertion. "Well, I wouldn't have put it quite like that, but your story doesn't seem to tie in to events, does it? And, unless you can provide us with more evidence to back up your story, that is how my report on this incident will have to read."

"Dammit! This'll ruin me, Picard!" Carmin Reo took a hold on herself, and straightened to her full height. She silently counted to ten, then said, only slightly more calmly, "This isn't getting us anywhere. Mind if I go now?"

Picard watched as Reo left the room and he wondered about her. Had the Enterprise's personnel made a mistake in their judgement of her? Certainly she seemed sane enough to him. She was very angry, but who would not be under similar circumstances? The Captain sighed, knowing that unless new information came to light, which seemed doubtful, his current evaluation of events would have to stand. Her word alone was not enough of an assurance that she would not do something similar in the future, and then, perhaps, it would not just be her own life she placed at risk.

Reo sat at a corner table in Ten Forward and cradled a drink in her hands. She stared out at the stars, and sighed as she caught a glimpse of the Camarae Prince II below her. Without its lights working, it looked like a dead thing. She had loved that ship, and she felt like crying for it.

"Hi. Do you mind if I join you? You look like you could use some company right now." The voice was rich and warm and, to her surprise, Carmin Reo found herself gesturing the stranger to take a seat.

"I'm Geordi La Forge. You must be Ms Reo," the newcomer said, by way of introduction. He followed Reo's gaze and said, "That's some ship!"

"Yes. She is. Was."

Reo fell silent, and La Forge began to feel uncomfortable. Perhaps he had made a mistake in coming over to this table. Tentatively, he said, "Look, if you want me to leave, I'll understand."

"No." The word came out more forcefully than Carmin intended. "Please stay. You were right - I think I do need some company right now."

"Want to talk about it?"

"No." Carmin considered her instinctive reply, then said, "Yes. Perhaps I do."

"Shoot."

"You know about the Enterprise rescuing me?" Geordi nodded; the subject had been mentioned in the senior officers' briefings. Carmin, on seeing the Engineer's gesture, continued. "Captain Picard thinks I was incompetent, and he says that that's how his report on this incident'll read. If it does, I won't get

insurance and I'll go out of business, not to mention that I'll probably lose my licence."

"That doesn't sound much like the Captain. I mean, anyone's entitled to one mistake."

Reo looked deep into her glass and said, embarrassed, "Yeah. Well. The thing is, Captain Picard's found out that I did something similar before, and that I got thrown out of Starfleet Academy as a result."

"Oh, I see!" Geordi's voice was full of understanding.

"No. You don't. You see, back at the Academy, I failed the test deliberately. Unfortunately, Picard doesn't believe me, and there's no evidence to support my story."

"You failed... deliberately. That's kind of hard to believe, you know."

"I know. It's a long story."

"I've plenty of time."

Encouraged by Geordi's words, Reo explained about the rigid honour codes of the Camarae people, and her desire to leave Starfleet Academy in the only way that would be acceptable in the eyes of her parents. Geordi listened, fascinated. When Reo finally finished, he asked, "And you told no-one else? A friend, perhaps?"

"Yeah, I told someone. My lab partner. Trouble is, he could be anywhere now, and I wouldn't know how to begin to trace him. I think he flunked out soon after me."

"We might at least try to find him," Geordi suggested. "If it's as important as you say. Do you remember his name?"

"Of course. Data."

abruptly.

"DATA?!" Geordi's astonished exclamation took Reo by surprise, alarming her.

"What did I say?" she asked, bewildered.

"Are you talking about Data as in pale skinned, yellow eyed, android Data?"

"Yes. You know of him?"

"Of course I know of him! He's here. On the Enterprise. But whatever made you think he'd flunked out of the Academy?"

"Well, I always assumed that..." Reo trailed off as Geordi's words sunk in. If Data were here, then perhaps her problems were easily solved after all. Hope flared up in her, and she switched tack. "What's Data doing on the Enterprise?"

"He's Second Officer."

"Second Officer?" *So much for hope*, thought Reo. If Data held a position that high up in the chain of command, he surely knew all about her situation. And if he had not said anything to Picard... Reo wondered why he was keeping silent. Vindictiveness? Vengefulness? She did not know what might be motivating the android, but she did know that his continued silence was going to ruin all her chances of getting out of this situation. Reo's face fell again. The change in her demeanour was not lost on the Enterprise's Chief Engineer.

"Are you all right?" Geordi asked, reaching out and touching her arm gently.

"No. I'm not." Reo stood up, said, "Damn him," under her breath, and left

Startled, Geordi stared after her, shrugged his shoulders, and muttered under his breath, "What did I say?"

The Enterprise's Chief Engineer liked Data. It was hard not to. It occasionally crossed La Forge's mind that this affection might only go one way, but he chose not let the thought bother him. If, as Data said, the android really did not have any emotions (and Geordi was not sure that he believed that), it was hardly Data's fault. In any case, Data sought out La Forge's company more than that of anyone else aboard the Enterprise, and if that was not evidence of friendship, La Forge did not know what it was. Perhaps Data still felt uncomfortable articulating the idea of friendship as it applied to him, but Geordi saw evidence of it every day.

La Forge was concerned by Carmin's reaction to the news that Data was the Enterprise's Second Officer, and the Engineer knew that he was missing some important pieces of information. Perhaps it was not any of his business, but he had been touched by Carmin's dilemma. Besides, she was angry with Data for some reason, and Geordi doubted that Data would stand up for himself if the need arose. The Engineer was rather protective of the android, an irony considering Data's relative strength and power.

Geordi tracked Data down in Holodeck Three where the android was making use of one of the Earth Landscape programmes, a series which was very popular with the Enterprise's crew. The android had selected a moorland scene, remote and wildly beautiful. White cotton wool clouds were scattered across a blue sky, a warm summer breeze was blowing, and the gorse and the heather

were in flower. Data's attention appeared to have been caught by some sheep grazing in the distance, and Geordi found his friend watching them intently. Idly, the Engineer wondered what Data could find so fascinating about sheep, but he decided that it was probably better not to ask. Instead, he stood next to his friend and said, "Hi, Data. Hope I'm not disturbing you."

Data turned his yellow eyes on Geordi and replied. "Hello, Geordi. No, you are not disturbing me. Can I help you?"

"Data, can we talk?"

"Certainly, Geordi. What is your preferred topic of conversation?"

Now that he was here, Geordi did not quite know how to begin. He sat down amongst the wild flowers and waited as Data followed suit. The Engineer took a deep breath, then said, "I've just come from Ten Forward. I was talking to Carmin Reo. She claims she knew you back at Starfleet Academy."

The android inclined his head slightly, and said, "That is correct. We were lab partners."

"Data, you know she's in trouble with the Captain?"

The android nodded, aware that the question required no further response. Like Geordi, Data attended the senior officers' briefings, and he knew that the Engineer would remember that.

Geordi continued, "Well, Ms Reo claims that you could help her out of this mess she's in. Somehow, the Captain has found out that she was thrown out of the Academy after failing her pilot's test, and, since the results of that test show remarkable similarities with the state of

her ship here now, Captain Picard is saying that it's extra evidence of her incompetence."

"She did fail the test, Geordi."

"Yes, I know. But she says that she deliberately fixed the results, and that you were the only other person who knew it. That you could corroborate her story. Is that true, Data?"

The android sat motionless. "Data?" Geordi prompted, aware that something was wrong. "Are you okay?"

"I am functioning within normal parameters."

Geordi knew from past experience this probably meant that while Data's body was working well he was bothered by something. Moreover, the android wanted to avoid the issue.

"Data. C'mon, it's okay. Just tell me, did you know?"

"I cannot tell you."

"So you did know!"

"I did not say that."

"You didn't need to, Data." Geordi paused, then said, "Can you tell me what happened?"

"No."

"Data?" Geordi was stunned by the android's unequivocal response. "Why not?"

"To do so would break a confidence. I gave my word, Geordi."

Now, thought Geordi, that's interesting. Someone, somewhere, told Data never to speak of the events of twenty-four years

ago, and, of course, he hasn't done so. After a few moments, La Forge asked, "Can you tell me who told you not to speak about this stuff?"

"Yes, Geordi. Carmin did."

Captain Jean-Luc Picard and Counselor Deanna Troi heard the shouting from several corridors away. They exchanged wordless glances, and set off to investigate. Whatever the argument was about, it seemed to be incredibly one sided. A woman's voice, raised in anger, was yelling, "Listen, I don't want to hear it, okay? So just BUTT OUT, okay?" Then, moments later, again, "Just leave. Get the HELL out of here!"

The Captain and the Counselor turned the last corner to find Data staring mutely at a closed door. Picard approached his Second Officer and said, "Commander, would you mind telling me what that was all about?"

"Ms Reo is cross with me."

"I'd gathered that much, Data! What I'd like to know is *why*?"

"I do not know, Captain."

Picard sighed, guessing that he was going to regret his next actions. He often found dealing with the android to be quite exhausting. Still... "Counselor, please see if you can calm Ms Reo down. I'm going to have a talk with Mr Data."

Troi palmed the door chime as Picard led Data off down the corridor. The door to the guest's rooms slid open, and Reo appeared on the threshold, wagging her finger angrily, saying, "How many times do I have to tell you - ?" She broke off abruptly as she realized that this time her visitor was the ship's Counselor.

"Uh. Oh. Sorry," Reo said lamely.

"May I come in?"

"I guess so." Reo reluctantly stepped aside to let Deanna pass.

"I think we should talk," Troi observed gently.

"Oh, yes? What about?" The Human sounded wary.

"The Captain does not appreciate anyone upsetting the smooth running of the Enterprise, so perhaps you could start by explaining why you were yelling at Data."

"Yeah. Right. Like it was all my fault." Reo sounded decidedly petulant, and not a little bitter.

"I doubt that," Troi said, trying to reassure her.

"Then why aren't you talking to Data? Why ask me?"

Troi smiled. "Captain Picard is talking to Commander Data, right now. We're not taking sides here. You must believe that."

Reo looked down at her feet, upset at being read so easily. Troi chose that moment to grasp Reo's elbow gently, and guided her to the couch. The two women sat side by side. After a few minutes of silence, Deanna tried again. "Please. Why were you shouting at Data?"

"It's a long story."

"I've plenty of time."

Carmin Reo gave a strangled chuckle and asked, "Why is it everyone says that round here?"

Deanna found that, once she got Reo started on her story, there seemed to be no stopping her. Finally the flood of words and worry dried up, and Reo finished by saying, "Data could have got me out of this mess, but he hasn't."

"And that's why you are so angry with him?" Troi inquired. Reo nodded miserably. "Why do you think that Data has said nothing?"

"I... I don't know. I was sitting here most of the afternoon trying to figure that out."

"And?"

"Well, he certainly hasn't forgotten the incident, so I guess... maybe... he's getting his own back."

Deanna's eyes opened wide. "Own back for what?" she asked, astonished at the notion that Data could ever want to seek revenge upon anyone.

"Well... We were pretty beastly to Data at the Academy." At Deanna's slightly horrified look, Reo hurriedly elaborated. "It wasn't anything personal. We just... didn't want to know. He couldn't relate to anyone else, and the effort was..." Reo shrugged. "I was sure he'd get thrown out. We all were."

Poor Data, Deanna thought to herself. Involuntarily, her thoughts drifted to the first few months on the Enterprise. Even then, Data had seemed to be something of a misfit. To begin with, only Geordi La Forge appeared to really see beyond the mechanism. Not only had he helped the android, he had also helped the rest of the bridge crew to see Data properly, as a person who, like anyone else, had particular strengths and weaknesses, and his own distinct personality. Thus, for example, while Picard still occasionally snapped at the

android, such incidents were happening more and more rarely. Instead, Picard seemed to take an almost paternal interest in Data, and willingly gave explanations and guidance when necessary. If Data had had so much difficulty fitting in only a year ago, Deanna mused, how much more difficult must things have been when he was at the Academy? The Counselor could only barely conceive of his isolation and difficulties twenty-four years earlier.

Deanna pulled her mind back to the present conversation. It was not her job to apportion blame for events that had happened so long in the past, so she merely said, "I do not believe that Data is capable of feeling the need to 'get his own back', as you put it, Carmin."

"Then why hasn't he said anything?"

"If you stop judging Data's actions by your own Human standards, I think you might find an answer."

"Really?" Reo sounded dubious.

"Really. You said you told Data that what happened was a secret?" Troi said, prompting the other woman.

"I asked him never to tell anyone about..." Reo trailed off. "Are you telling me that Data hasn't said anything because of a promise he made twenty something years ago?"

Deanna nodded, and said, "Yes, I am."

"But that's absurd! Circumstances have changed. Anyone can see that!"

"But Data isn't 'anyone'. Data is... Data." Deanna watched the other woman for a few moments, then said, "I think you and Data need to talk."

Carmin nodded mutely.

The conversation was going about as well as Picard had expected, which wasn't very well. "... and Geordi suggested that I should talk with Ms Reo to find out whether or not she still wished me to keep her secret. But, when I tried to speak with her, she shouted at me."

