

MAKE IT SO

21



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Q'OYMI PACHAKUTI

by

Taruka Quauhtezcatl

There was absolutely no doubt about it. The situation on Fomalhaut V had progressed beyond a minor irritation and was rapidly reaching disaster status.

At least that's how Starfleet saw it. The report clandestinely broadcast via subspace did not make pleasant reading.

"You're saying it's out of control?" said Picard, trying to keep some semblance of calm.

"It seems so," said Admiral Catamarca, who had brought the report. "Almost total anarchy. There are gangs roaming the streets causing all kinds of trouble."

"That happens whenever there's a revolution, sir. We can't step in every time someone wants to change government."

"There's more to it than that, Jean-Luc. It seems that about three months ago the colony was perfectly normal. Then with no warning and no apparent reason they began to turn against any form of technology. They've wrecked the research laboratories and most of the water and food processing plants. They've killed a lot of the research technicians as well, and smashed communications."

"Thorough."

"That's what we thought. Whoever's behind it knows exactly what he's doing, and he's very familiar with Federation technology and cybernetics."

"There can't be that many," said Riker.

"I'd say about five," said Geordi. "Two are at the Daystrom Institute, two at Starfleet Command and the other's here."

"All accounted for."

"Sir, may I make a suggestion?"

"Of course, Mr Data," said the Admiral.

"You have all overlooked the possibility that you are not dealing with a man but with an android."

"Now look, I'd know..." began Geordi.

"Not necessarily. I have studied the reports and it would appear that this is the case."

"Now look Data," said Riker, "do you mean who I think you mean?"

"I do, sir."

Riker sighed. "And how in the name of God are we to stop him?"

"We know his mental state is, shall we say, uncertain. He has evidently convinced the leaders of the Chawarqa rebels that he is sane. By destroying all technology he is ensuring that nobody can discover what he is. I believe there is a saying, sir, 'Give him enough rope and he will hang himself.'"

"And how do you propose to do

that?" asked the Admiral.

"Admiral Catamarca, sir, I probably know him better than anyone else; I suppose I should do. He will take advantage of any weakness he sees, and will not hesitate to masquerade as me. I suggest that we set a trap for him, sir, and I volunteer to be the bait."

"I can't let you do that, Data, he'll not be happy merely to shut you off. He'll have you forcefully disassembled."

"I think not."

"What do you mean?"

"He will have more problems than being me to worry about."

"Data." Picard's voice was a growl.

"If the intention is to trap him, then he would not consider that the Enterprise, on a training mission, would be much of a threat. To any observer that is what she must be. Even to her crew... save those present."

"Why would a training vessel visit Fomalhaut V?"

"I'm sure Geordi could arrange for the warp drive to break down at a suitably strategic location," said Riker with a grin.

"Captain, I have one further request, which you may not approve."

"What's that?"

"I would also like to try and enlist the assistance of Q."

"Risky," said Riker.

"I am certain he would enjoy it. This is his kind of game. And I know of

no other entity who would have the perseverance to show up the android as an impostor. He knows me very well."

"How do you propose to contact him?"

"I do not. You do."

Picard visibly jumped. "Me?"

"Yes, sir. A friendly invitation should work."

Riker fought hard to keep a straight face.

They put in at Starbase 21 to let Admiral Catamarca off and to pick up a few dozen fourth-year Starfleet cadets for a training run as per Data's plan.

In the lounge a small group of them were mulling over the news.

"Report to USS Enterprise," said the tall, dark Apachita. "Looks like we've finally got some space duty."

"This is most unusual."

"How d'ye make that out, Sayaq?"

"According to records we are not due for a ship until the middle of the year."

"Oh, I get it. Has this thrown a spanner into your memory banks?"

Sayaq merely looked at Apachita with a raised eyebrow. For his part Apachita was content to make some comment about the similarity between Vulcans and machines.

"Leonard McCoy, stardate 2443.6," said the third member of the group, an

Andorian called Thamin. "Shut up you two, at least we can get out of this place."

"Oh, I don't know..." began Sayaq.

"Come on, Sayaq, have we got Captain Picard?"

"I believe so."

"Scuttlebutt says he has an android Second Officer," said Thamin. "You two'll get on very well."

An ensign joined the group. "You posted to the Enterprise?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'm your liaison. Ensign Ro Laren."

They introduced themselves and settled again to wait for their turn to go aboard.

Most of Starbase 21 was on stand-down and greeted the arrival of the Enterprise with little more than mild interest. They could see that she was having some sort of refit but couldn't really be bothered to notice exactly what was being done. All this was to Data's satisfaction if not to Picard's taste. They were sitting in another part of the lounge watching the dents being knocked into the Enterprise's hull, her paintwork dirtied and stripped, and some of the polish knocked off her.

Someone tapped Data's shoulder. He looked up into the glowing green eyes of a Procyonite, with glittering mother-of-pearl scales. "Commander Data? Your presence is required aboard your ship."

"And mine?" asked Picard.

"I think this is a rather personal

matter."

Data followed the Procyonite ensign through to the corridor which looked out onto the main space dock, and he felt somewhat annoyed that a ship as graceful as the Enterprise had to be so mistreated. But she must look old and battered.

"Why are Humans so fascinated with old things?" someone had once asked him. He was playing on this fascination with his plan.

By now he was in the transporter waiting room, and nearby a group of cadets were talking. He quite innocuously joined them in the hope of passing the time while waiting for the transporter backlog to clear.

"Going to the Enterprise, sir?" asked Thamin.

"Yes, Cadet."

"Do you know Captain Picard? They say he's quite a taskmaster."

"If you misbehave he will let you know," said Data.

"And Commander Data? He turned down the captaincy of the Sutherland to go back to the Enterprise."

"Why would he do that?" said Apachita.

Thamin said, "They say he's very unconventional."

"Perhaps," said Data, "he did not believe that his place was aboard the Sutherland once the danger was past."

"Now that's crazy. I'd give my right arm for a job like that."

The cadets knew Thamin was left-

handed.

"You might," said Sayaq. "I believe you had something to do with liaison?"

Further conversation was cut short by the computer voice. "Lieutenant Commander Data please report to the Enterprise."

Data tapped his communicator. "Data here."

O'Brien's voice came back. "Sir, we need you here right now."

"Is something wrong?"

Was there a hint of amusement in O'Brien's voice as he said, "Well, yes and no."

"Acknowledged. Energise."

Data vanished in a transporter beam, leaving the group of cadets speechless.

As the interior of the Transporter Room materialised Data's eyes lightened on O'Brien. "What is wrong?"

"It's Spot, sir."

"Spot? Has she escaped?"

"Er... no, sir."

"Then I do not see..."

"You'd better come with me, sir."

O'Brien took Data to his quarters to find Spot... curled up in the middle of his couch nursing six ginger kittens.

"When did this happen?"

"Yesterday, sir."

"I thought she was just overweight. I had no idea..."

An echo of laughter, followed by a voice. "A little present for my teacher of the humanities."

"Q?"

With his usual flair Q materialised, wearing a Starfleet captain's uniform. "Jean-Luc asked me to drop by. I had to leave Vash exploring the jungles of Sigma Draconis III, unfortunately. Well, what do you want? I don't have time to waste."

"A game, Q."

"What sort of game?"

"I'd like you to try to make me lose my temper."

"Come, come, Data, you know that's impossible. And why would I want to do that anyway?"

"I am trusting you, Q, and I am not certain that I should. But I know your love of games."

"Yes, I do enjoy them."

"Then I ask you again. Can you make an android lose his temper?"

"I would never dream of doing that to you."

"Not me, Q."

Q looked puzzled. "Then who?"

"You will see."

"Data, I can't spend all my time aboard this starship. There are other places I could be."

"I believe you once said you

wanted to be a part of the crew of the Enterprise?"

"Yes."

"The Captain is offering you that chance. I suggest that you take it."

On the holodeck a group of some fifty cadets waited calmly as Data stepped through the door, accompanied by Q who, much to his annoyance, had been asked to wear the uniform of a lieutenant.

"I... I would like to thank you all for coming to this meeting," said Data, "and to welcome you to the Training Vessel Ch'illi... Qhopakha... Starship Enterprise. I think I have finally succeeded in accessing the correct name for this vessel."

A bad joke and the cadets' laughter was forced. Data continued, "I hope you will find this ship as friendly as I have done. My companion, Lieutenant... Q'oronta, is here as your Liaison Officer, along with Ensign Ro Laren, and they will be happy to answer any questions you may have."

Q gave Data a very black look. The android continued the usual welcome and indoctrination speech, finishing with "Are there any questions?"

Sayaq whispered to Apachita, "Androids! The only problem with them is that they're such damn perfectionists!"

Another laugh from the cadets. Data countered it by saying, "And the only trouble with cadets is that they do not remember everything they are told immediately."

On the bridge Picard received a

message from Starfleet. "Enterprise. There is an emergency situation developing rapidly on Fomalhaut V and you are the only vessel within range which can take refugees."

Riker said, "We've a raw crew, how do we answer this?"

"Fomalhaut V, sir?"

"You heard me, Jean-Luc. The only other vessels in the area are two survey vessels, Altair and Antares. They have no facilities to take refugees."

The message ended. "Mr Allenby, set course for Fomalhaut V, Warp Six."

In the observation lounge, Picard and his bridge officers reviewed the situation on Fomalhaut V. It seemed to be worse than before, if that were at all possible.

"Are you sure about this, Mr Data?"

"Yes, sir." He almost reluctantly removed his communicator. That was the only way the computer could trace him without a specific scan for artificial life forms. From now on he was on his own. He turned smartly and left the observation lounge.

It did not take long to arrive at the planet. The Altair and Antares were already in orbit, keeping a respectful distance both from it and from each other. Picard sent a message to them on a secure channel before returning to his place on the bridge.

As he sat down he asked the ensign at tactical for a channel to the ships.

"Altair, Antares, this is the USS

Enterprise. Have you made contact with the surface?"

"Not as yet, Enterprise. All communications equipment appears to have been destroyed."

"Have you found where the leaders are?"

"Affirmative." Antares gave the co-ordinates.

Picard straightened in his chair. "Fomalhaut V, this is Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the USS Enterprise. Please respond."

Static, through which a distorted voice could be heard. "Enterprise. Please hurry. Everything is destroyed."

Riker said, "It's a good job we've the element of surprise."

"I agree, Number One. I'd suggest that you form an away team and get down there at once."

"Yes, sir." Riker stood, collected Worf and made his way to the turbolift.

CAPTAIN'S LOG, Stardate 45800.7.
An away team is now investigating the disaster on Fomalhaut V. The cadets in the crew are settling down in their duties as is Ensign Paka, assigned to Ops under Commander Data. He seems competent enough. I await Commander Riker's report with some interest.

Riker's voice came through. "Enterprise..." Static broke the signal up as if something was deliberately blocking it. "Total devastation... all machinery

destroyed or rendered inoperative... signal weak..."

The message ended. "Get them back here!"

"I can't, sir," said O'Brien. "There's some kind of force field in operation."

Around Riker was a scene of total devastation. To one side a building with darkened windows burned steadily.

A long narrow street stretched almost to infinity. Buildings loomed above, tall and efficient. Streamers of wire and opti-cable hung from shattered windows like some strange crystalline garlands. The ground below was piled high with unidentifiable pieces of some kind of mechanism, and to one side lay three figures, motionless. Over everything hung a pall of blue smoke which tore at the lungs, carrying with it the acid scent of sulphur dioxide and the stink of hydrogen sulphide.

Worf looked at the three figures. All of them were dead, killed by a sharp blow to the head. A sound above made him look up. Five or six storeys above him was an open window through which a wild, undisciplined mob, all with some perverse sense of purpose, were trying to throw a protesting man. They succeeded, and Riker and Worf could only watch as he hit the ground with a sickening thump.

"What's going on?"

"I think Mr Data could help us sir... if I knew where he was."

Picard took advantage of a lull in the static to beam the away team up. In

the observation lounge, Riker made his report.