Picard sighed. After twenty minutes, the Enterprise's Captain had all but given up hope of ever getting the full story out of his Second Officer. Data had given him a blow by blow account of recent events, and an exhaustive (and exhausting) account of his conversation with Geordi. Yet, somehow, in amongst all the detail, Data had omitted to give any clue as to what the 'secret' to which he had alluded might be. And Picard had not needed to be a genius to figure out that events of twenty-four years ago were proving relevant to the here-and-now. The Captain tapped his communicator and said, "Picard to Counselor Troi."

"Troi here, sir."

"Counselor, are you still with Ms Reo?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Could you please bring her up to my ready room? I think she and Data have a few things to sort out."

"Certainly, Captain. We're on our way."

A few minutes passed in silence as Picard and Data waited for Troi and Reo to arrive. When the door finally slid open to admit the newcomers, Data and Picard politely stood up to greet them. The Captain was relieved to see that Reo looked much calmer that she had done

earlier, in the corridor. He gestured for everyone to sit down, then said, "Well?"

Reo and Data exchanged looks, and it was the Human who spoke first. "Data," she said, somewhat tentatively, "I'm sorry that I shouted at you earlier."

"That is all right," replied the android.

Carmin Reo carried on, as if unaware that he had spoken. "Counselor Troi has made me understand that you hadn't told anyone about the events at the Academy because I told you not to, and that you didn't keep quiet out of feelings of revenge, as I'd thought."

Data's brows furrowed slightly at that. "I am not capable of feeling the need for revenge," he observed, puzzled that anyone might think that he was.

Carmin again ignored Data's words and was silent for a few moments. Then she said, "And... I would be very grateful if you could tell the Captain and Counselor Troi exactly what did happen back at the Academy."

Data looked from Reo to the Captain briefly. "Go on, Data," the Captain prompted gently.

The android began to speak.

TWENTY-FOUR YEARS AGO

Starfleet Academy was a tough school and Carmin Reo had flunked out. Her classmates were still avoiding her, even though her failure had been common knowledge for two days now. No-one had approached her with words of comfort; they did not know what to say. Her fellows all knew how they would feel if they were sent home under similar circumstances, and none of them felt at ease with the spectre of

failure she presented among them, too close for comfort. They felt that any words that they might offer would be inadequate, shallow, meaningless, and so they chose instead to keep their distance, and they kept their thoughts to themselves.

If Reo had been Terran, she would have gone home as soon as the results were announced. However, passenger services to the Camarae sector were few and far between, and she had to while away her time as best she could until a passage became available. Now, for instance, Carmin Reo lay belly down on the grass, her chin propped on her folded arms. A discarded book lay a couple of feet away, pages fluttering in the breeze. The spring sun beat its comforting warmth against her back, hinting at a possible baking summer to come. The green expanse of parkland spread out around her, and in the distance she could see a group of her classmates - ex-classmates, now - playing football together, their laughter and shouts occasionally reaching across to her. From time to time one or other of them would accidentally glance in her direction, then duck his or her head, embarrassed. She did not need to hear their words to know that they felt badly for her. She smiled thinly, guiltily reflecting that she neither wanted, nor needed, their sympathy. She was happy to leave.

She had planned it this way.

A sudden drop in temperature as a shadow fell across her back alerted Reo to the presence of someone else, and she twisted round to see who the newcomer was. Judged by Human standards he was of medium height. He was slender and his skin was unnaturally pale. As usual, his expression was blandly neutral, and his yellow eyes were wide and unblinking as he looked down at her.

"Oh. Hi, Data." Carmin Reo greeted the android who had been her lab partner for the last six months with all the enthusiasm she might show for a trip to the dentist, and she felt the customary flush of irritation that his presence always caused. He never seemed to

follow her end of a conversation, and she had grown weary of having to explain even the most basic concepts to him months ago. So what if he had a brilliant mind? So what if he always scored full marks in any factual test the Academy chose to give to its students? He could not relate to his fellows, and they would not be bothered with him as a result.

"Hello, Carmin," Data said, in that oddly inflectionless tone of his. "I came to offer my condolences." He spoke somewhat hesitantly, as though he was unsure of the words.

Carmin's reaction was one of complete surprise, and it was not lost on the android. His brow furrowed, and he tilted his head on one side in puzzlement. "Are my words inappropriate?" he asked.

"No, no. Well, not exactly." Carmin felt totally unable to articulate the cause of her surprise to Data. Of all the cadets, he was the last one she would have guessed might make this effort. It was not that she thought he didn't care, exactly. Rather she had not imagined that he could care, or that it would occur to him to do so. And yet here he was, the only person to come to her with words of sympathy.

Data had picked up on Carmin's 'not exactly', and he could not help but ask what he might have said instead.

"What you said was fine."

The android continued to look down at Reo, perplexed. "Sit down, Data. You're making me feel uncomfortable standing there." Carmin spoke impatiently. She was aware that the android had no personal preference about sitting or standing, as he was equally comfortable with either stance. Data's understanding of the nuances of Human behaviour was rather poor, and he usually failed to pick up on unspoken clues as to what was expected of him. As a result, Humans often responded badly to Data's peculiar stiffness, and his failure to 'fit in'. He knew Carmin's

impatience was typical, though he had yet to understand its cause.

Data seated himself facing the Human, legs crossed and hands balanced lightly on his knees. He continued to watch her, head tilted to one side, clearly still bothered by something. Finally he said, "You do not appear to be upset."

"No. I'm not."

"Inquiry: that would appear to be inconsistent with events, would it not?"

"Maybe. Maybe not."

How many times in his short life had Data been confused by the ambiguities of Human conversation? If he so chose, he could no doubt have had access to his memories and counted them. He felt no desire to do so. Instead he said, "I do not understand." He did not ask for clarification: in the past, Carmin had ignored such requests and the android had learned that asking was pointless.

Data's tone was tinged with a wistful quality that Carmin had never noticed there before, and she sighed, suddenly feeling guilty. How many times had she brushed off the android's 'I don't understand's, in the last six months? How many times had she deliberately ignored the unspoken pleas for explanations? She had always justified her reluctance to help by saying that it was not her job to nursemaid the android, that she did not have time, that he was just a machine.

Yet, for some reason, today, he had touched her in some indefinable way, and Carmin found herself wanting to make Data understand how she felt and why she had deliberately set about failing her exam.

Then the thought crossed Reo's mind that perhaps her motives for wanting to share her secret with the android were not very altruistic, after all. Would the knowledge truly help him, or was it merely her own vanity which left her wanting someone to know the truth after she had

gone from this place? She did not like the thought that she might be acting for selfish reasons. However, she finally decided that it did not matter what her motives were. He wanted an explanation, and she wanted someone else to share her secret. They would both gain from the exchange of information.

"C'mon," she said, standing up suddenly. "I'm going to show you something."

Two hours later Data sat in the navigator's seat of a small Federation craft and looked even more confused than he had done in the park. His scrunched-up brow looked comical, and Carmin wanted to laugh at him as she sat in the pilot's seat. The Human and the android were in a shuttle constructed by one of the Academy's holodecks, and Carmin had just scored ninety nine per cent in an exam that she had failed three days earlier.

The android's mouth opened, and he said, "I do not --"

Carmin interrupted him. "I know, you don't understand."

"No. I do not. If you failed this test before, how is it possible that you have gained such a remarkable score now?"

"Simple. It's very easy to fail an exam in a subject in which you are an expert. You know where to make the wrong decisions."

"Why would you wish to do such a thing?" Data was having a difficult time keeping hold of the thread of Carmin's conversation, so far was it from all his previous experience.

"Data, I never wanted to be at the Academy. It's what my family expected of me, and entering was the honourable thing to do. Honour is very important to the Camaran."

"But are you not dishonoured now?"

"There is no dishonour in having failed. There is only dishonour in never having tried. My family know that Starfleet Academy is tough. They know that twenty per cent of entrants don't complete the course. If I go home now, they'll think that I did my best, and they'll let me get on with my life. If I'd rebelled, though, and hadn't come... Well, families can be tough."

Data wondered at Carmin's words. "You seem to be suggesting that you have kept your honour through deceit. I see no logic in that."

"Perhaps there isn't any, but that's how things work back home. Now I can go back to Camarae and take the job I've always wanted with Camarae Space Passenger Services. It's ironic really: I fail my pilot's exam here, and go home to be a pilot."

"Inquiry: will they accept you? You did fail your exam here."

Reo laughed at the android's naivete. "Of course they'll take me on! I've held a commercial licence for three years already, and I'm the best there is. When I was still at school, I'd fly to earn money during the vacations. It was great!"

Data's brow furrowed again. "Inquiry: if you already hold a commercial licence, does Starfleet not consider it odd that you have failed this exam? The Starfleet test is not rigorous at this level."

"Starfleet doesn't consider it odd that I failed because they don't know I hold a licence. As far as they know, I'd never flown before I came here."

Data sat deep in thought for a while. No wonder he so often had a hard time understanding Humans! If all their actions were determined by such a wide range of complex and illogical variables, he doubted that he would ever be able to understand them. Carmin had given him an explanation for her behaviour, but he was now more confused than

ever.

"Data?"

"Yes, Carmin?" The android snapped out of his reverie.

"Everything I've told you, shown you... you do understand that it's our secret, don't you? That you must never tell anyone else?"

Finally, here was a straightforward statement that the android could understand. If he had been capable of feeling relief, he would have done so. Data had been given an order by the Human, and he acknowledged it by solemnly saying, "I will keep your secret."

NOW

Silence fell in the ready room as Data finished his story. Reo's eyes fixed on the Captain expectantly. Finally he said, "Thank you, Mr Data." The android inclined his head slightly, acknowledging the Captain's words. Picard then turned his attention towards Reo, and said, "I think you should also thank the Commander. It seems that he has got you off the hook." Picard regretted using the phrase as soon as it was out of his mouth, but, to his surprise, Data did not query its meaning. Sometimes, Picard mused, I underestimate Data. The android's understanding of slang and colloquialisms had obviously increased dramatically in the last few months, no doubt largely due to La Forge's influence and tutelage.

Reo looked at the Captain, then at the android, and said, "Thank you. Both of you. And Data?"

"Yes, Ms Reo?"

"It's not a secret any more. You can tell who you like about it."

The android nodded his head once in acknowledgement.

Picard spoke again. "We'll take you to the nearest Starbase, Ms Reo. Then, perhaps, you can see what can be done with the Prince."

"Not a lot, I suspect, Captain. But... That'll be fine, thanks." She smiled at him, a genuine and warm smile, and, for the first time since they had met, Reo seemed happy. The Counselor and Carmin left together.

Data also stood as though to leave. However, instead of heading straight for the door, the android hesitated, and looked at Captain Picard. He looked almost sorrowful as he said, "I appear to have been the source of much difficulty, sir."

"It wasn't really your fault, Data," Picard said. "You did as you'd been asked."

"Yes, sir," Data agreed.

"However," Picard continued, "I hope that this incident has taught you something, Mr Data?"

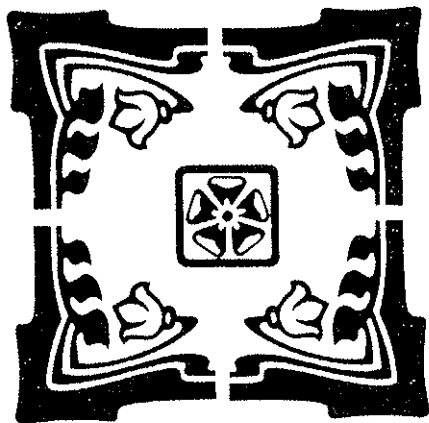
"Sir?" queried the android.

"Just because someone asks you to keep a secret today doesn't mean that it must always be a secret. Circumstances can change. You must learn to be flexible enough to recognise that, Data."

"Aye, sir." Picard wondered whether he heard a trace of uncertainty in the android's voice. Perhaps Data doubted that he was capable of being that adaptable. The android's next words seemed to confirm this. "I will try, Captain, but I think it is likely that I will require some assistance in learning to recognise when such situations arise."

Picard looked at his Second Officer and said, "You know if it is ever in my power to help, I will do so."

"Thank you, Captain." With that, Data turned and left. Picard watched him go, and reflected that any of the Enterprise's crew would offer the android advice if he needed it. Perhaps Data did not realise it yet, but he was a valuable and popular member of the crew, and everyone on the Enterprise would go out of their way to make sure that he learned to 'fit in'.



PERFORMANCE TO DREAM

by

Carol Sterenberg

"Sleep?" Data cocked his head, considering. "I have tried it, but did not repeat the experiment."

Tam Elbrun nodded, and for a fraction of a second Data wondered whether Elbrun's stated incapacity to detect his thoughts had been subterfuge, polite fiction, an attempt to spare Data's non-existent feelings. He had often wondered the same about Troi until he had become better acquainted with her.

But Elbrun had no motive for such consideration, no reason to treat Data any differently from the others, whose irritation he had aroused by his tactless percipience.

No: only Picard and Riker knew his secret, and they would carry it, inviolate, to their graves.

"Sleep, Data? Well, we could try." La Forge had grinned at Data's curiosity. "It's not easy to sleep on your feet, so first of all, lie down... You'll need to suspend all higher processing: you can't rest if your conscious mind is still alert. Now - close your eyes. Shut down all higher functions. Even your auditory sensors..." La Forge's voice had dimmed as Data obediently shut off his sensors. He lay there - how long? - in darkness and silence, inhibiting all processing, in total inactivity. It was, for him, a novel and unusual experience, but he could not imagine what benefit Humans derived from it.

And then, unbidden, a flood of memories swept over him. A feedback loop in his memory functions? Do not analyse the experience, he

reminded himself. He made himself lie there passively, allowing himself to become immersed in a myriad sense data and perceptions: the silky stuff of her costume beneath his fingertips; the warmth of her body beneath the fabric; the scent of her hair: kinaesthetic appreciations of movement patterns unfamiliar to him, patterns he must later subject to further analysis.

Then a wave of sensation, neither pleasant nor unpleasant, but of intolerable and almost dangerous intensity, overwhelming all foreground processing until equilibrium could reinstate itself. Was it like this for Humans? How dared they abandon themselves to this chaos, relinquish their conscious control?

He could tell Tasha felt it too. Her eyes were screwed tightly shut, and a silent scream tried to force itself from between her clenched teeth. Her back arched, her entire body in spasm. He attempted to pull away from her to release her from her agony, but even his android strength could not disengage them without damage to Tasha. Her arms encircled him with a strength he would never have expected from her slight, lithe body.

Lacking his sophisticated homeostatic mechanisms, she had been forced to endure the torment, and being Tasha she had done so stoically. At length her racked and quivering body relaxed, sagging against him. She opened her eyes. Her pupils were enormous dark pools in the half-light, unfocussed and strangely joyful.

"Tasha," Data whispered penitently, "I am very sorry. I had no idea I should cause you such pain. Please accept -"

She laid a trembling finger across his lips. "Data," she murmured, "I'm not hurt. I'm

crying because... because..." More tears trickled across her cheeks and onto the pillow. "It doesn't matter." She linked her fingers behind his head, and he found himself analysing the taste of her tears; the taste of her lips; the taste of her sweat; more tastes, flavours, smells, tactile and proprioceptive stimuli...

The warmth of her sleeping body was pleasant. A pulse throbbed strongly at her throat, her cheeks were flushed, hair awry and sticking to her forehead. For some reason he pushed it back into place with a tender brush of his lips.

Dimly he remembered his duty. He extricated himself gently, and with a strange reluctance, from her arms, and lurched unsteadily to the untidy heap of uniforms on the deck. As he pulled on his boots, he vowed to run a self-diagnostic on his proprioceptive faculties at the earliest opportunity. He reeled out, knocking over a table and chair in the darkness, and stumbled along the corridor to the turbolift.

Somebody was shaking him hard, and as Data responded to the stimulus, he marvelled at the way a random arc in his memory cortex had resurrected Tasha in all her living glory in his mind, all the sense data from her still sharp and accurate and... real. *I do not experience pain*, he told himself. *I cannot experience pain*.

"Wow, Data - it really worked! Or did it?"

Data sat up stiffly, not meeting La Forge's enthusiastic gaze. "It was not a restful experience, Geordi. Thank you for your assistance with the experiment, but I do not think I shall try it again."

"You all right?" La Forge's forehead was creased with concern.

"I shall be fine."

Ten Forward was deserted. Almost. Guinan's only customer was Data, seated by the viewport, his yellow eyes focussed on something even more distant than the stars. His face was immobile, but by no means impassive. He looked... sad. He was so deeply engrossed in his internal processing that she had to clear her throat to attract his attention.

"Is this a private meditation or can anyone join in?"

"Guinan -"

"Am I interrupting anything?"

"Not at all." Presently he said, "Do you remember, Guinan, I once asked your advice?"

"About Jenna. Your first love affair."

"Yes... about Jenna. I misled you. She was not my first lover, as I allowed you to surmise."

"No?"

Data was full of surprises. Guinan had never found him in what passed for an expansive mood before: tonight he seemed to need to talk. And she was an expert listener.

He told her everything, quietly and calmly, without any manifestation in his voice or upon his face, of the pain that haunted his words.

Now there were three people who knew his secret: but only one of them knew why he chose not to sleep.



THE HEALING

by

Sean Christie

Deanna Troi sat bolt upright in her bed, a fine sheen of perspiration running in tiny rivulets across her smooth skin. Trying her best to get her breathing back under control she slid across the sheets and rose shakily to her feet. The carpeted floor felt rough under her feet; the sensation a welcome anchor to the reality of wakefulness.

The subconscious tendrils of the nightmare were still gripping her mind, intent on reinforcing the anxiety that gave it its power. In turn, her thudding heart resisted all her attempts to calm it, snapping back with increased palpitations each time she tried to implement any of the Betazoid relaxation mantras.

Drawn as always to the mirror, she felt helpless, terrified that she would see that wizened, aging face of her nightmare staring malevolently back at her through her own ebony black eyes. Troi hid her face in her hands, expecting to feel deeply creviced folds of flesh beneath her fingers - but instead felt the wetness of tears running down the soft, silky smoothness of skin in the peak of its youth.

The temptation of the mirror proved too much to resist, though, and Deanna slowly lowered her hands, body tensed for the worst. Raising her eyes she stared into the face of a beautiful, youthfully mature woman, raven black hair flowing gently over the rounded perfection of her creamy shoulders.

With a heart-rending cry of relief, the empath fell to the floor sobbing like a

bereft child. Why? Why had Alkar done this to her?

The Enterprise had left behind the Rekag-Bironi system almost six months ago, but the mental trauma Troi had suffered at Alkar's hands had left a lasting scar that Deanna's natural resilience was finding so hard to heal. This blow to her mind was as crippling as the time she had completely lost her empathic abilities - but this time they were intact and she wished they weren't. The emotions of the crew, at work and play in the world outside her door, seemed to be much louder than usual, battering at her inner core with relentless blasts, as painful as any physical beating.

Deanna could feel the panic beginning to overwhelm her, hysteria riding on its crest like some maniacal sadist. She felt as though she were sinking into a sea of negative emotion, fear, hatred, jealousy, indecision clawing at her with deadly talons, dragging her down and down into the realms of madness. Deanna curled into a foetal position on the floor and screamed and screamed, one single word torn repeatedly from her throat, again and again - "Mama, mama, mama, mama..."

"Mother?" came an answering voice in her mind. "Mother?" The voice was soft, gently probing, confused.

"Iain?" Deanna asked, her mind desperately reaching out to clasp the comforting, familiar presence that was close beside her. "Iain!" Troi sobbed. "My baby, my baby, Iain."

"Mother, I am here," the entity murmured gently in her mind. "Hush, hush, now. I am with you."

Troi opened tear-filled eyes. The tiny blue firefly brilliance danced in front of her face, brushing butterfly light against her cheek. It slowly kissed its way up to her forehead, hovering there for a moment before beginning to weave in and out of her hair, feathering its illumination over each soft raven curl. Deanna felt a tingling warmth permeating every inch of her skin, her body throbbing with a cobalt-blue glow, its aura intensifying with the increased tactile activity of the entity.

A smile curved Deanna's lips. She could feel a concentration of pure energy radiating within her, calming, soothing, gentling. The demons were being chased out, leaving no conscious or subconscious hiding place for them to lurk in, and the empath knew exactly what weapon Iain was using - the most powerful emotion of all.

As if from a great distance Deanna heard her door chime urgently, yet she had no strength even to call out. "Deanna! Deanna!" The voice on the other side of the door was filled with restrained fear and panic, yet she did not recoil from them. These emotions no longer held any irrational terror for her.

The door whooshed open and she was aware of a figure falling down on its knees beside her.

"Deanna!" She was quickly lifted up and enclosed in a warm, comfortingly secure embrace. "Medical emergency. Counselor Troi's quarters!" Commander Riker snapped at his com-badge.

"Imzadi," Troi whispered languidly, trying to lift her hand to caress his concerned face. She wanted to tell him not to worry. Everything was fine - just fine now, just as it should be.

"I have to go now, Mother," Iain said gently, his voice tingling inside her mind.

"Thank you, Iain. My love. My child," Deanna answered.

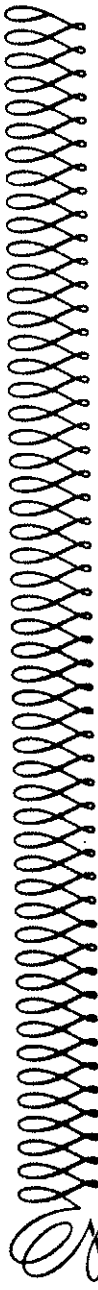
Riker followed her eyes and blinked. He could have sworn, for a brief second, that he had seen a blue light twinkling near the star-filled window. Yet at that moment Dr Crusher swept into the room and his attention was elsewhere.

"Goodbye, Mother. I love you."

"Yes, little one," Deanna smiled. "That's what healed me."



THIS HUMAN CONDITION



Alone -
 So close to Humanity, as
 Near a thing like me
 Can be. Yet far... They name
 Me their friend, and would offer
 Themselves in my place -
 If it were called for.
 I do not understand.

Silent,
 Watching a now empty space - a patch
 Of nothingness - where once you were, Tasha.
 Can it be I truly grieve
 With mankind, that we have
 Common ground? So hollow...
 I... feel, but then
 Surely I cannot.
 I do not understand.

Unique...?
 A mannequin, a toy or
 Am I more than that - the sum of these
 Parts? To strive, and edge forward
 Minutely - is that my
 Reason for being? Perhaps
 It is... I should not want
 More, but I... do.
 I do not understand.

Accepted.
 Different, true. But no more
 Or less than any other living
 Creature. This Human condition I
 Endeavour to find - my soul, or
 Love. And then to find I am real,
 But not of bone or blood...
 I am me... I am Data.
 I think I understand.

Gaile Wood



PRIDE

by

Sherry Golding

Captain's Log. It is a few weeks now since the death of Lt Tasha Yar, who was killed by the entity called Armus on planet Vagra II. The crew, the Starship, are silent, and I... I miss her very much. Life will go on, and in time we shall learn to accept the situation.

We are at present in orbit around Earth while Lt Worf attends the Tae Kwondo and Martial Arts tournaments in which Lt Yar, had she still been alive, would have competed. It is in her memory that Lt Worf is attending, and we await his return.

The shouts of "Kai!", the rocking floors, brought Lt Worf to a standstill. The hall was large - two miles long and a mile in width. Fighting mats lay sprawled almost everywhere and competitors were performing forms, katas and sparring. There were hundreds of styles, Human and alien, all challenging Starfleet Tae Kwondo.

Worf snarled. So many competitors; so many Humans, so many aliens; but Lt Yar, had she been alive, had she competed today, would have been outstanding - surely the best one here. His eyes lit up with pride. Yes, Lt Yar would have been the best warrior here.

He looked again at a man performing a kata; so dynamic, so powerful. He walked away towards another area.

A tall Romulan and a Human boy fought with incredible speed and skill. Worf felt compelled to watch.

The Human skilfully dodged a high kick to his head and dropped to his knees as the Romulan, who thought he had managed to trick the boy, brought out a sudden explosive punch aimed at the boy's stomach. The boy swiftly swept the Romulan's feet from under him and the alien fell like falling rock.

Worf smiled as the Romulan rose with anger and the determination of a warrior. The boy waited... waited. The Romulan rushed at him with a powerful running kick which, had he made contact, would have killed the Human. The boy simply stepped aside and threw a hook punch, slightly pulling it so as not to do any serious damage.

Worf felt impressed as the Romulan fell again. This boy, how old was he? Fourteen, fifteen? He was being so careful not to hurt his opponent; yet his power, his speed - incredible.

The Romulan was down, his head reeling. The countdown; ten, nine, eight... six, five... two one! It was over. The boy had won. He turned and began to leave the mat. Should he not be raising his hand in victory?

Another Romulan came up behind the winner and Worf shouted, "Boy!"

The boy turned in confusion and the Romulan lashed him across the face just as Worf rushed over. The boy spun like a

small whirlwind and dropped into Worf's strong arms.

Worf sneered as the Romulan stepped forward. "I wouldn't if I were you... *sir*."

The Romulan stopped. A Klingon? His eyes showed fear for a second, then it was gone. Meanwhile the boy looked up, shook his head, then smiled warmly.

Suddenly, almost as if he had been standing there unnoticed, a much taller Romulan appeared by Worf's side. The Klingon looked up slowly and gazed into the Romulan's dark, cold eyes - eyes which narrowed threateningly as he stared at Worf.

"A Klingon," the Romulan hissed. "I have heard you are warriors, like us. I doubt that belief; will you prove me wrong?"

Worf's lips curled in a sneer as he allowed the boy to stand unaided, but he said nothing.

The Romulan smiled. "As I thought. Your kind are not warriors. You fear my challenge."

"I fear nothing, *sir*."

"Then you accept my challenge? In one hour, on this mat."

Worf clenched his fists. He had not come here to compete; but if he did not accept... "I will be here, *sir*. In one hour," he replied, turned and walked away.

The boy grabbed Worf's arm, and the Klingon turned in surprise. He had appreciated the boy's speed and skill, but now he realised there was strength there too - the strength of a man. A very powerful man.

"Sir - please, can we talk? In private - over there." He pointed towards an empty, silent corner.

Worf said nothing, but crossed to the corner.