"As far as I could see the people of the planet have become tired of machines running everything and have retaliated. I've a good idea who their leader is; the way this is progressing, especially the fact that they've killed almost all the scientists, makes me think of one person. I've only met him once, and I'd know him by sight, but I know he's quite capable of something like this."

"Who?"

"Not who, sir. What."

Geordi said, "If we can't communicate with them, what can we do?"

"I wish it were that simple. Only some of them are in revolt. It's the others, and there are about twice as many, who are now in danger from these misguided lunatics. Somehow we've got to get them to safety before they're killed."

"Can we transport them?" asked Worf.

"Or use a shuttle?" suggested Picard.

"Transporters are out," said Geordi. "The leader of the revolution's put a stop to that by rigging an intermittent force field of some kind. The interval varies randomly and we daren't use any form of transporter knowing the force field might come into operation at any moment. Too risky. We were lucky to get you out."

"There are still some machines then?" Picard's voice.

"The leaders have kept the ones they want, or rather need, and ordered the remainder destroyed," said Riker.

In Ten-Forward the cadets were puzzled by what seemed to be happening. Apachita said, "I don't understand. He's not even tried to beam anyone up."

"What do you mean?"

Thamin, distinguished by his slightly drooping antenna - the result, he said, of getting into a fight with one Klingon too many - said, "I don't understand. Transporter Room Five's been locked onto co-ordinates but no-one's used it."

"Has anyone seen Commander Data lately?"

They asked. A dark-skinned Ensign, slow and deliberate of speech, with sparkling blue eyes, had been at ops for the past day. Where the android was, no-one knew.

Thamin saw the Ensign leaning against the bar talking to Guinan and joined him. "Hi. I'm Thamin."

"And I am called Paka."

"Where's Data got to? Have you seen him?"

"I am sorry to say that I have not. The Captain has asked me to take his place until he can be located."

However, yet another Ensign was on duty a short while later, and everyone discovered where Data was. He forcefully ordered Shuttlebay 2 cleared and launched a shuttlecraft.

Picard, on the bridge, asked for

identification and destination.

Data's voice. "Visual systems inoperative. I cannot let you risk your lives on the planet sir. I am expendable."

"Get back here at once, Mr Data."

"I am sorry, sir."

"Data, if you don't get back here at once I'll have you court-martialled!"

The channel clicked off. Picard stood fuming. "Mr Worf, can we beam him aboard?"

"Negative. He's already inside the force field."

Picard said something extremely rude in French. All he could do was wait until Data returned... if Data returned at all from that hell-hole.

"Mr La Forge, you'd better stay on standby in case, Mr Data needs your assistance."

"Aye, sir."

The shuttlecraft landed near the co-ordinates Data had given to Chief O'Brien, and was immediately surrounded by a stone-throwing crowd. Someone had the good sense to run to inform their leader.

He took his time leaving his comfortable, almost palatial quarters, and when he did so it was almost always well hidden from sight. His quarters were, he admitted, far too fussy even for him, but if he were to refuse the gifts his followers brought he would risk losing their support.

As soon as they saw him, now

wearing a hooded cloak, the crowd stopped in their tracks. He had been known to snap a man's neck with a single movement, and he had no qualms about doing it.

"What do we have here?" he said with some interest. "A Federation shuttlecraft." He walked around it slowly. "From a training ship? No. From the Enterprise!"

Someone raised a metal bar to smash the engines and he said, "No. This will be my... er... *our* way to finally destroy the machines which have ruined our lives!"

"How?" asked Chawarqa, who was evidently second-in-command.

"Can't you see? I'll take this back to the ship from which it came, the pride of Starfleet, and order the crew to crash the whole thing into the heart of the machines' city. When it explodes it will take all of them with it." He carefully did not add that a matter-antimatter explosion on that scale would destroy half the planet as well.

Cheers rose all around him. The leader, showing a surprising knowledge of Federation technology, found the panel which opened the door. "Bring the pilot out, but don't damage the craft."

It was quickly done. The crowd dragged Data out, silent and unusually limp in their hands. "Another machine!" shouted the leader. "Destroy it, but do not damage that uniform. I'll take that back to the ship to show we mean business."

The Chawarqa obeyed without question. Not one of them noticed the unusually maniacal glint in their leader's golden-yellow eyes. He, for his part, wondered why Data had put up no

resistance.

Q was very uncomfortable. It was bad enough that Data had actually managed to tie him down to the Enterprise, but that he was a cadet liaison was ridiculous. What was he, with an IQ of 2005, doing trying to explain how a food replicator worked to a spotty youth just out of school? Worst of all, Picard had said that he couldn't overtly use his powers, and that irked him even more.

"Can't I just move a bit of furniture? Materialise a Klingon Targ or two?"

"No, Q. If you're going to help us at all you'll have to stay within the rules," said Picard quietly.

"That's not my style. I need freedom to express myself."

"Oh, you'll have all the freedom you want soon. Until then you'd be better trying to get to know the crew."

Q snapped his fingers and vanished.

"Oh - and Q," said Picard.

"What?"

"Don't go doing that in front of the cadets."

Picard had no chance to relax as at that moment the com panel chirped. "Yes, what is it?"

"Message from the shuttlecraft, sir." Worf's voice.

"On my way."

Ensign Paka had the message on the screen as Picard came through the door from his ready room. Data seemed

unaware of the earlier video malfunction - or perhaps he had managed to repair it - as he said, "Enterprise? What're you doing there? Can't you see that there are people here who need your help?"

"I'm quite aware of that, Mr Data. What do you suggest?"

"I'll tell you when I get there."

Thamin, at Helm and as unfamiliar with Data as the rest of the cadets were, took this sudden outburst of anger as a sign of impatience and exasperation in the android. Paka, at ops, almost allowed himself a smile. Things were going exactly as planned.

Picard cut the channel, and signalled to Riker, La Forge and Paka to join him in his ready room. He left Worf in command.

"Well, gentlemen?" he said when they had assembled.

"He's fallen for it," said Riker. "Now all we have to do is give him about a hundred metres of rope."

"I do not understand," said the Ensign.

"You crazy android, it was your idea," said Geordi. "You said if you gave a man enough rope he'd hang himself."

"That is true. I mistook the figurative for the literal. We must let him think he has succeeded in his plan. But are you not putting the well-being of the cadets, to say nothing of the Enterprise, at risk?"

"I don't think so. I've got you, my crew... and Q to see that he doesn't get that far."

The Ensign nodded. Picard said,

"Now Data's back, you're a bit of a problem."

"If I may suggest, sir, I will assist Commander La Forge in Engineering."

"I need you on the bridge."

"That, sir, is the last place I should be."

They were on their way from Fomalhaut V at Warp Three when Data finally appeared on the bridge, glaring at Paka, who still occupied the ops console.

"Mr Data?"

"What's the meaning of leaving two thousand people stranded down there!"

"We can't beam them up. The leader..."

"What about him?"

"He's got a force field in place, Data. We daren't use the transporters because it'd cut the beam." This was Riker.

"Have you been monitoring it?"

Paka swallowed. "No, sir," he burred.

"Then wouldn't it be prudent to check it's still there?"

When the sensors proved it was not, Paka swallowed even harder.

"Calm down, Data," said Troi, surprised by this unexpected outburst from the normally impassive Second Officer.

The very last thing she expected was that he would say, "And you can shut

up as well."

"Mr Data," said Picard, "I do not expect you to speak to a fellow officer like that. At least not aboard a Federation vessel. A Klingon one is a different matter, but this is the Enterprise."

Any laughter there may have been was silenced by the look in Picard's eyes. Data strode to the ops position, elbowed Paka out of the way and sat down with a thud. Thamin looked again at him. What was wrong with the android?

"Bridge to engineering."

"Yes, sir?" Geordi's voice.

"As soon as possible, will you give Commander Data a full examination? He seems to be somehow affected by what he saw on the planet."

"Yes, sir. Engineering out."

"I don't need that," growled Data.

"What was that?"

"I said I don't need your engineering to examine me."

"I'm fully aware that you carry out self-diagnostics at regular intervals, Mr Data, but I'd still like Geordi to have a look at you."

"Very well, sir."

"In the meantime we could try and find out who's behind all this."

"And how would we do that?" asked Riker.

"Establish communications?"

"What with? Everything's been destroyed down there, they're running

loose in the streets."

"Mr O'Brien?"

"Yes, sir," came O'Brien's voice through communications.

"Can you find a window through which to beam an away team?"

"I can't even let you have a transporter, sir."

"What?"

"I've been to all the transporter rooms, sir. They're all off-line with the exception of transporter room five which was locked onto co-ordinates on Fomalhaut and can't be changed. Someone's taken the control chips, sir, and we haven't any spares."

The growl which emanated from Data was most un-android-like.

Apachita picked this up that evening in Ten Forward. Throughout his shift he had been eavesdropping on various accounts of Data's return. Now he was sitting at a table with his usual group of friends, and the welcome addition of Paka, trying to make some sense of things.

Thamin said, "I don't know what they've done to him but he's come back in a foul mood."

Apachita looked straight at Sayaq. "I thought androids had no emotions."

Sayaq, deadpan, said, "I believe that's so for most of them but Data's been around a long time. He may have a few loose connections."

An amused half-smile from Paka.

"A few loose connections?" said Apachita. "I'd like to get that positronic brain of his and play racketball with it."

"You'd really like to do that?" came a voice like velvet.

"Hello, Guinan. I was thinking what I'd like to do to knock some sense into Data."

"I've heard some things in my time but playing racketball with his brain's a new one on me. I don't think he'd be very pleased about it."

"But he's not what I thought he'd be."

"When is any officer?"

"I can't understand him at all," said Sayaq.

"I've known Data since I first came to this ship and he's one of the best officers I've known."

"Then why's he so short-tempered?"

Guinan looked amazed. "Data's been called a lot of things but never short-tempered. You sure you got the right android?"

"I've got the right one."

Apachita began to speak but was distracted, as was everyone else in the lounge when with a roar Data came through the door. "Where's Paka?"

Guinan said, "Data, may I have a word?"

"Of course."

"I think it might be better if you calmed down, sir. The cadets are getting

the jitters."

"What? Oh. Oh, of course. I'll do my best."

Guinan looked twice at him, as if not believing what she had just heard. After a pause she said, "Are you sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine, though I don't know what business it is of yours."

Guinan turned away. She had someone to find, if what she thought was true.

A silver light appeared on the bar beside her. "Leave well alone. This one's mine, Guinan."

"Q?"

"The same."

"You stay out of this, Q."

With a flash he materialised, hoping none of the cadets had seen him do it. He was once more a Starfleet Captain. "I do hope you won't get in my way, Guinan. I'm acting on the Captain's orders."

"I'll believe that when he tells me."

Paka said, "It is true, Guinan. We have asked Q to assist us."

There was something familiar about the Ensign's voice, which Guinan could not at that moment place. Data caught sight of him and grabbed him gently by the throat.

"I wondered where you'd got to. I was hoping you could try and knock a sense of purpose into these cadets."

"I would, if it were not for the fact that they are unsure of your wishes."

"Unsure? You're telling me they're unsure. They're as undecided as a team of... of Vulcan politicians!"

Sayaq looked hurt. Guinan smiled, even though it was most un-Data-like. The android threw Paka down in a heap and left, considering his conversation ended.

Guinan helped him up. "OK, what's going on?"

"What do you think?"

"I know one thing, that may look like Data but it's not Data. Now where is he?"

Paka indicated an empty table, and as they sat down, to be joined by Q, he said, "The current whereabouts of Lieutenant Commander Data are wherever the computer says he is. I cannot tell you any more at present as he, the Captain, Commander Riker and Geordi are working under Starfleet orders, with the addition of a considerable amount of... er... enterprise."

"This is a set-up?"

"Of a sort. It is a trap, with Data as the bait."

"Does he know?"

"It was his suggestion."

Q said, "He's had a personality transplant."

"Not exactly."

"Where does Q fit in?"

"I do not know. I believe that Q is to be allowed free run of the Enterprise."

Q snapped his fingers and

vanished.

Picard was surprised when Q materialised in his quarters. "I wish you'd use the door."