The boy smiled as he followed. "Sir, my name is Hamilton - Dave Hamilton. I am from the planet Yazra III."

"Yazra III? Impossible. Klingon rebels over-ran that planet fourteen years ago, killing all the inhabitants," Worf said flatly.

"I was a survivor. Yes, my family, their friends, were all killed. However, my father had put me in a small computerised ship, programmed to take me to safety. A Starship answering the distress call found me; I was adopted by one of Starfleet's Admirals."

Worf looked thoughtful. "Klingons killed your people. You do not hate me?"

"Hatred?" Hamilton shook his head. "Hatred is pointless. It leaves you little purpose in life and can even destroy you. Yes, Klingons killed my family; but you cannot be responsible for what others did. Is it not true there is good and bad in everyone? This is what many Humans believe."

"Yazra III..." began Worf. "Your race was said to be the most powerful and intelligent ever discovered by either the Federation or the Klingon Empire."

"Yes. Because we were intelligent and so powerful, the Klingon Commander Tirarashi chose to conquer us, to prove he was far more powerful. My people were peaceful; a sensitive race. We loved life and did not kill unless it was absolutely necessary.

"When the Klingons attacked, they

used weapons of intense radiation and claimed a mighty victory. What they failed to see is that all the power, all the strength in the world cannot fight against such destructive weapons. Therefore they proved nothing. Had they fought us unarmed, or with knives and clubs, it would have been a different story. I do not know much of my people - I was little more than a baby when they were destroyed - but what I do not know I will remember as I grow older.

"Yazra III is now deserted. The invaders left some time ago when they found nothing of value to them. Few Humans, and no Klingon - except you - know of a Yazra III survivor."

Hamilton looked at Worf for a moment, then continued. "Sir, you accepted that Romulan's challenge. Why?"

"Why?" snarled Worf. "If I had not, he would have believed my people to be cowards. That is not what we are!"

"Sir, no matter what that Romulan thinks, it will not affect or change what you and your people are."

"I am a Klingon warrior! If I do not prove this, the Romulan will win!" hissed Worf.

"No, sir. He already *has* won, even if you defeat him. He has won because although you are here only as a spectator, you accepted his challenge - and it was a challenge to *fight*, not merely to demonstrate your skill. You do what he wants you to do. Forgive me for saying this, sir, but I expected warriors to be strong-minded. You prove to be weak-minded by accepting what he wants to do. You go to his call as if he were your master."

Worf's lips curled.

"Sir," Hamilton continued, "a real warrior fights only in self defence or to defend others, not in pointless battles. Pointless battle does not make you a warrior but a weak-minded fool."

"You call me a fool?" Worf snarled.

"Do you believe my words, sir?" Worf clenched his fists as Hamilton continued. "Only when you believe in your cause will you accept challenge, and you will do so to prove the person wrong. In this case, by accepting it you have proved them right, that you believe what they say - that might equals right - or else you would just walk away. Sir, show him that you have nothing to prove, that you do not believe his words."

"The hour is up," Worf said, making to go. Hamilton looked thoughtful as the Klingon returned to the mat where the Romulan waited, smiling.

Something about that smile made Worf think. Was Hamilton right? Was -

The referee strolled over. "You must register your name, sir, if you are to fight."

Worf looked at the Romulan. Was the boy right? Was he more mature than the pair of them put together, two warriors standing here waiting to do pointless battle?

He had not come to compete; he did not have a ship to defend. Was this indeed pointless? A slow second passed; then another.

Was Hamilton right?

He looked again at the Romulan. Yes - the Romulan wanted this fight, wanted to prove that his race was better - but... did it really matter who was better? This was just a game!

Another second passed. The referee waited patiently; the Romulan's impatience reached out to him, a powerful jab. Powerful...

Worf straightened. "No," he said. "I have nothing to prove. I will not be fighting." He turned and walked quickly away, back towards Hamilton. The Romulan made to rush after him, but was stopped by the referee.

Worf could not hear what the referee said, but the Romulan's voice was clear. "You coward! You Klingon coward!!!"

"He is calling you a coward," Hamilton murmured, smiling, as Worf joined him.

"His words do not affect me. I know I am not a coward," growled Worf as he began to turn away.

Hamilton stopped him. "Sir - please..." He handed Worf a gold medal. "Please take this."

Worf looked at him.

"I won this earlier today. But you are the one who deserves it; you have won today, really won; you are the only true winner here. Not many have the courage or strength of mind to do as you have done."

Worf stared at him for a long time. Hamilton smiled warmly. "Take it, sir. Please."

Worf slowly reached out and took it gently. He fondled it slowly.

"It is really just a toy, sir, to those who play in these tournaments, but to you it an honour and a gift from a friend - if I may call myself that."

"You compete in these tournaments. Why?"

"To practise my skills, sir. One day, I aim to serve on a Starship like yours, and teach others my fighting philosophies; teach them too that tournaments are only games, and medals, only toys. Most people take tournaments far too seriously, believing winning medals to be a great achievement, a great honour."

Worf laid a hand on Hamilton's left shoulder. "You will succeed, friend." Then he left the hall, quickly and silently.

A blue light brought Worf to the Enterprise. Acknowledging the Chief Engineer, he left the transporter room quickly and made his way down long, busy corridors. He entered his quarters and stood by the door frame in silence, gently caressing the medal in his closed hand. A second passed in silence. He crossed to his white desk. Taking out a case, he pressed a button. The tiny image of Lt Yar appeared, her face smiling, her mouth opening to speak silent words. Worf's eyes saddened.

He slowly moved his hand forward and placed the medal beside the image. He stepped back.

"Lt Yar," he said softly. "I had great faith in you. You were a warrior, like I. I miss you. I miss you."

There was silence again as he watched the image for a further five seconds, crying silent tears. He remembered Hamilton's last words. *Not many have the courage or strength of mind to do as you have done.* The courage... the courage to cry? To show feeling?

To show feeling...

A further five seconds passed in silence, and then a listener would have heard the brave sound of a warrior crying.



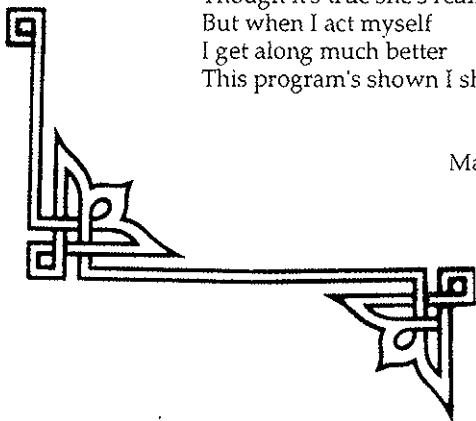
GEORDI'S LUCK

I have no luck with women
No wait, just hear me out
This isn't all self pity that you're hearing.
I can speak about our engines
I can build them all by hand
My forte really is my engineering.

When the booby trap ensnared us
I worked hard to sort things out
I ran tests on all the systems and they check.
I need a hands-on problem
This talking's doing no good
I recreate them on the holodeck.

My luck feels like it's changing
With this woman I communicate
Though it's true she's really just a hologram.
But when I act myself
I get along much better
This program's shown I should act who I am.

Margaret Connor



SOME KIND OF JUSTICE

by

Carol Sterenberg

Picard took his magenta dress tunic from the closet and donned it, scrutinising himself carefully in the mirror. He perched on the edge of the bed and gave his boots a final, redundant burnishing, and then set off for the transporter room. He found Riker, Troi and Dr Crusher already waiting, and Data followed him in.

Picard stopped for a moment to survey his officers. Data was trim and tidy in his gold dress tunic, immaculate as only an android could be. Riker, his First Officer, was leaning against a bulkhead with a resigned look on his handsome, bearded face. Picard knew full well that he'd have preferred to remain on the bridge rather than attend a full diplomatic function, and had relinquished the conn to La Forge, the Chief Engineer, with great reluctance. But even Riker couldn't sulk for long with such a consort as Troi, the Ship's Counselor.

Crusher was making a minute adjustment to Troi's raven curls, and Troi's space-dark eyes gleamed with pleasure as she caught the doctor's mood. Crusher was luminously lovely in her gown, a concoction Picard could never have described in a month of Sundays. The bodice was sort of tightish, and displayed her lovely neck and flawless shoulders, and indeed all points south to about her waistline, to perfection. After that, there was a sort of frothy effect. She looked like a captive cloud. The ivory silk brought out her peaches and cream skin, and her auburn hair shimmered under the lights.

He nodded briskly in approval, and

offered her his hand as they mounted the platform. "Ready when you are, Mr O'Brien -"

The shimmer of transporter effect took hold, but as it did so, he had a sudden suspicion that something was not quite right. That feeling was confirmed when the landing party materialised planetside.

"What the - where's Data?" Picard tapped his combadge. "Mr O'Brien -"

The transporter chief's voice crackled tinnily from the combadge. "Sir - I've lost him."

"How? Why only Data?"

"Not known, sir. I'm looking into it now."

"There was something strange about the beam," Riker said.

"I thought so too. Perhaps that particular pad was malfunctioning."

"O'Brien here, sir. His pattern is still intact. I'm going to try to retrieve him. If he isn't with you, I'll get him back from wherever he is."

"Make it so." What had they to lose? "Do your best, Mr O'Brien."

They waited tensely as the minutes passed - minutes during which Data hung suspended in some unfathomable space, hovering in a cloud of his component molecules. At length the tinkling whine of the transporter effect built up, and

Data's unmistakeable figure materialised within the swirling column of energy. He stayed on the pad for a moment, his brow furrowed in confusion.

"Mr Data, report, please."

"I feel that I have missed something. Were we not all beaming down together? How did I come to arrive alone?"

"I hope Mr O'Brien will explain that for us later," Picard replied grimly. "We'll be returning by shuttle."

The reception which Picard and his officers were attending was the conclusion of a week's trade conference at which important new treaties and agreements had been struck, thanks to the negotiating skills of a team of ambassadors ably assisted by a bevy of Federation legal staff. It had fallen to Picard and his crew to ferry many of the delegates to the conference, and generally speaking it had been an opportunity to renew old acquaintances and make fresh ones.

For once, Picard found duty mixed with pleasure. He danced well, although he rarely had the opportunity to do so, and was in his element as he led Dr Crusher across the floor. She not only looked like a cloud, she danced like one too. Her lithe body was weightless as a dream in his arms.

As the music ceased, Picard bowed gallantly to Crusher and led her to a table. He pulled out a chair for her, but before he could sit down himself, a visiting dignitary buttonholed him. It seemed a private talk was required, and Picard excused himself, leaving her watching the whirling couples as she sipped at her drink. She was joined almost immediately by Data, but her languishing look was

lost upon him. She sighed, and turned to him with a smile.

"Studying social behaviour, Data? There's an important custom you might observe. The man asks the woman to dance."

Data cocked his head. "Intriguing. And how shall I observe this custom, Doctor?"

"Why not try it for yourself?"

For a moment she could have sworn he looked disconcerted; and then she realised why. "You don't know this dance, do you? Don't worry, I'll teach you."

With an almost palpable relief he offered her his hand. "Would you care to dance, Doctor?"

Crusher smiled warmly into his golden eyes. "Don't mind if I do."

Data soon mastered the steps, and led her across the floor in a cloud of organdie. They made a handsome couple. After three more new dances Crusher pleaded exhaustion, and Data led her into the garden. It was cool, and purling fountains were bathed in the greenish glow of the planet's small moon. Crusher shivered, and Data put his arm around her and held her close.

"My body temperature should be adequate to keep you warm for a while. It seems a pity to go indoors on such a beautiful night."

Crusher did a quick mental double take at this unusual behaviour, but smiled as she realised he was experimenting yet again with the nuances of Human behaviour. She felt that all such experiments were worth trying, even his admittedly wearing attempts at

mastering humour. "You're right, Data, it is beautiful. And it's wonderful to be in a garden, smelling the fragrance of damp earth and grass. The holodeck is wonderful, but it doesn't come close, does it?"

"The night is not as beautiful as you are... Beverly."

Oh dear.

"Doctor, there is something I wish to discuss with you."

"I'm all ears."

"I would like to tell you about Dr Soong."

"Your creator."

Data nodded. "My late creator. He had a reason for summoning me to his side. He had designed a chip for me: a chip which would have given me emotions, simple feelings. My brother Lore arrived unexpectedly and tricked the old man into parting with it. There will never be another. No other cyberneticist will ever have the skill or the time to develop a replacement. He died believing that I am doomed never to experience feelings."

"Why are you telling me this, Data?" Crusher asked gently.

Data knit his brow. "I have been giving the matter a great deal of thought. I had always believed that I have no feelings: but now I believe I have the rudiments of basic emotions. Perhaps I am developing them as I encounter life's situations; perhaps they are evolving with me."

"What emotions in particular?"
Don't say love, she thought.

He paused, considering, and when he replied he did so hesitantly. "Do you know how I... felt... when we danced together? There was something about the rhythm and movement, and about the patterns we make, which I find aesthetically very pleasing. But there is something more than that. I feel pleasure, I am certain of it." He stroked an ivory finger along her neck. "Just as I am feeling pleasure from holding your body in my arms now. You have such a lovely neck, Beverly."

"You're too kind, Data. Actually, I'm getting rather cold now. I'd like to go back indoors."

"Do you know how I felt when I saw you in Picard's arms earlier? I am not sure, but I believe I felt a twinge of jealousy." There was an edge to his voice which Crusher found rather disconcerting.

"Data, there are some Human emotions you'd do better not to emulate."

"This is not emulation, Beverly."

"I assure you that it is."

"What do Humans do when they feel like this? You have a delightful phrase for it - a crime of passion, I believe." His arm tightened about her, and Crusher gasped suddenly. "Beverly, be mine. Mine only. If you ever go near Picard again, you will regret it. You both will."

"Data, this has gone too far. I know you like to act out emotions, but now I want you to stop, and I'm going in. Don't ruin a lovely evening."

"You will not swear to be mine, then?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

She was suddenly aware that he was favouring her with a peculiarly thin-lipped smile, an expression the like of which she'd never have imagined on Data's gentle face. "Then that provides me with the opportunity to study this crime of passion for myself." His hand was now on her throat, and before she could extricate herself, he was squeezing the life out of her. Her desperate eyes stared into his.

"Stop..." she managed to choke out.

"No. This is too intriguing." There was no mercy in his sulphurous eyes.

Her nails raked at his face and hands, opened weals of exposed circuitry, and coolant dripped into his collar. But still he only smiled that vicious smile. Her lips were turning blue. He shoved her away from him onto the grass, and she lay in a tumbled heap, like a fallen blossom. As he ran away across the lawn he laughed.

"I can't believe it!" La Forge's fist slammed into the conference table, and his shoulders were stiff with anger. "Data would never do such a thing."

"I'll be sure to tell Beverly that!" Riker snapped.

Picard held up a hand. "Gentlemen, please. This is not helpful. Mr Worf, do we have any idea of Mr Data's whereabouts?"

"We are currently scanning the planet, sir, but it's a big one. Scan should be complete within the hour."

"Where else could he be?" Riker demanded.

"There were countless small craft in

orbit. What if he managed to get aboard one of those?"

"Don't even think about it. I can just see him hijacking one of them - who knows what he'd do to the crew?"

"You really believe he's dangerous, don't you?"

"Don't you, Geordi? I know he's your friend, but there's something very wrong with him. And that escapade with Dr Soong showed us what he's capable of."

"He wasn't himself then. He was under Soong's control. D'you think he'd have hijacked Enterprise otherwise?"

"And another thing. None of us saw Lore at Soong's. We have no proof that he was ever there."

"Dr Soong said he was."

"Dr Soong was dying. He was rambling."

"He was not."

"He wanted to shield Data from the consequences."

"What are you talking about?"

"Data attacked Soong, threw him across the room, and then went and turned himself off. Simple."

"No! Lore jumped Data, and then attacked Soong. Riker -"

Picard rose to his feet. "Gentlemen!"

Their sudden, abashed silence was broken by the chirp of Picard's combadge. He tapped it."

"Sickbay to Captain Picard."

"Yes. What is it?"

"Dr Crusher has regained consciousness."

"I'll be right there. Picard out."

"Shall I attend too?" Riker demanded.

"That will not be necessary. You have the con, Number One. Inform me immediately of any developments. And try not to come to blows."

The doors whispered open to admit Picard to Sickbay, and he crossed swiftly to Crusher's bedside. Troi was already there, anguish haunting her fathomless eyes. Crusher's hand was in hers, her fingernails ripped and bleeding. Her neck was horribly bruised, and her eyes bloodshot, but at least they were open. Picard bent towards her, and his voice was infinitely gentle.

"Beverly - was it Data?"

She nodded wretchedly, and a tear rolled down her cheek.

"Why, Beverly, why?"

She swallowed painfully, and Picard had to bend his ear to her lips to hear her whisper. "He said... he was jealous."

"Jealous? Of whom?"

"Of you, Jean-Luc."

Picard straightened up in surprise. "How can he be jealous? He's told us often enough that he has no feelings of any kind."

"It was... a very good... imitation."

Dr Selar rounded the corner. "Captain, you're tiring my patient. It's distressing her to talk about this. Isn't it, Troi?"

Troi nodded vehemently and gave Picard an imploring look.

"Captain, the Doctor must rest," Selar told him authoritatively. "If you have no urgent questions, kindly return tomorrow."

Picard nodded reluctantly. He'd have been happy just to sit by Crusher's bedside and hold her hand, but he had work to do. A manhunt.

He squeezed her hand gently and strode out of Sickbay. In his mind he heard Data's hesitant voice echoing round and round, over and over again, his sensitive and delicate elegy for Tasha Yar. "We were... intimate..."

Worf's big strong fingers stabbed at the board, and he made his report with a look of extreme displeasure. "Sir - we have scanned the entire planet and failed to find Commander Data."

Picard sniffed in dissatisfaction, and pulled his tunic straight. "Any reply from the transporter rooms planetside?"

"None positive, sir. He's very distinctive. Surely someone would have noticed him beam out."

"So we now have to extend our search to those ships in orbit. I had hoped to avoid this; it will be difficult task, since he doesn't register as a life form."

Worf responded to a pulsing chirp

on the board. "Sir! A positive identification from one of the shore transporters."

"On screen... Captain Picard, of the USS Enterprise."

The transporter chief wore a grave expression which chilled Picard's blood. "Captain Picard, I have bad news for you. Your officer attacked a member of my staff and escaped by beaming himself out."

"How is your staff member?" Picard asked, dreading the reply.

"Not good, sir. He made the mistake of trying to prevent beaming. He was thrown into a wall for his pains."

"And were you able to determine the co-ordinates to which he beamed himself?"

"Yes. To one of the small craft in orbit at that time."

"Kindly transmit co-ordinates."

"Received, Captain," Worf rumbled.

"Many thanks, sir. Rest assured that we are doing everything in our power to arrest this officer. Picard out."

Picard massaged his forehead wearily. "Mr Data - Sorry, Mr Worf - kindly compute which of the ships Data could now be aboard. Contact ground-based stations to check on traffic movements since twenty-one hundred this evening. Number One, you have the bridge. I'll be in my ready room."

The man in the pilot's seat unfastened his gold dress tunic, ripped it off and wadded it into a ball which he

threw across the cockpit. Tentatively, he felt the scratches on his cheeks and a lipless smile spread across his face. The cloaking device engaged, and with his course corrected for the rendezvous, he now had hours of uneventful travel ahead of him. That called for a diversion of some kind - and he knew what kind would suit him best. He rose from the seat and strolled into the rear of the scout.

On the deck sprawled the motionless and half-clad figure of his twin. He kicked his brother viciously until finally he triggered a subcutaneous button. Data sat up abruptly, confusion in his eyes.

"So, little brother. Time to wake up."

"Lore. Why have you brought me here? Return me at once to the Enterprise."

"Or what? We're not in beaming range now. And in any case, I don't think you really want to go back there."

"I most certainly do."

"Sure? I recorded this earlier. Thought you might be interested."

Lore hit a key, and Data's eyes widened as Worf's voice growled from the speaker. "Description of fugitive: android; complexion, pale; slim build; medium height. Dangerous. Approach with caution."

"What is the meaning of this?"

"I've had a busy evening since I snatched you up. I've been trying out my emotions on Dr Crusher. She was quite convinced. You've got yourself quite a reputation now."

"I insist on returning to the

Enterprise. Whatever you have done, I can explain the circumstances."

"Think they'll listen to you? First thing you know, you'll be in the brig." He paused, and added airily, "The Doctor and I got quite intimate tonight."

"You did not hurt her?"

"Oh, yes I did. I enjoyed it. And she knew I enjoyed it." Data's face would have paled, if it had been possible. "She'll be a very good witness against you. She'll testify to your peculiar state of mind."

"I can prove my innocence."

"How? Our DNA is identical. The scraps of synthoskin under her fingernails - " Lore touched his cheek - "are identical to yours."

"My face is not scratched."

"Isn't it?"

Reluctantly, Data touched his cheek. A long strip of synthoskin was missing.

"Face it, Data, you've no choice but to take a ride with me. I've set a lock on the autopilot that even you won't undo. You're going to make a fresh start, outside Starfleet. We're well matched, you and I. We'll make a great team."

"We shall do no such thing."

"Do it, little brother. Or I'll turn you in."

"I have nothing to fear."

"You have Maddox to fear. Who else will get the job of retraining a recalcitrant android?"

Lore found his brother's expression

entirely gratifying: he was obviously convinced. He threw Data an all-in-one. As he pulled it on, Data replied. "Perhaps you are right. I need time to consider my next course of action."

"Daimon! Approaching rendezvous co-ordinates."

Daimon Turq sat forward in eager anticipation. "Any sign of our contact?"

"He's decloaked, sir, but his shields are still up. Coming into visual range now."

"On screen. Helm, bring us alongside."

The Ferengi vessel swung neatly to the side of the scout, and Turq worried at his blue fingernails as he waited for his contact to make the first move. Rule One of The Trade: Thou shalt not appear too eager to do business... After five minutes, however, he swung in exasperation to his First Officer. "They must know we're here. They're not deaf and blind, are they?"

"Indeed not, Daimon. Their sensors are functioning and there appears to be no problem with their comms capability."

"Occupants?"

"He seems to have that device operating again, Daimon. No life signs registering."

Turq sighed. This client was indeed a mystery man. Turq didn't even know which of the spacefaring races he belonged to. He drummed his fingers against the arm of his chair, then caught himself and stopped. Rule Two: Thou shalt not let thy competitor know thou art anxious...

Five minutes later Turq ordered Comms to hail the ship. As usual with this associate, he had audio contact only, but his client's coyness was worth tolerating. Turq had already supplied him with a warp-driven scout, complete with the best subspace radio that credits could buy, ex-Starfleet transporter equipment, and the sort of cloaking device only a high-powered smuggler or a Romulan Warbird should ever need. And all at a handsome profit, needless to say, which the mystery man never queried. A valued client, indeed."

Today the client wished to do business of a different kind: he had something to sell, and the Daimon already had a market for the item. There were plenty of robots and other mechanoids in existence, but he knew of only one on offer here, at such a bargain price. A promising day.

Turq cleared his throat. "Sir: I am ready to initiate transfer of our respective goods, if you will supply beaming coordinates."

Turq swivelled in his seat to see Comms nodding. "Received, Daimon. He's dropping his shields."

"Good. Commencing beam-across. Now, Chief." There was a peculiar expression on the Daimon's face. Partly excitement, but with apprehension, even fear, admixed. What he was about to do was completely against the Rules. It was a big risk, even for such a powerful Daimon as himself, and he would certainly lose his position as Daimon if it misfired. But he had a strong hunch that it wouldn't. "Initiate weapon exclusion filter. Beam across all that is beamable from that vessel."

The cargo hold of the Ferengi vessel suddenly filled with the entire portable effects of a small scout... and two identical

androids. Before they could completely materialise, the prepared force field sizzled into effect. The androids were trapped.

Ferengi law, unlike Federation law, does not recognise androids as people. They are machines, and have the rights of machines: that is, none. They are property and can belong to anyone who can afford to purchase them. And now the Daimon owned two androids, and before very long their craft had also been 'reclaimed' and occupied his hanger deck. A good day's work.

Lore prowled the parameter of the force field, glowering murderously at the guards. They had never been more thankful to be on the other side of a force field, and despite its presence, they cowered before his scowl, nervously and longingly fingering the weapons they'd been forbidden to use. The Daimon had no intention of allowing damage to his precious cargo.

Data sat with quiet composure on a crate, watching his brother pace the confines of their prison. At length Lore turned to him in exasperation.

"Say something! Do something!"

"Nothing I can say or do will achieve anything."

"Damn it, you're not even angry!"

"Of course not. The chip which would provide me with such an emotion is currently -"

"Enough. Data, we have to get out of here."

"I am working on the problem."

"And?"

"All viable solutions depend on our being on the other side of that force field."

"Wonderful. And Soong always thought you were the clever one."

"I am able to be more objective than you. My reasoning is not clouded with emotional reactions."

Data filed away Lore's emotional reaction for future analysis, and, beckoning Lore closer, dropped his voice to a whisper. "If we are unable to lower the force field, we must persuade someone else to do it for us."

"Such as?"

"The guards controlling it."

"I'll just call them over and make that request, shall I?" Lore hissed.

"That will not be necessary. They will do so of their own free will."

"Explain."

"We are valuable to them. They want their merchandise to arrive in good condition. We are evenly matched, and could damage each other severely if we wished."

Lore nodded slowly. "I get the picture."

"Our craft is on the hanger deck next door. They are dismantling the cloaking device but it should still be serviceable."

"Our craft! I like that! It's *mine*, little brother."

"Without the cloaking device you will need to execute evasive manoeuvres.

I do not believe you have sufficient training to do so. I, on the other hand, hold the Starfleet - "

Lore cut short Data's recitation with yet another intriguing turn of phrase. Data blinked. "Shall we begin?"

"It'll be a pleasure." Lore took up a belligerent posture in front of Data and raised his voice. "This is all your fault. It's you they want, not me."

"It is natural that they should want the superior, of course."

"You conceited little - ! I'm superior to you in every way."

Data shook his head with a gentle smile.

Lore's hands were balled into fists. "I'm superior, and I'm willing to prove it! But I think the Old Man left guts out of your programming. You wouldn't dare face me like a man!"