"Why use a door when all the universe is my playground? Starfleet Captain Q reporting for duty."

"What're you doing?"

"I have a great respect for you, Jean-Luc, you're one of the few beings who've actually stood up to me. As well as that, you're the nearest thing to a friend I have."

"That's not what you came to tell me, Q."

"No, it isn't. I'm risking my cover to report to you. I don't know what you're up to but I don't like it."

"Go on."

"What've you done to Data? Half the cadets like him, the others loathe him almost as much as Guinan loathes me."

"I've done nothing."

"Then am I to assume that that isn't Data?"

"The all-seeing, all-knowing Q is finally baffled?"

"I'm a little out of practice."

Picard outlined at least some of the plan to an ever more enthusiastic Q.

On the bridge Troi was trying unsuccessfully to calm Data down.

"I've told you, Counselor, I don't

need you to analyse me."

"Data, all this is doing the cadets no good at all."

"The cadets? Who's bothered about the cadets?"

Communications chirped.
"Engineering to bridge."

"Go ahead, engineering."

"I hate to say this, sir, but I'm going to have to shut down the warp drive."

"May I ask why?"

"The warp coils need some attention."

"That's not so bad."

"Yes it is. You see, something's knocked the starboard engine out of alignment."

That made Data check with the computers. It appeared to be true. With a sigh he said, "Very well. How long will the repairs take?"

"I don't know, sir. I've got my best men on it now."

"Thank you. Bridge out."

Data sat down again. He had had some plan and now it had been thwarted. From nowhere came a voice, almost singing, "Often Wrong's got a broken heart, he can't even tell his boys apart."

This served to further annoy Data. Leaping to his feet he said, "Security! Find the source of that transmission and lock him in the brig on a charge of insubordination!"

No sooner had he said that than

Geordi's voice drifted up from engineering. "I'm going to have to close the whole reactor down, sir, it's beginning to overheat."

"Denied."

"If we don't, sir, the whole ship'll explode."

"Ensign, prepare to separate the saucer section."

"What, sir?"

"You heard me!"

The same almost mocking voice said, "Oh dear, and I had hoped you would be more amenable, Commander."

"Who's that?" Data was surprised.

"Come, come, Data, surely you remember me?"

"I cannot recall ever having spoken to you."

"I don't believe it! The great, infallible Data forgets me. That's not only incredible, it's virtually impossible!"

"Who are you? Where are you?"

"I'm here."

With a flash of light a being stood there, dressed as a Starfleet Captain. "Ah, the Enterprise. I'm home. Are there any sentient beings on this ship who do remember me?"

Troi smiled. Q looked up to see Worf at tactical.

"Hello, micro-brain! Eaten any more good books lately?"

"WILL YOU GET OFF MY

BRIDGE!"

"Will you inform the Captain that his good friend Q is back."

"Q?" said Data.

"That's what I'm known as."

"Ensign, access file on Q."

Paka, once more at ops, said, "There is no file on Q, sir. It appears to have been deleted."

"Worse than useless."

Q flexed his knuckles and looked round. "Now what can I do? Ah, I know, my teacher of the humanities. I once said I wouldn't curse you by making you Human, but as you seem to be so near already..."

With a flash Data was transformed from an android to a tall, slender man. His eyes were steel-blue and as he stood in a rage he swayed slightly as if unsure of his balance.

"Look here, you extraterrestrial... thing. You change me back this minute!"

"I thought you were the one who wanted emotions."

For once, Data had no answer. He merely slumped back into the command chair and sat glowering at Q, who with a glance to Paka, snapped his fingers and vanished.

There was certainly some interesting conversation in Ten Forward that evening. By the far window Paka had gathered a group of cadets and was entertaining them with various impersonations of the rest of the crew.

Picard joined them. "Can you do me, Mr Paka?"

"With your permission, sir."

"Of course."

"Ensign Paka, do you realise that it is an offence to impersonate senior officers on this ship without their permission?" said Paka in Picard's voice. "And if I catch you doing it again I will lock you in the brig." He followed it with, "I think that is a little too severe, sir," in Riker's voice, which brought gales of laughter.

Apachita said, "Can you do Commander Data?"

"I do not know. I will try. Ensign Apachita, I do not find it amusing to listen to this garbage!"

"Not quite, but not bad."

"Have you been singing, Ensign?" asked Picard.

"I sing very badly sir."

"I'm sure we'd all like to hear something."

Paka picked up the guitar which had been leaning against the table. "I am not very good at this. I asked Dr Crusher for assistance."

Gently he strummed the strings.

"At the edges of space
Where no-one has gone
There we seem to fly..."

Picard smiled but Data, who had come into the lounge, let out a roar which almost effectively blanketed the latter part of the final line. Paka nearly

laughed. "Is something wrong, sir?"

"No, Ensign. Nothing wrong. Where did you learn that song?"

"I discovered it in the computer."

Data hit the table, shattering the top... and cutting his hand in the process. Guinan called for medical assistance and Beverly was very surprised when she saw Data's hand. "What's happened here?"

"An entity called Q. He's turned me into this. Watch what you're doing, that hurts."

"It will do, you're not used to this."

CAPTAIN'S LOG, Stardate 45808.1.
The situation is, to say the least, fraught with problems. The ship is now on impulse power, the engines having been effectively shut down by a combination of circumstances for which Q may or may not be ultimately responsible. Q has caused his usual amount of trouble, which is proving highly interesting.

Data, under Captain's orders, had retreated to his quarters. As soon as she saw him, Spot came dashing up, purring. At about three feet from him her back arched, her fur stood up and she crouched down to the ground, backing off into the other room, not taking her eyes off Data for a second.

The android followed her. "Spot? Spot, come here."

The cat continued to back off. She reached the couch where her kittens were lying purring and jumped up to them. As Data continued his approach she spat at

him.

"Damn cat! What is it, Spot? It's only me." He reached out to stroke her... and she gave him a scratch down the whole of his forearm, through the material of his uniform.

"Damn cat!" he repeated, then hit the com panel. "Data to Veterinary Sciences. Will you remove my cat? She is suddenly very violent toward me."

"That's not like Spot, sir," came a voice.

"Just remove her, Ensign."

Data turned and looked at the still very angry Spot. That cat knew what was going on. She would have to be put somewhere where she could not let anyone else know.

Paka had joined Apachita's group in Ten Forward by the simple expedient of bringing them all something to drink. "May I join you?"

"It's a free country," Thamin had said.

"Thank you. What is happening?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

Riker chose that moment to join them. "Hi. How do you like the Enterprise?"

"Not like I'd heard."

"Oh?"

"Commander," said Paka, "some of the crew and many of the cadets appear troubled by Commander Data's behaviour. It is strange, even for an

android, and for Commander Data I would suggest that it is unheard of."

"Perhaps that's because of what Q's done to him."

"I think not."

"I didn't come here to discuss Data's mental health or lack of it. Paka, didn't you once say you wanted to keep a cat?"

"Yes, sir."

"Data's just thrown his out. She's down in Veterinary Science and I've told Lieutenant Dunleavy to give you first refusal."

"Thank you, sir."

"You'll have to hurry."

"Acknowledged." Paka made his apologies and left, in the direction of Deck 22 and Veterinary Sciences. A glass of Romulan ale suddenly materialised in front of Riker.

"Q?"

"You called?" Q materialised, dressed as a lieutenant.

"I must admit you've a flair for understating things."

"No, merely keeping within the good Lieutenant-Commander's rules."

"You're incorrigible!"

"You're the second person to tell me that. I'd prefer to think of myself as unorthodox, enterprising, individualistic maybe, but certainly not incorrigible."

"I can't argue with that."

"All right Riker, what do you want

me for?"

"You'd better make Data an android again. He's intolerable now, but an electronic nervous breakdown would be very useful."

"That's preposterous!"

"Not for a Q of your unlimited resources and ingenuity."

Q smiled.

"And throw something else in. I'll leave it to your imagination."

With a wicked grin, Q vanished. Thamin said, "What is he, sir?"

"I wish I knew, Cadet. He's something we've met a few times. I've been studying the personality profiles of every cadet on this ship and you three seem to be the most trustworthy... No, that's not quite the right word but I'm sure you know what I mean."

"Us, sir?" asked Thamin.

"I said you, didn't I? I want you three to keep Commander Data under surveillance, reporting either to Ensign Paka or to me. The Captain and I think he's near breaking point and we're trying to find a valid reason for him to be taken off duty."

"Aye, sir. Thank you, sir."

Riker left.

Halfway through the first shift the next day the Enterprise fell into a wormhole.

No warning, it just opened up in front of them. Q, who was sitting on the

horseshoe rail, managed a smile before he was flung to the floor along with several other crew members. Fortunately he didn't fall very far, but as he dusted himself off he made a point not to think of the rail as being secure. He sat on the floor between helm and ops instead, glaring at Data who, had he chosen to look, could not have missed the hazy outline of Q. Neither would Geordi, had he been there.

Red alert sounded as Picard asked Data what had happened.

"It appears that we've fallen into a wormhole, sir."

"How big is it?"

"Unknown. It is not marked on any charts."

"What wormhole is?"

"Full reverse. Ensign Paka, get us out of here."

The Ensign tried. "It is having no effect, sir. I believe we must traverse its entire length."

Data looked at him. "Isn't there an emergency procedure?"

"No, sir. There is not."

Thamin and Savaq, who were monitoring the Environmental station, exchanged glances. "Getting a bit emotional, isn't he?"

"No more than the average Human, but I would say quite a lot for an android."

Picard overheard the remark and smiled at Riker. Data heard it too. As he was at his bridge station he contented himself with a glare in the direction of the

two cadets.

Q looked through the viewer and snapped his fingers. With another lurch the ship came out of the wormhole into an area of space like none anyone had seen before. Coloured gas clouds floated about, along with strings of starlike objects.

"Where are we, Mr Data?"

"I... don't know. None of the visible stars register."

Paka said, "If I may suggest sir?"

"Go ahead."

"This appears to be the place mentioned in the records to which the Enterprise was brought by the Traveller. It would be wise to advise the crew to guard their thoughts, as the last time many of them became reality."

With a flash Q materialised, now standing between the two consoles. "I thought this would be more to your taste, mon capitain. Now your wildest dreams can become real."

"Get us out of here, Q."

"Jean-Luc..." Q looked hurt.

"You heard him," said Data, "Get us out."

"I preferred you as an android."

With a snap of his fingers Q returned Data to his usual self. Sayaq thought Q was totally insane doing it, as when he had been Human there had at least been a chance of restraining him. Now there was none at all.

Riker looked at Picard.

"Mr Data," said the Captain. "I

thought you were due to give the cadets a talk on particle mechanics."

Data looked surprised. "I was not aware of it, sir."

"It's in your timetable."

The android checked with the computer. Apparently it was true. He made an excuse and left, accompanied unobtrusively by Thamin. As soon as he had gone the whole bridge, including Q, released the pent-up laughter they had concealed from Data.

"Mr Worf?" said Picard.

"Yes, sir?"

"Once Q gets us out of here I want a channel to Starfleet."

"Yes, sir."

Q said, "Why should I let you go, Jean-Luc?"

"I think you know why. I've proved my Second Officer's a risk to the rest of the ship."

"Ah, but my part of the bargain."

"I don't recall any."

"I've left a... little surprise in Data's ops console for when he gets back. Thank you Jean-Luc, it's been most enjoyable."

And with that Q went. Paka looked with disbelief at the ship's speed - off the scale. Then suddenly they slowed, to find themselves once more in orbit around Fomalhaut V.

Worf said, "You have a channel to Starfleet sir."

Admiral Catamarca's face

appeared. "Enterprise, did you get him?"

"I believe so. Request permission to relieve Lieutenant Commander Data of all his duties, and lock him in the brig as a danger to the rest of the ship."

"On what grounds?"

"Mental instability. He's changed since he went down to the planet." On being further asked Picard gave a list of incidents, to which Riker added, "The Data I always knew wasn't in the least emotional. Now he's losing his temper over the slightest thing."

"That's nothing new."

"For an android?"