"I am not a man."

"No - and that's the difference between us. You snivelling coward - you'd rather fence with words."

"Lore, I am programmed to respect life in all its forms."

"How very convenient," Lore sneered.

"But I may use deadly force in self-defence."

"I'll show you deadly force! By the time I've finished with you, you'll be a heap of scrap. So much for your superiority!"

Lore's fist slammed into Data's face, knocking him backward off the crate. He

rolled over and up into a defensive crouch. As Lore lunged again for him, he rolled with Lore's attack and Lore sprawled on the deck behind him. There was a pile of ore blocks at hand, and he picked one up and ran for Data, catching him a glancing blow which resounded through the hold.

The guards panicked and lowered the force field. The brothers, locked in combat, ignored them completely, and the guards made the mistake of trying to separate them physically. Lore grabbed one of them and crushed his skull casually with the ore block, tossing him aside. Data flung the other across the deck, and the guard landed badly, with a sickening crunch. Data ran to his side, dismay written on his face.

"Come on! Hurry, you idiot! Do you want to escape or not?"

"This man is injured. He will die if we do not call for help."

"And prevent our own escape? This is a Ferengi."

"He is a living creature."

Lore knelt at the man's side, and before Data could react, he'd snapped the guard's neck. "*Naw* will you come?"

Data's face spoke volumes, but there was no alternative. He scrambled to his feet and they raced for the scout.

Zaigam Khan, Captain of the USS Hood, swung in his seat as his Science Officer interrupted his chain of thought.

"Sir - Ferengi vessel approaching at Warp Nine."

"Warp Nine? What's their hurry?"

"I'm not certain - their course is erratic in the extreme. Looks like some pretty fancy evasive manoeuvre, but there's nothing following them. Unless it's cloaked... No. Wait! They're *chasing* something. It's a scout, sir! But... it seems to be empty."

Khan's handsome brow was furrowed in confusion. "That doesn't make sense. Hail both vessels. Let's see if we can find out what's going on."

Daimon Turq shimmered onto the forward screen. "We request your assistance, Federation ship. We wish to retrieve... our property."

"The scout? How's it making those course corrections? Are you trying out some new remote control?"

"Something like that. Can you slow it with your tractor beam as it approaches?"

Khan sighed. *They're the most obstructive little so-and-sos the other side of the Federation*, he thought. *Why should we help them?* But anything to foster better relations. "Helm, match course of the scout and prepare to engage tractor beam."

"USS Hood is attempting to match our course," Data reported calmly. "I believe they are preparing to activate their tractor beam. Status of cloaking device?"

Lore snarled. "I'm doing my best, dammit! Just keep your mind on your job and let me do mine."

"I am capable of multi-tasking. If there is any question you wish to ask, kindly feel free to do so."

Lore seethed in the rear of the cockpit, but he was almost finished. He crossed to stand next to Data in the pilot's seat, and stabbed at the control panel. "Ready to go." He turned to Data with a look of malicious glee. "Well now, little brother... all good things must come to an end. It's been fun. But it's time for you to leave the party."

"Lore..."

"I'm afraid I've upset the Ferengi. I can't trade you to them now. But I think your days in Starfleet are probably numbered. Let's find out, shall we?"

Lore's fingers blurred across the board, and suddenly he was alone in the cockpit as Data dematerialised in a swirling cloud of energy. The little scout shimmered and was gone, to the chagrin of the Ferengi, and to the astonishment of the Hood's bridge crew, who had just witnessed the unexpected materialisation of an android in their midst. Lore wheeled the scout around to fall in beside the Hood as the Starship's uninvited guest was removed from the bridge and escorted to the brig.

Captain's Log, supplemental.

Enterprise is now in orbit around Delta Seven, where committal proceedings will be brought against Lieutenant Commander Data. As his commanding officer, I volunteered to defend him, with the claim that the assault was the work of his brother Lore. However, on hearing that Dr Crusher would then have to give evidence about his attack upon her, he decided, much against my better judgement, to plead guilty, thus saving her the emotional trauma of reliving the incident.

My duty today is thus a sad one. I must submit his plea of guilty. It seems certain that his career in Starfleet is at an end. Mental illness cannot be tolerated in a Starfleet officer. Any Human officer might be sent for treatment and rehabilitation. Commander Data, however, is a special case, and I am concerned that the court will rule he be dismantled, or be sent for reprogramming to Maddox, who once again claims to have made a breakthrough in his studies. These appear to be the only possibilities. I wish there were some other.

End Log.

Picard punched the button to end the log, and leaned forward wearily on his elbows. He closed his eyes and dropped his face into his hands, and sat motionless for a minute or so as he reviewed Data's long history of faithful service to Starfleet and to himself. Data's place at Ops had been taken by Worf, and his abrasiveness was a rude shock after Data's restraint.

He was interrupted by the chirp of the door. "Come."

The door swished open to admit Crusher. Although it had been a week since the incident, she still looked pale and shaken, and there were dark rings beneath her eyes.

"Jean-Luc - I've just heard. Data will be pleading guilty?"

Picard nodded unhappily. "Sit down, Beverly. He didn't want you to have to go through the business of describing the incident. He says you've suffered enough, and he won't have you

go through more for his sake."

"But he still insists it was Lore?"

"He's unshakable. Told me some story about being abducted by his brother on the night of the reception, and their being captured by Ferengi... all sorts of things. I never realised he had such a capacity for imagination."

Crusher got up, and gazed sadly at Picard's spiny fish as it swam, unconcerned, in its aquarium. "Lore will still be drifting through space when the universe finally folds itself up."

"I know."

"How can Data believe Lore's back in circulation?"

Picard shrugged. "I'd wondered if his circuits got scrambled by that business with the transporter on the night of the reception."

"I had, too."

"But this isn't a recent aberration, Beverly."

"He claimed Lore was at Soong's, too. I know. He told me that."

They sat in a thoughtful silence for a while. At length Picard said, "It seems that Data really did have some involvement with the Ferengi. That vessel in which he escaped from the reception is the craft which the Ferengi were pursuing. Nobody knows where he was in the interim. The Ferengi say that they were trying to 'reclaim' the craft he was using, but decided he was too dangerous to handle, and so they beamed him aboard the Hood. They won't say anything more than that. You know how obstinate they can be. Unless we choose to believe the Ferengi, we can make no

sense of events."

The ensuing silence was broken only by a faint gurgle as the fish made a sudden course correction.

Crusher sighed. "It's so typical of Data - not wanting me to testify."

"Riker says it's because he thinks your testimony would sink him."

"He's already pleading guilty, dammit! Will's never really liked Data, has he? Never really trusted him."

"Let's keep Will out of it."

"Sorry. I just hate to hear him talk that way about Data."

"You still care about him."

"Of course. And so do you."

Picard watched Crusher as she wrestled with a decision.

"Jean-Luc - I want to plead for Data. To tell them he's not really this vicious person who attacked me. To make sure they realise why he's pleaded guilty."

"You can do it after Data's been taken out of the court-room."

"I shall."

The doors of Crusher's quarters whispered open, and she entered with Picard. She dropped her bag onto the table, and subsided miserably into a chair.

"I'm sorry, Beverly."

"It's not your fault, Jean-Luc. Of course they were bound to examine Data's service record, and there was no

hiding his hijack of the Enterprise."

"It was the subsequent assault on Doctor Soong that finished Data."

"I still can't believe Data did that."

"Can you believe it was Lore?"

Crusher sighed heavily. "Until - this business - I'd accepted Data's version of events, however unlikely it now seems, never even questioned it."

"And we'd both formed the hypothesis that Maddox presented to the court."

"It might be true. Perhaps Soong's androids do have a design fault, a gradually-developing psychopathic trait. Data was an improvement on Lore, but still fatally flawed, and it just took longer to develop in him."

"You can't blame the court for their doubts."

"You did your best for him. You made it possible for him to be held in an open facility instead of under maximum security. Data will be dismantled instead of being sent to Maddox for reprogramming. That must be better for him. At least then there'll be a possibility of his being readjusted in the future. Maddox would just dissect his mind."

Crusher shuddered. "Oh, Data..."

Picard opened his mouth to say something comforting, but was interrupted by the chirp of Crusher's combadge. She tapped it.

"Personal call for Dr Crusher."

"I'll go, Beverly. Excuse me."

Crusher crossed to the wall panel

and sat down before it. The expected image did not form, but the voice message was clear. "Dr Crusher - we have a mutual friend."

"We do? Who are you?"

"I'd rather not say right now. You'll find out later."

"Who is this friend?"

"Lieutenant-Commander Data. Doctor, I was listening to the relay from the court today. I heard you pleading for him. I'd no idea he had other friends as devoted as I. We go back a long way. I owe him."

"What are you getting at?"

"I'm going to scramble now. If you want to find out, you'll have to decode..."

Crusher sat motionless for a moment, and reached hesitantly towards the decode button. She pressed it with a sudden burst of decisiveness.

"Thank you, Doctor. I knew Data could rely on you. Doctor, I've the power to help him. Whatever comes, his time in Starfleet is finished. Don't leave him to the bureaucrats. He doesn't deserve that. I can take him away to start a new life. Doctor, will you help me?"

Crusher sat back in surprise. "That's quite a question. What had you in mind? What can I do?"

"You've been Chief Medical Officer and Head of Starfleet Medicine. Your opinions are respected."

"But I know nothing of artificial intelligence."

"Data's purely artificial intelligence is not in question. It's his mental stability

that's the moot point. Could you request an interview alone with him, ostensibly to check him over, so that I can locate him and beam him out?"

"It's an open facility where he's being held... In theory I could request a meeting with him face to face. But he really is unstable. He does need attention," she insisted.

"Don't worry. He'll get it where he's going. I guarantee you he won't ever be a worry to the Federation again, and there won't be any danger to anyone in doing this."

"Where, exactly, would you be taking him?"

"I'm not at liberty to divulge that information. And neither do I want to reveal myself to you. After all, the less you know about all this, the less incriminating it is for you."

That's true, Crusher thought. She turned the proposal over in her head. The thought of Data's dismantling, or his being handed over to Maddox, both made her blood run cold, even though she recognised that something had to be done. Any alternative had to be better. "I'll help you. Now what do I have to do?"

Governor Han walked around his desk to greet Crusher as she stepped into his office.

"It really is very good of you to fit me in at short notice," Crusher told him.

He bowed gallantly. "It's the least I could do for such an eminent physician. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, although of course the circumstances leave much to be desired. I hope you'll

consent to take tea with me when your work here is complete."

"I'd be delighted."

Han keyed the intercom on his desk. "Prisoner Data to report to Interview Room Two." He turned to Crusher. "He'll be there in a couple of minutes. What exactly is the object of your visit today?"

"I want to run some psych tests to augment the data available to the court. They're for Humans, obviously, but Data's mind emulates Human behaviour with heuristic algorithms. If we can just find out which area has been compromised, we can determine what treatment will benefit him most."

The Governor eyed her shrewdly. "Doctor, I know you pleaded for clemency for the prisoner. You'd like to see him cured rather than dismantled, wouldn't you?"

"Of course."

"But it must have been a great shock when he attacked you."

"I don't bear him a grudge. You don't know him as I do. He saved my life, and my son's, once. And on many other occasions, indirectly. I can't just forget that."

"You aren't afraid of facing him again?"

Crusher's stomach lurched. She'd been hiding her fear from herself, but in fact she was dreading being anywhere near Data. She hadn't seen him since - that night. No matter how much she'd have liked to deny the truth, she still had to admit to herself that he'd tried to kill her, whatever his state of mind.

"You *are* afraid."

"Sometimes one has to do difficult things for a patient."

"For a friend."

Crusher made no reply.

"Sir - prisoner has reported as requested."

Han lifted his eyebrows and made a gesture of invitation. Crusher stood, her knees wobbling, and wiped her sweating hands on her uniform trousers. She preceded him from the room. Their boot heels clicked on the deck as they walked the short distance to the interview room. At the doorway, Han stood aside.

Through the window Crusher watched Data, clad in an ill-fitting prison coverall, sitting motionless in the corner. What was she looking for? She'd never see the facial expressions and body language characteristic of mental disturbance in Data. Who could tell what was going on inside that positronic mind of his?

The governor studied her face in concern. "Sure about this?"

"The more I delay, the harder it'll be. Please let me in. I'll be fine."

"I can post a guard inside the room, as well as outside, if you wish."

"No." That was the last thing she wanted.

"Very well. Don't hesitate to call me."

Crusher pushed herself into the room. Data stood up, a troubled look in his eyes. "Doctor. I did not expect to see you. I have been most concerned about

your welfare."

She made no reply.

"Doctor? Is anything wrong? Or do you have news of my... my sentence?"

"Data, I - I -"

"Are you all right?"

Crusher swallowed drily. Her heart was pounding so hard she could see her uniform shaking. She forced a neutral expression to her face, which felt unusually hot. "I'm fine, Data. Really." A wave of cold ran through her, followed by another wave of heat.

Data stepped toward her and made to take her arm. "Allow me."

"Don't come near me!" The words could not be unsaid. Data looked as if he'd ben slapped. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry," she said. "I guess I'm a bit jumpy just now. I'd feel happier if you just sat down."

"As you wish."

Crusher took a deep breath to steady herself. "I've come to run some psych tests on you, Data, in the hope that we can pin down where the bug in your programming has occurred, so we can amend that instead of..."

"I see. But, Doctor, there is no flaw in my programming. As I explained before, my brother Lore -"

"Data, that's the flaw. We both know that Lore was beamed into space. We both know the chances of his ever being found again. Somehow you've convinced yourself that it's so. That's one flaw for a start. And you can't go on like this, persuading yourself that any adverse responses or impulses are his. In a

Human we'd have called that schizophrenia, split personality."

"I understand how difficult it must be for you to believe the truth, Doctor."

"It's you who are having difficulty with reality. Shall we begin the tests?"

"There is nothing to find."

Crusher sighed. "Data, I want to help you. I really do. Won't you try to co-operate?"

"You are wasting your time. But if it pleases you, I shall do so."

The effort of professionalism had steadied the doctor down, and she and Data spent almost an hour in questions and answers and discussion. At length, Crusher entered a final sequence of scanning patterns into her tricorder, and let it run for exactly five seconds.

Data cocked his head. "Intriguing, Doctor. What was the purpose of that test sequence?"

She ignored the question, and holstered her tricorder. "I don't think I can do any more today, Data."

"You look tired. I believe rest is indicated."

"Yes, Data. It's been rather a stressful time recently." And not the least of that stress had been to carry out the tests as if the results would be worth something, when she knew that Data was to be snatched to safety at any moment.

She sat with her hands in her lap, looking at him for the very last time, mentally taking her leave of a good friend whom she'd never see again. Then she gathered her belongings and motioned to the guard outside the door.

She and Data disappeared before the guard's uncomprehending eyes.

A slim figure sat alone at a table in Ten Forward. Most of the other occupants were gazing at the starbase that hung alongside in the inky void. La Forge, however, nursed a drink, gazing into its depths. La Forge was the only one of Guinan's clients who could actually see anything interesting in the swirling synthehol: the heat from his fingertips produced a coruscating Brownian motion which only he could detect. But Guinan had a feeling that, right now, the effect held less than its usual fascination for him. Although there was no eye contact, she could read his misery and frustration in the set of his shoulders and the cast of his jaw.

She glided across to his table and sat down unbidden. He glanced up, and forced a fleeting and bitter smile to his lips.

"You don't feel like smiling."

"I feel angry."

"About Data."

"About the way everyone's just going around talking about his 'personality lapse'. Everyone just accepts it."

"The evidence is pretty overwhelming."

"Dammit, Guinan, he's an android, a Starfleet officer... and their friend."

"Data himself has done little to refute their belief."

"I know."

"The only other android like Data is Lore. And from what I hear, Lore was not a good role model. The thought of Data growing up to be like his big brother is not an appealing one."

"Data's completely different."

"He's completely the same, and you know it. The only difference is in their programming. Lore was better able to emulate Human behaviour, that's all."

"With all its imperfections. Magnified."

"And as for Data's being a Starfleet officer, and even their friend - that doesn't excuse or discount recent events."

"You sound like Riker. Whose side are you on?"

"Listen, Geordi, Riker is a big pussycat compared to the people you'd have to convince of Data's innocence."

La Forge sighed gustily. "Sorry, Guinan. I guess I'm a little touchy on the subject." He cupped his chin in his hands. "I wish Data were here now. I'd like to see him investigating this situation. He liked - likes - detective stories."

"Like Dixon Hill."

"Not quite. He preferred a more... more cerebral model. Ever heard of Sherlock Holmes?"

Guinan smiled gently. "He had a sidekick, didn't he?"

"Dr John Watson. At your service."

"I'll be Watson. Your turn to be Holmes."

La Forge hesitated momentarily.

"You know his methods," Guinan prompted him. "What's the single most damning argument against Data's testimony?"

"He says that Lore was responsible for attacking Beverly and Soong, but nobody's seen Lore for a couple of years, since Data beamed him into deep space to save the Enterprise. There's no concrete evidence that Lore was ever recovered. But there again, there's none that says he wasn't."

"Is his recovery any less likely than Data's developing into a psychopath?"

La Forge thought for a moment. "About the same, I'd have said."

"Was his recovery impossible?"

"No, just very, very improbable... and once you have eliminated the impossible, what remains, however improbable, must be the truth."

"An arrogant axiom," Guinan commented softly.

"Why so?"

"It assumes that one is able to come up with every possible explanation, both probable and improbable. There's usually at least one more that you don't think of. Often the correct one."

"It's the best axiom I have just now."

Guinan spread her hands expressively. "Fine."

"Listen, Guinan, I'm going to assume that it's impossible Data could have attacked Beverly and Soong. Let's see where that gets me."

"If he didn't, then...?"

"Somebody else did. And in Beverly's case, at least, that person looked like Data."

"Lore."

"How could Lore have taken Data's place...?" La Forge rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Data was acting perfectly normally before they beamed down... Of course!"

"Got something?"

"That mysterious transporter problem. Data was the only one affected. Must check that out with O'Brien."

"There's one line of enquiry, then."

"If Lore really was at Soong's, he must have left in some sort of craft."

"Did you pick up any sign of a vessel on sensors when you were at Soong's?"

"Things were a little fraught at the time. We were devoting our efforts to retrieving command of the ship, and finding a way to beam down to find out what was happening planetside."

"Retrieving control of the ship?"

"Data had hijacked it," he explained.

"Ah."

"Another bad mark against him."

"Surely not."

Guinan's gentle irony was lost on La Forge. His fist clenched, and very slowly and gently he beat the table. "Yes... yes. There was something - a little craft, one that we decided was an unmanned satellite, perhaps a lost drone. It was in orbit around the planet, and in

the circumstances we took little notice of it. I wonder... Androids don't show up as normal life-form readings. We have instruments especially calibrated to pick Data out. I don't imagine anyone thought to scan it for an android..."

"You think Lore might have been on board?"

"It would fit the scenario. We never saw what became of the craft. We had a medical emergency on our hands, too, and as soon as we got control of the ship again we had to run for the nearest starbase."

"Promising."

La Forge pushed his seat away and got to his feet. "Thanks, Guinan. Or should I say Watson?"

"Riker to La Forge..."

"La Forge here, Commander."

"Problems, Geordi. Be prepared to take us into warp."

"What's up?"

"Jail break. Data has escaped. He was beamed out of there with Dr Crusher. Attempting to ascertain their whereabouts now."

"Acknowledged." La Forge stared in confusion at Guinan.

"Perhaps there's something I should tell the Captain," she said calmly, pushing herself up from the table. "I'll go up there now."

"Doctor, what is the meaning of this?"

"I wish I knew. I'm supposed to be standing in the interview room looking amazed."

"I do not understand."

"Nor do I."

"This is Lore's ship."

"Data! Not now. Please. Lore does not exist any more. I wish you'd get him out of your head."

"I'm afraid my little brother is right. It is my ship."

Crusher whirled to face the newcomer, and froze in horrified comprehension. Lore stood framed in the doorway, and he was armed with a disruptor. A Verron-S. Not quite as vile a weapon as the Verron-T, but close.

"A good plan, don't you think? You played your part admirably, Doctor. Data's escaped yet again. And this time he has a hostage. A most dangerous criminal."

"Lore, let the Doctor go. This is between us."

"She's a useful pawn. Why should I give away my advantage?" Lore smiled that thin-lipped smile. "The good Doctor's testimony was most impressive. She as good as secured your dismantling, in the face of Maddox's arguments. Most tenacious, she was. I want to be certain you're turned over to Maddox - so I'm taking you there myself. He's already been disappointed about obtaining your company recently. I thought I'd cut out the middle man. The Ferengi are greedy little vultures. Why should they make all the profit?"

"Data, I want you to feel every sensation as Maddox takes your mind to

pieces, the gradual dismemberment and dwindling of your intellect as he removes each circuit and chip, compared to which your physical dismantling would be nothing. Not nearly repayment for what you did to me!"

"What I did to you, Lore, was regrettable but necessary. I would rather not have beamed you into space, but I could not allow you to -"

"Shame I didn't let the Old Man give you emotions, after all. I just wish you could feel the terror, the horror, that such a fate should conjure up for you. But I'll have to content myself with my own emotional reactions. This will give me great satisfaction. I'll have my revenge, and it's been a long time coming. And not least, I have a little unfinished business with the good Doctor. If it hadn't been for you, my dear, the power of the Crystal Entity would have been mine on that day when I was cast out into interstellar space. I owe you for that."

He made an adjustment to the disruptor and aimed it at her belly. "Ever treated anyone for a disruptor wound, Beverly? I doubt it. The agony usually kills them. They die of shock. Look, I'll show you."

"Do not harm her, Lore."

"Or what? Don't you wish you could feel angry, Data? Anger gives Humans strength to attempt the impossible - for instance, to save Beverly here. Your programming won't allow you to risk your life - such as it is - to save hers. You know as well as I do what effect this weapon will have on you. So stand aside."

Mesmerised, Crusher watched Lore's knuckles as his finger pressed slowly, ever so slowly, on the firing button. Suddenly Data threw himself in

front of Crusher, reaching for the weapon in Lore's hand. But he was too late. The livid beam made a blinding arc and Data collapsed to the deck, twitching grotesquely and uncontrollably as his circuits overloaded. An acrid smoke filled Crusher's nostrils as she fell to her knees at his side, trying to determine the extent of the damage. She swallowed a cough as the smoke burnt her throat and made her eyes water.

Data's uniform had melted onto his skin covering, and where that also had burned away, circuits fizzed and sparked, immersed in leaking hydraulic fluids. Data's eyes were open but unfocused, and even as she watched helplessly they snapped shut. She looked up, horrified.

Lore tutted in disapproval. "Now, where was the logic in that?" he asked ironically. "This is where the study of Human behaviour leads you, little brother. But it was quite a creditable imitation, wasn't it?" he appealed to Crusher. "What a shame. He was getting the hang of it towards the end."

"Is that all you have to say?"

"This is rather unfortunate."

"What?!"

"He won't be nearly so valuable to Maddox now he's damaged."

"You -"

"Yes? My, but you're lovely when you're angry." Lore threw the disruptor into the corridor, and strolled nonchalantly towards her. Crusher looked about her desperately. There was nowhere to hide, nothing she could use as a weapon. And that smile... She became aware of a melodious humming, and Lore extended his hand. "Care to dance, Doctor?"

She backed away from him, stumbling over obstacles, not daring to take her eyes from his. She'd hidden the terror of that awful night deep within herself until she should feel ready to deal with it, and now it was being awoken prematurely.

"It's not polite to refuse, you know. Don't risk upsetting me. It really isn't a good idea."

Her mouth moved, but no sound came out. There was a scream building up inside her, and she clamped her teeth against it.

He seized her shoulders with a painful grip, and as his fingers bit into her, he dragged her around the deck in a grotesque parody of the dance they'd shared at the reception. Her head sagged against his shoulder, and he inclined his head to murmur intimately in her ear.

"You'll stay here with me for the rest of your life - however long I allow that to be. Data was right. It'd be a waste to shoot you. We could have a lot of fun together, Beverly. I'm sure the rest of you is just as lovely as your neck. And now *he's* out of the way, we have all the privacy we could possibly need."

He yanked her chin up. As his brimstone eyes bored into her, Crusher's mind refused to handle any more and shut down. Lore dropped her unceremoniously, and she crumpled in a heap beside Data's lifeless body.

Daimon Turq was getting on his Chief Engineer's nerves. He'd been hovering between the bridge and engineering for three solid shifts, and his constant presence was galling the engineer beyond description. Faruk made a final adjustment, and barked

tensely at his assistant, his fingers poised over the board. "Now!"

"Well, Faruk?" Turq demanded.

Faruk and his assistant pored over the console, tracing circuits with stubby, nail-bitten fingers. Faruk took his time, and then turned to Turq with calm confidence. "The cloaking detector is installed and fully functional."

"At last!" Turq turned on his heel and made for the bridge.

Faruk sighed. "I told you so, didn't I? That's all the thanks we're going to get for working ourselves to a frazzle. When I think that I could have shipped out with Daimon Taag..."

The Daimon threw himself energetically into his seat. Now to track down the androids! He'd gone to enormous trouble and expense to obtain the detector, and if he was honest with himself, even the profit to be made on the two androids would hardly cover his outlay; but it was a matter of principle. One couldn't be seen to make mistakes - a Daimon was only as good as his last deal, and there were plenty of aspirants to his position. The situation had to be salvaged, or there would be a new Daimon in his seat before long.

The question of where to begin his search had tasked him severely; but with a natural Daimon's shrewdness, he'd instinctively brought his ship to the Delta system. He couldn't have explained why; it just felt right.

And that feeling turned to a satisfaction almost as intense as Umax, his Science Officer, looked up in excitement from the new viewer at his station. "Daimon! Small cloaked vessel,

heading out of the system at Warp Seven!"

"Is it the scout?"

Turq drummed his fingers on the armrest, and then sprang up impatiently and looked over his Science Officer's shoulder as the man struggled with the unfamiliar controls, still labelled in the angular Romulan script. After a few false starts, he looked up into Turq's anxious eyes. "Yes, Daimon."