"Mm. Very well. You have my permission."

The screen clicked off. "Mr Worf?"

"Yes, sir."

"Find a Security team, take Ensign Paka with you, and lock Data in the brig... if he'll go."

Paka suggested that it might be easier to shut him down instead of throwing him in the brig.

"I hadn't thought of that. Can you do it?"

"I believe so, sir."

"Make it so."

Worf found Data tearing his quarters up in a mad search for something. What it was no-one knew but the furniture was in shreds and the floor was covered in pieces. Worf glared at

him and he turned, fire in his eyes. "What're you doing here?"

"Commander Data, you are under arrest for conduct unbecoming an officer in Starfleet."

"You can't do this to me."

"They cannot," said Paka, "but I can."

He stepped swiftly around Data, ducking the blows aimed at him with almost android-like reflexes, and equally quickly found the switch which shut Data off. How many times was it now?

As the android fell in an untidy heap Paka picked him up. Then they threw him into the brig, before returning to the bridge.

Someone tapped Paka's shoulder, and he looked up to see the blue eyes of Riker.

"Time to come out of hiding, I think."

"He is definitely no longer a threat?"

"We put a stasis field around Detention Cell 3 as well as the normal force field. If he can get out of that..."

"I doubt if he can. Excuse me, I have things to do."

"Granted," said Picard and Paka left, in the direction of sickbay.

There, with Beverly's help, he removed his blue contact lenses and the straggly black wig he had been wearing, before Beverly carefully lifted the dark

paint from his golden-yellow skin. A few minor repairs and a fresh uniform and he felt fit enough to report for duty once more, though two of the cadets gave him a strange look as he stepped into the turbolift to the bridge.

Worf was the most surprised when he arrived. He jumped over the rail and levelled a phaser at him.

"Calm down, Worf," said Picard. "Mr Data, I think you'd better explain what's going on."

"It is all quite simple, Lieutenant. It was necessary to keep much of this covert. There had been reports of unrest on Fomalhaut V and from descriptions brought back by those who had managed to escape from the planet we deduced that the leader of the revolt was an android."

"Lore!" growled Worf.

"From what we already know about Lore we thought Data might make good bait for him."

Sayaq, at Science 2, said "Sir, I don't understand."

"Lore is my twin brother," said Data quietly.

"But you went down to the planet."

"I did not. I had the computer make a replica of me, and put my communicator in the shuttle in order to fool Lore. I piloted it by remote control from Shuttlebay 2."

"Let me get this right," said Troi, who had been listening in some amazement. "You sent a replica of yourself to the planet?"

"We have met Lore before and I

believe that his one overriding emotion is blind ambition. He would savour any chance to strike out at me. To anyone who knows me very well the difference between us would be plain, but I was wagering on the fact that the crew does not know me very well, and Lore could impersonate me quite comfortably."

"So where have you been all this time?"

"Here on the bridge."

"What?"

Picard said, "Ensign Paka. The name means 'hidden' in an old Earth language. If the good Doctor can disguise Data as a Romulan she can disguise him as anything."

"You were sitting next to Lore and he didn't recognise you?"

"That is correct."

"What are you going to do with him now?" asked Picard.

"He is still unconscious?"

Worf checked with the brig. "Yes, sir."

"Then our first course of action would be to remove the computer chip Lore stole from Dr Soong."

"Can you do it?"

"I believe so, sir."

In Data's cybernetics lab on Deck Twelve Worf and three Security officers stood by in case Lore awoke as Data, with the skill of a surgeon, flicked open the access panel below Lore's right ear and

carefully, so as not to damage any other systems, lifted the stolen chip out. He looked at it for a while before dropping it to the floor.

Worf stopped Data's foot landing on the chip.

"What is it?" said the android, somewhat surprised.

"You aren't going to keep it?"

"I have seen what it did to Lore, might it not do the same to me?"

"It was made for you, sir."

"That is true. But I do not know if I would like to have it now. I have somehow become used to having no emotions."

"Or perhaps," said Apachita, there because of his size, "you've developed your own versions of them."

"I suppose that is true." He put the chip in Worf's hand. "You guard it for me, and if I should need it, I will know where to find it."

He flicked the panel back into place and had Lore taken to the Transporter Room.

"What're you doing with him, sir?"

"There's not all that much we can do," said Riker, who had been waiting there for Data. "Abandoning him on a barren planet's no good, we beamed him out into space and the Pakled picked him up. There's really only one solution. I'm sending him back to Fomalhaut V."

"You can't do that!"

"I believe we can," said Data. "The two survey ships Altair and Antares are

in fact the Federation Security vessels T'Leissa and Charatt'go, and while we have been occupied with Lore they have visited the leaders of the Chawarqa and explained to them that their leader was an android. They did not at first believe it but I have received news that now they understand."

"So now Lore's in for a shock when he gets back?"

"He'll have a lot of explaining to do," said Riker, "and under threat of disassembly he'll be rebuilding the computers down there for the next ten years. The Chawarqa leaders are quite capable of disassembling him now, and they've promised to fling the bits halfway across the galaxy."

Data involuntarily shuddered. He would not wish that fate on his own worst enemy... even though Lore was probably just that.

"Energise," said Riker and Lore vanished.

CAPTAIN'S LOG, Supplemental.
The problem of Lore solved for the time being, we are once more en route for Starbase 21 to drop off our cadets and have the engineers knock out the dents they put into the ship. My commendations to all concerned for a job well done.

That would certainly look good in the cadets' files. Picard turned to Riker and said, "I'm glad there's only one Data. Think of the problems two would cause."

"I'd rather not, sir, if you don't mind."

That made most of the bridge crew

smile. Data was elsewhere, having a slight problem of his own to sort out.

Spot sat purring in her accustomed place as he entered his quarters. "Feline nutritional supplement fourteen," was the order to the replicator - Spot's favourite. The six kittens were a different problem altogether. Data had sought Troi's advice on the matter.

"I should think you'd be able to sell them at Starbase 21. They're adorable."

What Spot would think of being separated from them worried him. However, that was a problem which

could wait. The mission had been confusing, dangerous, but most of all successful.

But for how long?

"Driven by steam
And that android's dream
My patience he will soon try.

Data is his name
But he is not quite the same
As he was before
And whither we go
Travelling to and fro
He is unto himself a lore."



LAMENT

I felt you grow in my womb,
My child, my son.
A kick as you stirred,
My child, my son.
Then you were born -
My child, my son.
To be held against my heart,
My child, my son.
You suckled at my breast -
My child, my son.
You were a threat, they said,
My child, my son.
But you became a little boy,
My child, my son.
I had you for a while,
My child, my son.
For just a little time,
My child, my son.
And now that you are gone -
My child, my son -
What have I got left?



Gaile Wood

WHEN THOU HAST

by

Brenda Kelsey

Rage and grief and anger roiled through her, disrupting her thoughts, ruining her composure. The people in Ten Forward were very quiet, unnaturally so, sitting in tight little groups, not talking much. Not daring to talk about what had happened, and the consequences. Just sitting and not being alone. That was what had drawn them all there. The idea of not being alone in the vaster aloneness which the Borg had created by stealing Jean-Luc Picard.

The Borg! Creatures that had developed a life style that was totally alien to everything she had ever believed in.

She took a drink, real wine from her private stock, and occupied the solitary empty table in Ten Forward. It was by a window, looking forward, out towards the direction of travel. It was the table that Jean-Luc preferred to use during his all too infrequent visits to Ten Forward. His crew had left it vacant.

Ignoring their glances, curious or hostile depending on their disposition, she sat in the starlight, sipped her wine and thought. The Borg had beaten them, stolen their Captain, and after being challenged by Riker had simply left them, badly damaged and drifting, to carry on to their greater target - Earth.

She hoped - oh, how she hoped - that Jean-Luc had had some part in the decision to leave Enterprise without including it into the Borg assets. It was foolish to hope so for the cost of such a decision was high. It put the Borg Cube

on course to Earth with so little delay. Then again, with Borg efficiency, there would have been little enough delay; and Enterprise had been left able to provide valuable information to Starfleet. They had been warned that now the Borg had use of one of the brightest and the best. When the combined task force met the Borg at Wolf 359 they would at least know who they were fighting. Unfortunately, so would Picard, and the Borg would be much more adept at 'battle', or rather the acquisition of assets, than the Federation could ever be.

She took another sip of wine and listened to the occasional, very muted conversations around her. The tenor remained the same. The people of the Enterprise had put their trust in their new leader, Riker, and would follow him unflinchingly into battle, and would as unflinchingly die with him.

The Borg had beaten them once and had stolen Picard, then Picard had been used to beat them again. Picard's people didn't expect to survive a third time. How could they when they were trying to fight someone who knew them better than they knew themselves?

She wondered if Jean-Luc knew what was happening to him. She rather thought that he did. He'd called Riker 'Number One' after their attempt to destroy the Borg Cube had failed. Whatever the Borg had added to him, whatever overlaid him to change him into Locutus, it was only a controlling veneer. Jean-Luc Picard was still Jean-Luc Picard and Guinan was absolutely certain that

given half a chance he would find a way to help the Federation to defeat the Borg.

But first Riker had to defeat Picard.

Riker had done well so far. He'd tried to fight, even though the effort of attempting to kill Picard had drained him. The strain was visible on his face, in his eyes. She wished that there was something that she could do to help him.

The thought stopped her in her mental tracks. Help him? Help Riker? To kill Jean-Luc?

Her hand shook as she lifted the wine glass, the deep, rich red of the wine agitated into waves that threatened to slop over the rim. She took a healthy swig, lowering the level by a considerable amount, and put the glass down with a ringing snap.

Of course she would help Riker. It was exactly what Jean-Luc would expect her to do. Hadn't he proved time and again to be willing to die for the Federation. Surely now any part of him that was still Picard would be begging Riker to find a way to stop him, to kill him, before his knowledge was used to destroy the Federation. And after that, the Klingon Empire. And then the Romulan Empire. It wouldn't end until all the worlds known to every sentient being were absorbed.

But what could she do? How could she help Riker? Her people had fought the Borg and had gone down before them. It was entirely probable that some of the Borg on the Cube en route to Earth were of her people, absorbed into the Borg just as Jean-Luc had been. Hadn't the theorists of her people, now long dead, decided that whatever the Borg had once been, that the original race had been superseded by acquisitions more adaptable, more valuable, to the collective

conscience. That the Borg were now extinct and that only the idea of the Borg lived on, kept alive by those that they stole from other peoples. After all, what was more difficult to kill than an idea?

She took another sip to moisten her suddenly dry mouth. That was what she could do. That was exactly what she could do to help Riker.

Riker had tried to kill Picard and had failed. In order to defeat the Borg and Picard, Riker first had to do something far more difficult than killing Picard. He first had to kill the idea of Picard. He had to destroy the idea of his friend, his teacher, his Captain. Only then would he be able to defeat the man and so defeat the Borg.

She glanced at the chrono and calculated the probable position of the Enterprise. They must nearly have reached Wolf 359. She had to talk to Riker now, before they reached the slaughter. She was certain, as certain as she knew Riker was, that the Task Force had been totally wiped out. There had been no word since the abruptly ended message from Hanson, and there would have been if anyone had been left alive.

So it had to be now. She activated the table link to the main computer, swallowed hard against the sudden sting of tears and affirmed her decision.

"Tell me where Captain Riker is."

*"And so thy thoughts, when thou hast gone
Love itself shall slumber on."*

Percy Bysshe Shelley



PERSONAL CONFLICT

by

Richard Meade

In Commander Riker's quarters a group of his friends had assembled for a game of poker. At the table sat Will Riker; Data in his playing hat; Deanna Troi; Worf; Geordi La Forge and Beverly Crusher. The current hand had become very intense; in the centre of the table was a large stash of chips. Four players remained in the game, with both Troi and La Forge folding their hands. It was Riker's turn to bet, and the other five stared at him, awaiting his call.

"I bet fifty," he announced, his face stiff with concentration.

"That is too much for me," Worf said, placing his cards in front of him, face down.

"I fold as well, Commander," Data said, also placing his cards in the middle of the table.

"What about you, Doctor - do you give in as well?" asked Riker, smiling.

"No," she said, placing in fifty chips. "I call. Show your cards, Will."

"After you, Doctor."

"Okay." She placed on the table her five cards, and looked at Riker.

He looked back, and said, "You win." He showed his cards, which were only a pair of Kings compared to Crusher's full house.

"I believe that puts you in the lead, Doctor", Data announced.

"Yep!" replied the Doctor, who was scraping up her winnings.

Suddenly the voice of Captain Jean-Luc Picard could be heard via Riker's communicator. "Commander Riker, will you and the other bridge officers down there please report to the bridge."

Riker activated his communicator. "We're on our way, sir." He got up, as did the other five. They walked out of the room and made their way to a turbo-lift, and soon the door was opening to reveal the bridge. They left the lift and took their positions, except for Riker, who stood in front of the Captain.

"What's the problem, sir?"

"A Federation look-out post near the Romulan border has been attacked by a Romulan Warbird. We're on our way to help them."

Riker, now understanding the position, took his seat next to Picard.

"Mr Worf, are there any uncloaked Warbirds in sensor range?"

"No, sir."

"Data, how long until we reach the station?" asked Riker.

Data turned in his chair. "At our current speed we will reach the station in ten minutes fifteen second."

"Ensign Ro, increase speed to warp nine point three."

"Aye, sir."

Picard turned to Dr Crusher. "Put a medical away team on stand-by."

Crusher rose from her seat next to Troi and left the bridge.

"Mr Worf, raise the shields, load all torpedo bays and arm phaser banks."

"Captain, we are approaching the station," Data announced.

"On screen."

Worf flicked a switch and a small space station appeared on the screen. There was a little damage to the exterior of the station, a few disruptor burns and a small sensor array had been destroyed.

"Drop to impulse speed," Riker ordered.

"Dropping to impulse speed," replied Ro.

The ship dropped out of warp and slowly crept upon the station.

"Hail the station, Mr Worf."

"Channel open."

"This is Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the Federation Starship Enterprise."

"Message coming in, sir," Worf said, looking up from his panel behind the Captain.

"On screen."

With that, a face appeared on the screen. "Captain, this is Lt-Commander Tarkinson. We have been attacked by a Romulan Warbird."

"We know, Commander, we

received your distress call. Do you need medical assistance?"

"Yes. Our medical officer was killed in the attack, and we have three injured on board."

"Stand by to receive a medical team. Picard out." He signalled Worf, who turned off the screen. Picard then activated his communicator. "Doctor, beam your team aboard."

"We're on our way, Captain," replied Crusher, who with three other medical officers made their way to the transporter room. Soon they had beamed across to the station and Dr Crusher had begun treatment of the injured.

While Dr Crusher was treating the injured, Picard reopened communications with Tarkinson.

"What happened to the Warbird?" asked Riker.

"It must have detected your coming, because it suddenly stopped its attack and reloaded."

"How long ago was that?"

"About seven minutes before you arrived."

"Hmm. I think it will be best if we treat your injured on board the Enterprise."

"Okay, Captain."

"Once Dr Crusher has stabilised their condition we will beam them across."

"What about the attack? I haven't been able to contact Starfleet Command yet."

"I'll contact them, Commander, but I will need a full report from you."

"Yes, sir. I will get it to you as soon as I can. Tarkinson out." The screen went blank.

Picard turned to Worf. "Lieutenant, scan long range for any uncloaked Warbirds and keep the shields up until further notice. Stay at yellow alert."

"Aye, sir."

Picard left the bridge and went into the ready room. Once inside he took his seat and activated his computer. "Computer," he said, "dispatch a priority one call to Fleet Admiral Jansan at Starfleet Command."

Within five minutes - during which time Tarkinson's report arrived - Fleet Admiral Jansan's face appeared on the screen. He spoke with a deep, worried voice. "What is the problem, Jean-Luc?"

"Admiral, Look-out Post Delta 5 has been attacked by a Romulan Warbird. Damage to the station is relatively minor, but unfortunately one person - Dr Timothy Peters - has been killed and three others injured."

"What about the Warbird?" The Admiral still sounded worried.

"It activated its cloaking device and disappeared before we arrived."

"Good. Just to be safe, though, I want the Enterprise to stay there for a few days. Your Chief Engineer can assist with the repairs to the station. I will be in touch soon. Jansan out." The screen went blank.

"Picard to Worf."

"Worf here, Captain."

"Has Dr Crusher beamed the injured aboard?"

"Yes, sir. They were beamed back two minutes ago."

"Good. Picard out." He turned to Tarkinson's report. He had not been reading for more than a minute when the red alert sounded. He jumped up and walked briskly onto the bridge.

"Report, Number One."

"Sir, a Romulan Warbird decloaking dead ahead." On the screen, the menacing shape shimmered into solidity.

"Sir, they are powering up their disruptors," announced Worf.

"Hail that vessel!" demanded Picard.

"Channel open."

"This is Captain Picard of the Federation Starship Enterprise. You have crossed into Federation space and are violating the treaty between the Federation and the Romulan Empire."

The face of the Romulan Commander appeared on the screen. "Captain Picard, I am Commander Torak. I want you to surrender yourselves and your vessel to me immediately - or be destroyed." The screen went blank.

Picard, slightly bewildered by what he had just heard, turned to Troi. "Is he bluffing?"

"I don't know. It's hard to tell, but he definitely wants something."

"If they attack us it could mean war... and I don't think the Romulans could be ready for that," suggested Riker.

"What is their weapon status?"

asked Picard.

"All shields and weapons fully powered."

"What do we do now?" asked Riker.

"We leave it to them."

Moments later Worf announced, "The Romulans are hailing us, sir."

"On screen."

The face of Torak appeared. "Well, Captain, are you going to surrender?"

"I'm certainly not, Torak! You are risking war with the Federation by just being here. Now leave immediately!" ordered Picard.

"Then you leave me no choice," replied Torak sternly. The screen went off. There was a sudden burst of laser fire from the Warbird; it scored a direct hit on the Enterprise.

"Damage report!" cried Riker.

"Shield strength down to sixty three percent."

"Return fire, Mr Worf," ordered Picard.

The Enterprise let out a volley of phaser fire which hit the Romulan ship. "Their shield strength is down to sixty four percent; their cloaking device is damaged," Worf told the bridge.

"Plot course three five one mark four, and engage."

The Enterprise moved to a position in front of the look-out station. The Romulan fired its disruptors once more. The shots hit the Enterprise.

"Shields down to fifty one percent!" cried Worf.

"Move the ship - course one seven ten mark six, and return fire."

The Enterprise moved away from the station into a new position at the side of the Warbird and let out another volley of phaser fire which hit the Romulan ship in almost the exact place as the last volley.

"Multiple hits," announced Data in his ever calm voice.

"They have lost their cloaking device, their warp engines have received some damage and their shields are down to fifty five percent," Worf said, breathing deeply.

The Romulan ship moved into a new attacking position and fired. The shots smashed into the saucer section just above the phaser array, and one shot landed beside the torpedo bay.

"Damage report?" called Picard.

"Sir, photons and phasers are off line, and there's radiation leaks on decks one through four. Shields are down to twenty percent."

"Initiate radiation protocol."

"Sir, we are defenceless against the Romulans," added Worf.

"Options!" demanded Picard.

Riker immediately offered a suggestion. "We could beam the station's survivors onto the Enterprise and get out of there."

"Good idea. Mr Worf, lock on to the survivors and when you have a positive lock, lower the shields and beam them

across."

The Romulan ship fired another volley. The blasts smashed into the forward hull.

Worf exclaimed, "Shields are down to five percent!" A moment later - "Shields have failed, Captain."

"Mr Worf, beam the - "

Worf interrupted. "They've dropped their shields!"

"What!?" came the voice of Riker, who rose from his seat.

Just then six Romulans appeared on the bridge, armed with hand disruptors. Worf pulled out a phaser from under his computer panel and fired at the nearest Romulan. The Romulan dropped to the floor, stunned. Worf turned to face another Romulan, but it was too late; he was put to the floor, and didn't move.

"Computer, lock ou -" Picard began but he was too slow; a Romulan shot him and he fell to the floor. Moments later Riker also fell. Data rose from his seat, grabbed the nearest Romulan and threw him into a wall, which knocked him out. He then moved towards another Romulan as another came up behind him and switched him off. Data froze and dropped straight to the floor. Ensign Ro jumped up from the helm but was met by a blast of disruptor fire which sent her to the floor. The Romulans picked up Picard, Riker and Data.

"We have them! Beam us back," said one Romulan into a communicator. Just as they were beaming away, a security team lead by Troi - who had got off the bridge during the attack - arrived on the bridge.

Worf's eyes opened to see Dr Crusher standing above him. He had a thumping headache. He soon realised he was in sickbay; he tried to get up but the Doctor placed her hand on his chest and said, "Stay down."

"Doctor, where is the Captain?"

"Worf... The Captain, Commander Riker and Data were kidnapped by the Romulans after they boarded the ship," she said, looking a bit sad.

"What!?" demanded Worf, who tried once more to get up.

"Please, Worf, you must rest. You were stunned."

"Doctor, I must persist. I have to return to duty," he said, this time forcing himself off the bed. Once up, he noticed Ensign Ro lying motionless on a nearby bed. He looked at the Doctor.

"She will be fine, Worf. She was stunned as well."

"I must see Commander La Forge. Where is he?"

"In engineering."

Worf left sickbay, leaving Dr Crusher standing by an empty bed. Worf made his way to a turbolift and soon found himself in engineering, walking towards La Forge who was working at a computer panel. "Commander."

La Forge turned. "Ah, Worf. Glad to see you're okay."

"Thank you, Commander."

"I've managed to get shield strength up to thirty percent, but still no phasers or torpedoes."

"Good, Commander, but have you reported to Starfleet Command yet and told them of this outrage? The Romulans have no honour in kidnapping Starfleet officers!"

"I haven't contacted Starfleet yet, because I thought it would be best if you did so."

"Why, Commander?" asked Worf.

"Well, you'll be taking command of the ship, so that makes it your responsibility."

Commander, you are the most senior officer; you should take command of the ship."

"No, Worf. I'll be needed down here more than up there. I think you should take command."

"Very well, Commander," Worf agreed finally. "Have we been able to pursue them?"

"Yes: their cloaking device was destroyed. But we're only travelling at warp four due to the damage to the engines."

"I will contact Starfleet Command and tell them of our status."

"And I'll see if I can get the weapons on line."

Worf left La Forge to his work and made his way back to the turbolift.

On the bridge, one person was working at tactical and there was one at Ops. Lt Robert Jones sat in the Captain's chair. There were two officers sitting at the science panels at the back of the bridge. Worf made his way to the door

of the Captain's ready room. Inside, he stopped, stared at the Captain's chair, and activated the computer.

"Computer, contact Starfleet Command on a Priority One code."

He was then left once more with his thoughts. In the back of his mind he could not help thinking that it was his fault that his senior officers had been captured, as it was his job as Security Chief to protect the people on the ship.

The computer screen sprang into life. Jansan's face formed.

"Lt Worf?" He sounded surprised.

"Yes, sir."

"Where's Picard?"

"The Romulan Warbird returned and attacked the Enterprise. Romulans then boarded the ship and took prisoner Captain Picard, Commander Riker and Commander Data."

"Have you traced or followed the Warbird?" asked Jansan.

"Yes, sir. In the battle we destroyed their cloaking device and we have been able to trace their course. We are currently in pursuit."

"You're doing the right thing, Lieutenant. If the Romulans are preparing to go to war, we cannot allow them access to someone like Picard. I want you to carry on pursuing the Warbird until you have stopped it."

"I am going to contact the Romulan government and see what they're playing at. One more thing, Mr Worf - if you can rescue the prisoners, then do so."

"Yes, sir."

"I will be in touch soon, Mr Worf. Jansan out." The screen went blank.

Worf got up and left the ready room. Once he was on the bridge, Lt Jones rose from the Captain's chair and replaced the man at the helm. Worf took his place in the Captain's chair and activated the ship-wide intercom.