"Life signs?"

"One Human."

"And now we know how to scan for an operational android," Turq prompted him.

"Of course. ...One android aboard."

Turq felt somewhat disappointed. *But after all, one mustn't be greedy*, he thought, and squashed the blasphemous thought instantly. He'd just raise the price; he was certain his buyer would pay up, however reluctantly.

"We'll have to leave the Human on board the scout. We can't risk bringing the Federation down on our necks for his sake. Shame - the craft would have fetched a good price. Send the co-ordinates of the android to the transporter room. Use the weapon exclusion filter and beam him direct to the brig. Double the force field intensity. I'll have no mistakes this time."

Guinan turned from her perusal of Picard's exotic fish as the Captain entered his Ready Room.

"You wanted to see me, Guinan?" He waved her to a seat as he lowered

himself warily into his own chair.

"It may be nothing, Captain, but I think you should know that Beverly came to Ten Forward last night. She seemed pretty excited. Said an unexpected message had suggested a new course of action, that she was going to help free Data by running some tests on him."

Picard's brow furrowed. "Were those her exact words? 'To help free Data?'"

Guinan nodded slowly.

"Did she say any more about the message?"

"She went out of her way to be evasive. She was just so excited about the idea that she had to share it."

Picard tapped his combadge. "Mr Worf, do we have any record of a transmission which Dr Crusher received yesterday? Incoming, on our return from the enquiry - end of alpha shift."

"I'll get onto it now, Captain."

"Mr Riker - any news regarding the escape vessel?"

"No, sir. Still scanning and monitoring all available information."

"Very good, Number One." He gazed shrewdly at Guinan. "You know what's going through my mind." It was a statement, not a question.

"Was it an escape, or an abduction?"

"Data's been under guard since the Hood recovered him. He's had no contact with anyone except one or two crewmen aboard the Hood, ourselves, and assorted legal staff. I can't believe that any of them would be party to an escape. That

leaves only one possibility."

"O'Brien to Captain Picard."

"Picard here."

"Sir, I know you're busy right now, but I've just found something new about that transporter malfunction. Something Commander La Forge suggested put me onto it."

"There was no malfunction."

There was a moment's surprised silence. "That's right, sir."

"You didn't lose Data's signal. It was taken by somebody else. And the signal you pulled back and beamed planetside wasn't exactly identical to the one transmitted from Enterprise."

"Right again, sir. Almost identical - but not quite."

"Thank you, Mr O'Brien. Good work."

Worf's voice rumbled from Picard's combadge. "Sir, we have a fragment of the message. The rest was scrambled."

"That may be sufficient. I want a voice comparison on the caller." He glanced over at Guinan. "Compare it with Commander Data's characteristics."

He rose, and offered Guinan his arm as they emerged onto the bridge. They crossed to Science Two, where Worf was correlating wave traces. He swivelled toward them, trying to hide the surprise on his face. "A good match, Captain. The accent is not the same, but the timbre and frequency characteristics are within accepted parameters for a perfect match."

"Both from the same larynx, eh,

Worf? Two of a kind. Identical." The grim triumph on Picard's face almost camouflaged the remained of his seething thoughts. Guinan turned away and slipped unnoticed into the turbolift as Picard took the command seat, pulling his tunic straight with a sniff.

Something's burning, Crusher thought. Her fingers twitched. *My hand is in something sticky. And this sticky stuff is -* "Data! Data!" she hissed. There was no response. She rolled to her knees.

She was kneeling in a pool of the blue coolant oozing viscously from Data's ruined midsection. She pulled fragments of burnt synthoskin and uniform away from the edges of the blackened hole, and swore softly. She sought desperately along the walls for a toolkit, and spilled its contents onto the deck. Spot welder... She worked swiftly to stem the flow, but was only partially successful. But at last there was a response. Data's eyes flicked open, and he looked hard into the middle distance, scanning as he did so.

"Data! How badly are you hurt?"

"Damaged, Doctor," he corrected her absently. "Scarcely viable. My self-correction routine closed me down to effect repairs, but although you appear to have been of assistance, re-routing of my hydraulic and certain electrical subsystems has not been accomplished. I am too badly damaged."

"Not mentally."

"No - but soon I shall shut down completely. My body fluid level is reaching critical point."

Crusher's shoulders sagged. She needed Data to be strong, to help in their escape from Lore. And that was a point.

Where was he?

"Data - we have to get out of here. What should I do?"

"We need to disengage the vessel's cloaking mechanism and broadcast a distress signal."

"How do you know we're cloaked?"

"We would certainly have been apprehended by now, were we not."

"Of course. How can I disable Lore so I can do all that?"

"His disruptor could be used against him. That is our only hope. It would be helpful to know where he is at present."

"I'm on my way."

"I shall accompany you."

"You'll do no such thing. As soon as you move you'll lose more coolant. You stay here and do some more re-routing, and I'll do the dirty work. Trust me."

"Doctor, I cannot permit you to go alone. The risk -"

"Data! Doctor's orders." With that, she pulled her boots off and padded barefoot to the open door of the cargo bay. She slipped through it as silently as a shadow, hugging the wall, hardly daring to breathe, her heart pounding. She was full of adrenalin, her senses stretching out before her like a cat's whiskers, hair-triggered to react to any stimulus.

The ship was small. There were not many places Lore could be, and she guessed he'd be in the cockpit. She crept

stealthily along the deck, willing her knees not to crack. As she rounded the curve of the corridor, she felt like screaming with tension. Holding her breath, she poked her head cautiously around the cockpit hatchway. Empty. Where, then? Was he watching her now on some internal surveillance screen, that vicious smile on his lips? She spun around. Nobody there.

And then she noticed the disruptor on the seat. Booby-trapped, perhaps? That would be typical of Lore, typical of the games he liked to play. Perhaps Data would be able to determine if it was safe to use. She picked it up gingerly.

She still had to find Lore. She set off down the corridor, now checking every cabin and open space aboard. Her bruised shoulders ached as stress knotted the muscles; the more places she checked, the more certain the next place was to contain him. She set her jaw in frustration, almost tempted to call out and challenge him to appear. Especially now she had the disruptor.

And then she pictured Data, helpless in the cargo hold, Lore returning to finish the job. She broke into a run, throwing caution to the wind. She skidded into the cargo bay. Data was still exactly as she had left him, and he turned his head toward her as she squatted beside him.

"No sign of him, Data. What now? He must be here somewhere."

"Not necessarily. You must trust the evidence of your eyes, Doctor."

"Must I? I've done that once too often lately."

"If you cannot find Lore, we must assume he is not here - perhaps only temporarily. Help me to the cockpit."

"Wait. I found this. Can you tell if it's serviceable?"

"Kindly point it away from me, Doctor. Indeed it is. Lore left this behind? Most intriguing." Data made a fruitless attempt to sit upright. "As I feared, I have limited power, but have lost co-ordination."

"I'll help you."

Somehow Crusher levered Data to his feet, and then began a nightmare journey to the cockpit. It was not far, but Data was almost incapacitated, and had to hang onto the bulkhead whilst Crusher moved his feet for him, one after the other. She was breathing hard and shaking with effort as she helped him awkwardly into the pilot's seat. She wiped sweat and coolant from her forehead with her sleeve, and leaned forward, her hands braced on her thighs, to regain her breath.

"The cloaking mechanism - this control here." Data stabbed ineffectually at the board. Co-ordination was worsening.

"This one?"

He nodded. "And to broadcast a distress call... the emergency frequency..." He dictated the digits to her, and she entered them with trembling fingers. She looked behind her. Still no Lore. *Where the hell is he?* "And now we just sit and wait."

"Correct."

"And hope we make contact soon. Show me how to reply to a message."

Data's head sagged onto his chest. The seat was saturated with fluids. He explained the procedure patiently as Crusher took in every word.

"Got it, Data. Look, there's something I have to say to you..."

"We do not have time, Doctor." There was a peculiar, flat quality to his voice which Crusher found extremely worrying. "I fear I cannot survive until we are rescued. I would rather not desert you in your hour of need, but I know my systems will shut me down very soon. The damage is irreparable. I need replacement parts, but there are none. Unless..." His voice tailed off abruptly. His eyes stayed open, but there was no expression in them.

"Unless what?" She took his shoulders and shook him in desperation. "Unless what, Data?" Her hand strayed to the scanner at her belt, but she knew the truth already. She closed Data's eyes with a tender sweep of her open palm.

She was alone. Utterly alone. She crouched at his side, hanging onto his limp hand like a frightened child. Now she had nobody to care for, nobody else to keep strong for, misery welled up inside her to burst the barriers she'd erected so carefully, and the first fat tear rolled down her face. She cried as if her heart would break.

As if her pent-up pain and terror were not enough, guilt fuelled her grief as she considered all that Data had been through. Her own rejection of him; disgrace; the appalling sentence he'd faced. All this, and he was innocent all the time. And now he was gone, and he'd never know how she wanted to heal the rift between them. She was still crying in Troi's arms half an hour after the Enterprise picked them up.

It was late, and Ten-Forward was almost deserted. The sole occupants sat at a table with the best view in the house;

but neither of them was enjoying the show. The stars swirled past, disregarded, like wind-driven snowflakes. Crusher stared into the synthehol in the bottom of the frosted glass. Her eyes were red-rimmed, but La Forge couldn't see that. It was her aura that betrayed her mental state to him. He sighed unhappily.

"Beverly, I'm going to bed. I have a busy day ahead of me tomorrow. Can I walk you back to your quarters?"

"Not just yet, Geordi. You're going to do it tomorrow, aren't you?"

"Dismantle Data. That's my first job in the morning."

"It just isn't fair," Crusher said bitterly. "Dismantling was to have been his sentence, and that's the thanks he gets for laying down his life for me. Where's the justice in that?"

"How d'you think I feel?"

"I know it has to be done, but I feel I'm letting him down. Now that Starfleet has dropped all charges, he should be back on duty, where he belongs, not packed away in crates." She drained the glass moodily. "I keep wondering what he was thinking of. Unless..."

"Unless what?"

"There are no spare parts, unless..."

"I've racked my brains. I've no idea."

"Think, Geordi, *think*! He must have had something in mind."

"Perhaps he was considering using parts of Lore."

"Ha! I don't think so. He had no

idea where Lore was."

"And we still don't. I wonder what devilry he's hatching now."

"Perhaps he went for a ride with the Crystal Entity."

La Forge said drily, "Listen, if I was the Crystal Entity, I'd watch my back with Lore around."

Crusher paused for a moment to collect her thoughts. "If not from Lore, there must be some other source. Wait. When we found Lore in the beginning and rebuilt him here - did we have any spare parts?"

"None. Beverly, I think you're clutching at straws. I hate to say it, but I'm afraid we'll have to store him away until the day that some bright cyberneticist manages to rebuild him. We have the schematics, but I know of nobody with the skill to build from them. Data was the only one who - Of course!"

He slammed his fist into the table, causing the glasses to jump and jangle. He stood up abruptly. "Of course. Come with me!"

La Forge tapped an access code into the storage bank and the sound of the door motor echoed around the crew storage hold. He stood aside as a pod swung open. "D'you know what this is, Beverly?"

"I guess it's Data's storage space. But what could he have to store that's so bulky? I don't know anyone who's got fewer possessions than he has."

"This isn't really a possession." He released the catch gently. "Look."

Inside the pod was the body of a young woman. Crusher gasped in surprise as she clutched at La Forge's arm, but she recovered herself quickly.

"Is this...?"

"Lal. Data's child." La Forge smiled fondly as the memories flooded back.

"Geordi," she breathed. "I had no idea..."

"Data had to deactivate her, but he couldn't bring himself to part with her. He always hoped that he'd learn how to improve her in years to come. After all, he had all the time in the world. He always hoped that Lal would live again."

Crusher took Lal's cold hand reverently. "Do you think we have the right to do this to her?"

"We can't ask Data, now, can we? I'm sure he wouldn't mind. He could always rebuild her again if he wanted to. Couldn't he?"

"This seems... weird. But why not?"

"I'm game if you are, Beverly."

"We'll do it. If it's the last thing I do, Data will live again."

Crusher sealed the abdomen section and handed the microwelder to La Forge. She looked at him intently. "Shall I?"

He shrugged. "I can't think of a better time. Do it."

With a hand that trembled slightly, Crusher reached for the activation control in Data's back, and pressed it gently. His eyes snapped open and he lay there scanning for a few seconds, his mouth

slightly open. "All systems normal. All systems operating within specified parameters." He blinked twice, and then his eyes focussed.

Crusher was holding his hand, and her happiness was overflowing into tears. Data reached up and brushed them gently away.

La Forge was gripping his shoulder:

He smiled.



THE BORG

Beware of these beings
They're dangerous you see.
Organic, mechanic
Trouble to you and me.

Reapers of knowledge
And technology too.
Guinan has told us
Of the things that they do.

They are not individuals
They make no mistakes.
They don't wait to be given
They simply just take.

They show no emotion
They give no sign of fear.
They acknowledge no suffering
They ignore all our tears

Be careful of these beings
They'll kill you, you know.
Opposition's not easy
Their powers seem to grow.

Report any sign of
The Borg you might see.
Gods help us survive them
Where'er they may be.



Helen Connor