"This is the acting Captain. All civilian personnel report to the saucer section immediately and prepare for saucer separation. All bridge officers with battle experience report to the battle bridge." He glanced round the personnel already on the bridge. "Do any of you have battle experience?"

He was not surprised at the staggered chorus of "No, sir," from everyone but Jones.

"Get down to the battle bridge, Lieutenant." He activated the intercom again. "Engineering. Mr La Forge."

"La Forge here."

"Report."

"Well, I've got phasers and photon torpedoes back on line."

"Good. What about our shield strength?"

"Forward shields are at fifty five percent, and aft shields at fifty nine."

"How long until we have maximum shield strength?"

"Hard to say." La Forge hesitated for a moment. "Could be an hour. Could be two. I'll keep you informed."

"What about our velocity?"

"I can give you warp six in about

five minutes."

"Good. Engage as soon as you have it. I want a final meeting with the senior staff before we engage the Romulans. Can you be in the observation lounge in ten minutes?"

"I'll be there."

Before closing the intercom, Worf added, "Dr Crusher, Counselor Troi - please report to the observation lounge in ten minutes."

Worf headed for the battle bridge, where he found ten officers waiting. He looked them over.

"Lt Jones, take the helm." He went on to assign positions to four other officers. "The others report to engineering." As the officers moved to their places, he went on, "Mr Jones, where is the Warbird now?"

"It is travelling on course four two four mark twelve at warp five."

"How long until we intercept?"

"At current speed, fifteen minutes, sir."

"Have we got warp six yet?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. We are almost ready. Lt Jones, you have the bridge." Worf headed for the observation lounge.

With the four officers gathered, Worf said quietly, "Starfleet has ordered us to continue our pursuit of the Romulans. This gives us a chance of

rescuing our missing officers. Counselor, I want you to take command of the saucer section."

"I believe I will be of most use there," Troi agreed, "since I can also be of help to the families of the men who are going with you."

"Doctor, I want you to prepare for casualties."

"As soon as we've finished this meeting," Crusher agreed.

"Mr La Forge, how long until we have maximum shields?"

"About an hour."

"Current status of the shields?"

"Forward shields, seventy percent, aft, seventy-one. Worf - it's likely that the Warbird hasn't restored its shields to maximum strength yet either."

Three minutes after the meeting finished, Worf was back on the battle bridge. "Worf to main bridge."

"Bridge here."

"Release the docking latches."

Worf watched the saucer section slowly float away. Once it was well clear, he ordered, "Engage interception course now!"

"Aye, sir."

The Enterprise began the chase.

Meanwhile, on board the Romulan ship, Picard and Riker were awakening

from the stun effect. Riker was the first to stand up. He noticed a guard outside.

"I take it we're on the Warbird."

"Shut up!" replied the guard harshly.

"Not too friendly."

"I agree," said Picard, who had now stood and was straightening his uniform.

"We must have been taken from the Enterprise when they boarded," Riker suggested.

"Yes - but what did they do with the Enterprise?"

They had not long regained consciousness when a young officer appeared with two guards, who led Riker and Picard into another room.

"Data!" Riker exclaimed. In the centre of the room, a motionless Data did not respond.

"He must have been deactivated," whispered Picard.

"Take a seat," the officer told them. They had no choice; they were forced into chairs by the guards.

"Who are you?" asked Picard.

"I am Cosak - a junior officer."

"What do you want with us?"

"I have my orders from Commander Torak."

"Why do you follow an insane commander?" asked Riker.

"Insane? Torak is not insane - he is a great warrior, and he proved this by defeating your Enterprise and bringing you here."

"He is risking war between your Empire and the Federation by bringing us here."

"Torak knows the risks - and besides, he doesn't work for the Empire any more."

"And that's his excuse for kidnapping us and possibly causing a war?" asked Riker.

"Quiet! I will not answer any more questions. From now on, I ask the questions - and you will provide the answers." There was a moment's silence, then - "My first question is for you, Captain. I want you to give me all the defence codes for all your Starbases and Starships."

"You know I cannot tell you those," replied Picard firmly.

"We can wait." Cosak looked down at a data pad. "Ah, you must be Commander Riker. "Do you know the codes?"

"How do you know my name?" demanded Riker.

"We know many things, Commander. Torak knew that the Enterprise was the nearest Starship to that station - that was why we attacked it. To attract you."

"What would you want with me?" asked Picard.

"Why, Captain Picard, you are in command of the Federation's flagship. It is more than likely that you will know many of Starfleet's operations."

"What about me?" demanded Riker.

"Well, Commander, if Picard somehow manages to resist us, perhaps you will not."

"And what about Data?"

"Oh, yes, your android friend. He will be taken to Romulus, where I'm sure our top scientists would appreciate a look at how he works."

"You will not get away with this!" insisted Riker.

"Oh, but we will, Riker. Under the leadership of Torak we shall be successful."

"How did you know how to activate Data?" asked Riker.

"We have many ways."

"I've had about as much as I can take," started Picard. "Get Torak down here now!"

"Torak is on the bridge and does not wish to be disturbed. You have no choice but to deal with me."

There was a sudden beeping noise and then came an announcement on the ship's intercom. "Cosak. Report to the bridge."

Cosak turned to the Federation officers. With a mocking bow, he said, "I must leave you now - but I will be back to finish our conversation." He then turned to the guards and spoke in Romulan to them. Picard and Riker were fastened to metal poles by handcuffs, and watched Cosak and his guards leave.

"Sir, the Warbird is dropping to

impulse speed," Lt Jones reported.

"Time to arrival?"

"One minute."

Worf activated the intercom. "Worf to La Forge."

"La Forge here."

"What is our shield strength?"

"Eighty percent."

"Good. Prepare for battle. Worf out."

"Sir, we're coming up to the Warbird," Jones reported.

"Drop to impulse speed. Activate screen. Now we shall see how honourable the Romulans are!"

As the two ships approached each other like two raging bulls, Worf opened communications with Torak.

"Torak!"

The Romulan replied instantly. "Oh, so I was proved wrong. Klingons can remember simple things such as names - or was it just a lucky guess?" He was smiling maliciously.

"You have no honour - like all Romulans. Hand over the officers you have kidnapped."

"Klingon, you make it sound so easy. I wonder which Ferengi put you in command?"

Worf felt like letting out a flood of Klingon insults but he held back, deciding he would not give the Romulan the satisfaction of knowing he had annoyed him. Before he had the chance to say

anything, the Romulan spoke again.

"Let's see, Klingon, if you can work your photon torpedoes." The screen went blank.

"Their disruptors are powering up. They're moving into a standard attack posture," announced a worried Lt Jones.

"Move us to position Alpha," ordered Worf.

As the Enterprise moved into its attacking position the Warbird let out its first burst of disruptor fire. The first shot slammed into the starboard side and every deck shook violently. The second shot smashed into the door of shuttlebay two, causing it to decompress. The rush of air from the bay caused the ship to move downwards and the third shot passed over the ship.

"Damage report!" demanded Worf.

"Coming in now, sir," said the tactical officer. "Starboard power grid is damaged. Shuttlebay two is seriously damaged. Shield strength is down to sixty three percent and holding."

"Lock on the Warbird and fire photon torpedoes, maximum yield, full spread."

"Torpedoes, under way." The Enterprise let out five torpedoes which made their way towards the Warbird. The Warbird made an effort to move but it was caught by all five torpedoes on the belly.

"What damage did that do?" asked Worf.

"Their shield strength is down to sixty percent and holding."

"Move to course ten ten three mark

five, and fire torpedoes.

After moving into a new attacking position the Enterprise fired five more torpedoes which screamed towards the Warbird. Once again it made an effort to move, but again it was struck. The shots slammed into the port side.

"Sir, their shield strength is down to forty-five percent," announced Lt Jones.

The Warbird launched an assault of disruptor fire which smashed into the Enterprise's port side.

"Damage report!" cried Worf.

"Minor damage to engineering. Shield strength down to fifty one percent."

"Fire torpedoes!"

"Torpedoes away." Once again the Romulan ship was struck.

"Sir, their shields have failed."

The Romulan ship fired a volley of disruptor fire which slammed into the port hull. The Enterprise immediately retaliated with a burst of phaser fire which hit the Warbird's engineering section.

"Sir, they're been rendered immovable."

"Hail them!" ordered Worf.

"Channel open, sir."

"This is the Enterprise. You will power down your weapons and prepare to transport the hostages."

Torak's face appeared on the screen. In the background, flames were eating the walls. "If you think a Romulan

Commander will hand over his prisoners to a Klingon, you are deeply mistaken."

Worf rose from the command chair and walked over to the tactical officer. "Fire torpedo, low yield, at their disruptors."

"Firing now." The Enterprise destroyed the Romulan's weapons.

"Now we shall see who will surrender. Hail them again."

"Channel open."

"Surrender, Romulan! You have lost!"

"No reply, sir."

At that, Worf decided he had to go over to the Romulan ship and get Picard and the others before Torak killed them.

"Sir, I'm reading massive energy surges from the Warbird. It's probable that they've activated their self-destruct mechanism."

"Thank you, Lieutenant." Worf activated his communicator and summoned La Forge to the bridge.

Within two minutes, he had arrived. "Worf! What is it?"

"It seems clear to me that Captain Picard and the others will be killed now that the Romulans have set their self-destruct system. Have you been able to pinpoint their positions?"

"No. We can't get a positive pattern lock."

"As I thought. I have decided that as I failed in my duty as a security officer and as a warrior in protecting them when the Romulans boarded us, I should go

across and rescue them."

"Dangerous. How would you find them?"

"I will take a tricorder set to detect Human DNA."

"I still think it's too dangerous."

Worf left the bridge, followed by La Forge. "I must try. It would be dishonourable not to. You will return to the bridge and take command."

Worf soon walked into the transporter room carrying a phaser and a tricorder.

"Chief," he told the transporter controller, "you will beam me onto the Romulan ship and once I have located the Captain and the others I will transmit a signal via tricorder. This should allow you to get a pattern lock on all four of us."

"Aye, sir."

Worf stepped onto the transporter pad. "Engage." The Ensign engaged the transporter.

Worf appeared in a small empty corridor of the Romulan ship. He pulled out phaser and tricorder, and studied the latter.

They were not far away. He could only hope that Data was with Riker and Picard, because he would not show up on the tricorder. Worf moved into another corridor. At the end of it was a lift. He made his way to it and stepped inside.

It was controlled by buttons. He

pressed one and the lift rose by one deck. The door opened, and he got out, phaser at the ready.

There were four Romulans in the corridor he entered, all armed. When they saw him, they opened fire. Worf dived into a small storage room at his side as he returned the fire. He heard the Romulans moved towards the storage room; one entered. Worf, hiding behind a crate, fired one shot which hit the Romulan in the chest and sent him to the floor. The second Romulan entered, diving behind a crate for protection. The third was not as careful, and Worf blasted him into a pile of crates. There was no sign of the fourth.

The second Romulan made a move to try and get closer to Worf, but the Klingon saw him moving and shot him. Then, realising that the fourth one must have gone for help, Worf left his position behind the crates. He left the room and discovered the fourth Romulan outside, waiting for him. As he saw him, Worf fired - as did the Romulan. Worf's shot hit the Romulan in the chest, and he fell; but the disruptor shot hit Worf on the left shoulder and sent him flying to the floor, his arm badly burned.

Worf forced himself up; checking his tricorder he realised that Picard was only six doors away. He began running, phaser at the ready. He had to hurry; he wasn't sure how long he had until the ship blew up!

Torak, his face all cut and bruised, stood above Picard who was also cut and beaten. He had been released from the pole, but his hands were still bound by handcuffs. Riker lay on the floor, unconscious, with a large cut above his right eye. Data was still frozen in the centre of the room. Torak brought out a disruptor and pointed it at Picard, setting

it at a very low setting so that it was enough to hurt the Human yet not enough to stun or kill him. He then fired a single shot at Picard's leg. Picard screamed. After continuing to torture Picard for a few minutes longer, Torak spoke.

"Picard, your ship may have defeated mine, but you will not enjoy that victory. I'm going to kill you, and your ship will not capture mine, as mine will explode in five of your Earth minutes. And because I'm not going to be captured, that makes me the winner!" He gave a small laugh and then set his disruptor at its highest setting and placed it at point-blank range in front of Picard's face.

"Sir, the Warbird's energy surges are becoming more intense!"

La Forge sat in the Captain's chair; a small bead of sweat ran down his head. "All right. Plot a course away from the Warbird and engage at warp nine if the surges become any more intense."

"Aye, sir."

La Forge activated the intercom. "La Forge to transporter room."

"Ensign Thomas here, sir."

"Any word from Lt Worf or the Captain?"

"No, sir."

"La Forge out." He looked at the Warbird on the viewscreen. "Come on, Worf!"

hand. Torak turned and Worf fired, but Torak managed to avoid the blast by jumping behind a table. Worf also took cover.

Intent on Worf, Torak had forgotten about Picard, who slid across the floor so that he was just behind the Romulan. Picard put both feet in the air and pulled them back, ready to kick.

"Torak!" he screamed.

An astonished Torak turned, disruptor raised. Picard kicked the weapon out of his hand. Torak jumped onto Picard, and began beating his head against the metal floor. Worf raced across to the Romulan and with a mighty kick sent Torak flying off Picard. Worf then fired his phaser at the fallen Romulan, who collapsed unconscious. He then let out a Klingon battle cry, and with the help of his phaser burned off Picard's handcuffs.

"Get Commander Data; I'll stay by Riker," ordered Picard.

"Aye, sir," nodded Worf and he rushed off to Data at the other side of the room and reactivated him.

"Lt Worf?" asked Data.

"Yes, Commander, we are on board the Romulan ship."

"Interesting," replied Data.

"Worf, we must hurry - the ship's been set for self destruct!" called Picard.

"I know, sir," Worf replied. He and Data then moved to rejoin Picard. Once there, Worf activated the signal and moments later all four appeared on the transporter pads of the Enterprise.

Worf burst into the room, phaser in

Worf immediately activated his

communicator. "Worf to La Forge. Get us out of here!"

On the bridge, La Forge ordered Jones to engage the pre-set course and the Enterprise shot away. Seconds later the Romulan ship exploded in a ball of flames.

Worf, after taking a few deep breaths, reactivated his communicator. "Worf to Dr Crusher. Report to transport room."

"On my way," came her voice.

A day later, Picard had resumed command of the re-joined Enterprise and

they were on their way to Starbase 134. He and the other senior officers were discussing the recent events.

"According to Admiral Jansan," Picard began, "Torak was a renegade who had convinced his crew to follow him into a personal war with the Federation."

"Well, if it wasn't for one person, three of us might not be here," said Riker.

"Even if his method of rescuing is a bit dangerous!" added Picard. "Nonetheless, Lieutenant, you did a splendid job, and one day you will make a great Captain."



SENTIENCE

What is sentience?
Explain why he is not he,
Well, give me a reason
Why to be is not to be

Come, state your criteria.
Let's see which one he fills,
And finally solve this matter -
Does he fit the sentience bill?

We know he is intelligent,
And self aware is he -
But is he really conscious?
Who should say? Not me.

Now pass your judgement,
And may your law be good;
Let him lead his life
As all sentient beings should.

Helen Connor



THE SLEEPER SHALL AWAKEN

by

Nigel Turner

The craft drifted aimlessly in the far reaches of space. It circled a pulsar, whose radiant energy lit up the sky for light years. Silence permeated its chambers and crawlways. Ancient equipment lay disused in rooms and huge crates occupied the cargo bay. On the main deck, power readouts declared there wasn't an ounce of energy left aboard the derelict and centuries of dust layered everything. Throughout the decks nothing stirred.

Well, almost nothing.

"Well, Mr La Forge, report." Picard wasn't in a good mood as he arched his back. Lack of sleep and this difficult situation hadn't helped matters. The Enterprise, HIS ship, was sitting in space like so much junk, and he wanted a damn good explanation.

"Sir, we'll have impulse power in six hours and warp power in about forty-seven hours, providing everything checks out okay."

"Two days is a hell of long time to be stuck out here, Geordi," commented Riker.

"Sorry, sir," apologised La Forge, "but we're running a complete level one diagnostic on all power systems, all two thousand of them. We're lucky there wasn't an antimatter containment breach."

"Any clues as to what happened, Geordi?" asked the Captain.

La Forge squirmed slightly in his chair since he didn't have a clue. "No, sir, we still haven't determined where the power went. Like I said, we're still checking."

Worf frowned, something which he did a lot. "There could have been some outside influence," he growled. Worf wasn't paranoid - to his way of thinking. In fact, the Klingon was paranoid for so much of the time it was normal behaviour for him.

"Could it be another Tychon's Rift, Data?" asked Picard. Deanna Troi suddenly felt a chill run through her at the mention of the name. It had trapped the Enterprise and another space craft. The aliens had eventually communicated through Troi's telepathic abilities but the incident almost drove her insane, and the rest of the crew to the point of killing each other.

"No, sir," replied Data. "The energy loss which brought the Enterprise out of warp was sudden. The Rift would not have affected us while in warp and all sensors confirm that there are no anomalies within sensor range. Somehow the energy was siphoned off directly from the dilithium reaction chamber before the Enterprise could utilise it. The resultant sudden loss of energy would have affected the magnetic containment system of the antimatter, and if Engineering had not executed containment procedures, the collapse of the system would have resulted in the destruction of the Enterprise." Everyone breathed deeply, not only because death

had been narrowly averted but also because Data had spoken continuously without taking a breath. Picard looked expectantly towards the Betazoid. On such occasions as these he relied heavily on her counsel and empathic powers.

"I know what you're asking," she replied in a soft voice, "but I feel no presence whatsoever. The crew is nervous and stress levels are higher than normal, but I'm sure that everything will settle down once we are en route to Caleste IV." She added the part about stress levels being higher than normal because the Captain would be concerned about his crew. However, he didn't need her abilities to tell there was a high level of stress amongst the crew since he himself was feeling it. *Or perhaps, he mused, she felt his anxiety and was, in her own way, telling him to relax.*

"Keep me up to date, Commander."

"Yes, sir," replied La Forge and they filed out one by one from the conference chamber. Worf took his place at tactical while Data took ops and Troi sat in her place at the left hand side of Picard, with Riker at the right. For a few moments Picard stood staring out at the beauty of space, then assumed his place in the command chair.

Ambassador Kelro sat in his assigned guest quarters and complained quietly to himself. By Algonian standards they were rather sparse, but livable. He'd been informed by Commander Riker that it would be two days before they would be able to resume their journey, but that they would reach the peace conference as planned. He stood up and started his exercises, the silver sheen of his skin and white shoulder length hair making him stand out even more when compared with Mendik, his servant. While Kelro was tall and proud, Mendik was just the

opposite. Short, rotund with back hair cropped short, he walked with an air of subservience while Kelro swaggered around as if he owned everything.

"Why did we have to come here?" asked the Algonian between grunts of effort as he worked up an appetite. Kelro's question was rhetorical. He knew why the Enterprise was out in this unexplored arm of the galaxy. To explore a pulsar.

A ship like this and they go around being peaceable to everyone. Despite all his protests to Riker he was secretly glad he'd have more time to prepare, since he wasn't really an ambassador, just a high-born who was unlucky enough to be skilled with words. Mendik stood in the doorway while watching Kelro go through his ritualistic exercises and sighed deeply. After a few moments, he felt it was time for the afternoon meal to be prepared.

La Forge and Worf were in main engineering checking out the power relays to the phaser banks. Since Worf was paranoid about everything, he decided to do this task himself. However La Forge kept pestering him.

"Well, what do you think?"

"We have to complete the diagnostic," replied the Klingon in a threatening voice.

"I know, but you didn't answer me."

Worf considered the visored Human's question and then thoughtfully replied and hoped the matter would be settled. "For a Human, Lt Varis could be considered attractive."

"I knew it! You do like her. Okay, so what are you going to do about it?" La

Forge looked at Worf, who was doing his best to ignore his friend. It was a strange situation since usually it was Worf giving the advice to La Forge, but this time it was reversed. "You do know who her grandfather is, don't you?"

Worf snorted his best 'do you think I'm a moron' snort and turned to face the Chief Engineer. "Only a fool would not know of Admiral Xavier Varis. But I do not see what that has to do with checking power relays to main phaser banks."

At that moment Louise Varis walked in, her black hair tied into a pony tail and her green eyes sparkling. La Forge got the distinct impression that she had overheard the conversation. "Lt Varis, I thought you'd left for the day."

She smiled uncertainly and gestured vaguely to the main table. "I did, but I forgot my padd. I won't be a minute."

Worf stared furiously at his read-out panel and La Forge knew that the Klingon would never do anything, but wouldn't have any objection to him asking. Or would he?

"Phaser banks are now cleared for operational use. There appear to be no evident problems with them."

La Forge acknowledged this without actually listening to it. "Yeah, right. Tell you what, Worf, I won't be a minute." La Forge put down his padd and walked over to where Louise was still searching for hers.

"Lieutenant?" She looked up, giving the Chief Engineer a startled expression. "We'll be finishing soon. How about a drink in Ten Forward?"

"I would, Commander, but I've got some work to finish. Perhaps some other night?"

"Yeah, fine." He grinned as she turned and entered the turbolift. As the doors closed, La Forge's smile vanished and the expression Worf knew so well returned.

"You still have much to learn. A Klingon would never dishonour himself by grovelling to a female. Our way is better," announced the Klingon.

"Yeah, but I don't think hitting them over the head and dragging them back to your cave will work these days."

Mendik had been alone for the best part of two hours as Kelro took his mid-afternoon nap. He knew he didn't have longer as his fat fingers worked feverishly on the control module. The transceiver was working and now the cube seemed to have a opaque quality with flickering white lights emanating from beneath the surface. Now all that was left to do was... He heard something behind him and turned suddenly. Kelro had finished his sleeping session earlier than usual and had walked up behind his servant. He didn't notice, through the sleep haze, the way Mendik surreptitiously tried to hide the equipment he was using.

"Fetch me some more ale, and make sure that my bed is made for tonight." Mendik hardly needed telling since he knew the Ambassador's routine. As Mendik acknowledged the command, Kelro walked to the bathroom to wash up. He didn't notice the eyes of his servant; normally so submissive, they glinted with a barely concealed anger.

On the bridge, Picard marvelled at the routine everyone had fallen into without a word of encouragement.

"If anyone needs me, Number One, I'll be in my ready room."

"Aye, sir."

As Picard walked towards his place of sanctuary, he suddenly felt dizzy. He experienced unimaginable pain and fought to keep his balance. He stumbled forward; the door obligingly whooshed open just as his head was about to hit it. He lay there, immobile and helpless. Riker was there first, but only just. The burly Klingon Security Chief already had his phaser out as he reached Picard. Riker turned the Captain onto his side to discover blood streaming from his nose, and stared at the look of mute suffering on the face of his Captain.

"Medical emergency! Dr. Crusher to the bridge! NOW!"

He awoke disorientate,, bright lights blinded him and his face ached more than he would have admitted.

"What happened?" he managed to croak. As his eyes became accustomed to the light, he saw the face of Beverly Crusher as she stood over him. He tried to get up but found he didn't have the strength.

"Lie back and relax, Captain." The emphasis was on the word 'Captain', and even in his weakened state Picard could tell she was not pleased. For some obscure reason that made him feel slightly better.

"I'm perfectly all right, Doctor." Again he tried to raise himself off the bio-bed and would have succeeded this time if Beverly hadn't placed a firm hand onto his shoulder and pushed him back.

"You're far from all right. You

passed out and I'm sure that even you can tell that isn't a good sign. So you're not leaving here until I find out what's wrong." There was an edge to her gentle tone which Picard recognised. Picard relaxed, or at least tried to.

Inside the craft something strange was happening. The eight-foot cylindrical pod glowed eerily as two spheres bobbed from side to side, weaving a complex dance over the faintly transparent tube. Frost coated its outer surface, a thin layer which had been untouched for centuries.

Outside, on the ship's hull, heat tiles had decayed until the perfect whiteness of their youth had degenerated to an almost black/grey colour, their soft texture pitted by the faint radiation of the pulsar. Its side was decorated by a picture, something unseen for several lifetimes and certainly not in that part of the galaxy.

Through the dirt and debris which had collected to obscure it over the length of time it slept, certain features were discernible. Red, white and blue. Possibly even a few stars which echoed their former glory.

Data looked down as his console bleeped an alert. The shields automatically went up as it detected the object.

"Commander, sensors are detecting a faint energy reading at 327 mark 43. It is on a collision course, nineteen minutes until contact." Data's pronouncement brought Riker from his morbid thoughts about the Captain.

"Any information on it, Data?"

"Not as yet, sir," replied the android. "For some reason sensors are unable to penetrate the energy field even though it

is almost negligible." Data stopped and checked his readings, his pale hands flying across the ops panel with unHuman speed.

"On main viewer." The bleak starfield was replaced by an equally bleak starfield with an object in the centre.

"What do you think it is?"

"Sensors are still unable to penetrate the field. I cannot form a cogent theory without additional information."

Riker turned towards Troi who was sitting tensely in her chair. Her black, wide eyes were fixed on the main viewer, and Riker could tell she was in pain.

"Sir, the energy field is now dissipating. Contact in eighteen minutes and forty-nine seconds."

Riker slowly walked from beside Data and sat down in the command chair. "Deanna, what is it?"

Troi's eyes were fixed on the viewer, her entire body tensed and she seemed to shake her head clear as the emotions she felt left her. "For a moment I felt anger, bitterness, hatred so deep I..." She faltered for a few moments, trying to shut out the emotions which were ripping through her once more. She carried on, "But there was also love and tenderness. As if there were two separate sources of strong emotions."

"Directed at us?"

"I don't know," she admitted.

"Any life signs, Data?"

"Sensors are detecting organic matter; however, no life signs are indicated."

Silence gripped the bridge as the Enterprise slowly crawled towards the vessel. All eyes were on the main viewer as the ship grew larger and more detailed.

Data broke the oppressive. "Commander, we now have accurate sensor readings. Accessing main frame in order to correlate." Data's hands flew across his panel as he searched the ship's library computer. "Sir, I have a correlation. It is a cargo shuttle used by the North American Space Agency in the late twentieth century to transport supplies to the newly established Lunar research base. There is no possibility that it could have reached this far in space under its own power."

"Well, then," said Riker, "what the hell is it doing way out here?"

Beverly Crusher stared at the readouts from the bio-bed. After nearly five hours, she had found nothing. She'd run every test she knew but everything still came up a blank. Troi had professed to have felt something but couldn't be sure. There wasn't a damn thing wrong with him, *except*, she thought, *that he still doesn't like coming into sickbay. After I let him out of here, the next time I'll see him is three weeks after his medical is due.*

"What was that, Doctor?" asked Picard in a loud voice.

"Nothing." She hadn't realised she'd been speaking out loud.

"Oh," replied the Captain.

As the Enterprise drew closer to the ancient derelict, power read-outs which had been lifeless for centuries suddenly sprang into life; screens lit up and the remaining terminals which

had not decayed with age began to operate once more - trying in vain to awaken its occupant.

As Picard stepped from the turbolift onto the bridge, he felt a surge of pride. Even after all this time commanding the Enterprise he still felt the exhilaration of command. Data at ops stared with undisguised interest and perhaps concern showing in his golden eyes. Riker and Troi, both standing to welcome him, shared worried expressions. Worf towered over his tactical station, a neutral expression on his face but a look in his eyes which Picard recognised.

"Feeling better, sir?" It was a statement rather than a question since Riker knew that Beverly wouldn't have discharged him from sickbay without giving him a grade A medical. Besides he'd been calling every so often to make sure.

A faint smile touched Picard's thin lips. "Of course, Number One. Well, what's been happening since my dramatic exit?"

Riker followed his Captain's gaze to the derelict on the main viewer. "Well, sir, I was just about to send over an away team. We haven't really anything to do until La Forge gives us the go-ahead on the warp systems and we've completed our analysis of the pulsar. Besides, it'll give Data something to do." Riker grinned and Picard couldn't help smiling and knew he'd regret it. Data's stories were bad enough without having to encourage him.

At ops, a puzzled look flittered across Data's pale features since there was never a shortage of things for him to do. He realised that Riker was trying to lighten the mood and decided to go along with it. He turned in his chair to face the

Captain.

"Yes sir, it would," Data replied and then his face twisted into a huge inane grin.

Louise Varis walked into her quarters, after two shifts feeling more than ready to sleep. Two weeks on board the Enterprise, the novelty still hadn't worn off. After undressing and taking a shower, she glanced around her quarters, refreshed and no longer particularly sleepy, comparing the cabin with her last quarters on board the Hood, and before that, the Academy. The Hood was a good ship but it wasn't the Enterprise, and when she compared the place with her Academy quarters, she smiled even though she had complained bitterly at the time.

She sat down at her terminal and reviewed what she had accomplished during the day. She wasn't Engineering, but she did have a good understanding of the dilithium matrix reaction. Her father was in Starfleet Medical and disapproved of her choice to join Security, but her grandfather carried more influence with the wilful young woman, especially since he virtually raised her from childhood. She didn't like being compared to her grandfather even though they shared similar character traits. Having a legendary ancestor while he was still alive was difficult, especially since his fame was so widespread. Lifespans were not long in Security, and that made him more of a legend.

She turned off her terminal, having had enough for one day. Looking through her small collection of printed books, she chose the writings of Surak, a Vulcan philosopher. She was interested in him, but he usually put her to sleep. This occasion was no different as she lay

in the chair. Slowly the book fell from her hands and slid to the floor.

That night her sleep was troubled by dreams which were unfamiliar to her. Strange images floated through her dreamscape but by morning she could remember none of them.

Data, Lieutenant Regis, Worf and Riker beamed over into the cargo bay of the derelict. The Enterprise had scanned the ship thoroughly and found no hull breaches, and the liquid propellant had long since been used.

Worf had volunteered for the away team mission, declaring gruffly, "You can't be too careful." No-one was about to argue with his assessment, especially Riker.

Tricorders were out and hand lights stabbed at the darkness. Sealed crates were lined neatly down the entire bay and tarpaulin covered ancient machinery.

"Curious," commented Data. "These are food and medical supplies. The tricorder information agrees with that of the Enterprise sensors and it is surprising that the power cells still have remaining energy to operate life support systems."

Worf grunted his acknowledgement of Data's information. The Klingon had been there when Troi had felt the emotion of anger, and felt that anything angry might also be violent. (No-one would accuse Worf of being paranoid, mainly because you wouldn't want a six foot paranoid Klingon with a phaser taking a dislike to you.) They carried on with their search.

There were four decks on the shuttle, two cargo decks located at the bottom of the craft, a command deck at

the top and another deck in the middle. Sensors hadn't gleaned much information from that deck, which was where they found him.

Kelro sighed deeply as the golden china plates were laid before him on the large table. He placed a white napkin delicately on his lap and his mouth watered with the expectation of Mendik's cooking. There was mettikian spice with steak and boiled warrak, followed by a dessert of una berries and cream, and all this was to be washed down with Saurian brandy. He idly wondered if four bottles would be enough to last the evening.

"Alive!" Picard exclaimed.

"Yes, sir, apparently the support systems are still operational. The occupant is approximately twenty-five Earth years old."

Picard mulled over his options and found that he didn't have that many. "Is he like the other frozen people we encountered some time ago, Data?"

"No, sir. We are as yet unable to access the main frame computer; however he is alive. It is definite that he was not put into cryogenic suspension so that at a later time the illness which killed him could be cured and the patient revived." Data hesitated for a few moments, remembering Picard's reaction the last time he brought over frozen people. "Do we beam him over, sir?" the android asked in a hesitant voice.

"All right, but make it quick."

"Yes, sir."

"Are there any answers as to how

he got this far out?"

"No, sir, as yet the only information we have obtained is that the occupant's name is Michael Johnson and that he entered cryogenic suspension three days after World War III."

Ensign McKnight looked down at her console as it beeped quietly. She brushed her hair back with a casual sweep of her hand even though it was immaculate.

"Captain, the away team has beamed on board, except for Commander Data. He's decided to stay to try to access their computer."

"Grand," replied Picard and then waited patiently until Riker stepped out onto the bridge.

"Well, Number One, anything interesting to report?"

"Yes, sir," replied Riker as he took his place next to the command chair. "Firstly, the patient is under Dr Crusher's personal attention. One thing that's odd though."

"Just one thing?" interrupted Picard.

Riker grinned. "The ship is hardly a ship, just a transport shuttle designed to freight supplies from Earth to the scientific Moonbase which was going to be used as the platform for the Mars explorers. Apparently the onboard navigation computer still thinks it's orbiting the Moon."

"Any information on how it reached this part of the galaxy?"

"No, sir, but from what little Data got out of it, it's waiting," Riker paused

rather dramatically and Picard took the bait.

"Waiting for what?"

Data accessed the main frame computer and started to download the memory. A very sophisticated security code had prevented him from using the ancient computer earlier, but very little information had been corrupted during its centuries of non-use. While he used his tricorder to store the information pertaining to mission profiles, cargo and basically everything it contained, a surge of raw power snaked around his body, his internal alarms signalling an overload and his eyes assuming a pained expression. Data swayed from side to side then fell to the floor like so much useless hardware. Several seconds later, a sphere of golden light floated through the floor and danced around the android's head.

He licked his dry lips and opened his eyes slowly. As the haze cleared from his vision, he saw a face which you could easily call beautiful. Then the countenance of Beverly Crusher was replaced by the Klingon with a very displeased look on his face and a snarl on his lips, showing a fair number of teeth.

"You've gotta be joking?" he said, then passed out.

As Beverly relaxed in the chair she continued her report to the Captain.

"As far as I can tell, there's nothing physically wrong. As for his mental state, I can't determine that until he regains consciousness." She half smiled

at the Klingon, who was not pleased about being the butt of a joke even though it was harmless. Picard looked thoughtfully out of the window as the stars floated serenely past.

"Is there any possibility that he's responsible for the problems we've been having?" The 'problems', as Riker put it so diplomatically, included not only the power drain but also Picard's momentary illness.

"I don't think so, Commander," replied La Forge. "We're talking about something that can drain raw energy directly from the dilithium reaction chamber and bring a Galaxy Class Starship out of warp six. I don't think a three hundred-year-old sleeper could do that."

Picard nodded his agreement. "But is there any indication of how he arrived here?"

"None that I can see. There are no anomalies within sensor range and the shuttle was on an elliptical orbit of the pulsar - luckily it was far enough out not to have suffered serious damage. Any closer and the primitive radiation shielding wouldn't have held." La Forge looked at his fellow crewmates seated around the table, slowly reaching a decision.

"I can probably spare a few people to give the shuttle a thorough analysis to see if there's anything special about it. The Pelgrave Institute would also be interested in it, for its historical value."

Picard gave his Chief Engineer a direct look. "Agreed. By all means send over some people, but only if you really can spare them. Also notify the Institute; it would be a pity if this relic were lost. However, as soon as warp systems are cleared for operational use, we leave.

Understood? Good. Dismissed." His tone was final, tinged with irritability. For the past few days he'd been feeling unwell, for no apparent reason, an 'unwellness' that had culminated in his fainting on the bridge. He remembered the embarrassment he felt when the crew had learned of his artificial heart replacement, and his near death when the operation took a turn for the worse.

To pass out on your own bridge is inexcusable, he thought. Looking out of the window, he slowly gathered his thoughts amongst the beauty of the stars.

As Ensign Alexander Murphy leaned his head against the turbolift wall, he wished his back would stop hurting. He'd been in agony for several days since the unloading of the Ambassador's shuttle, and Doctors were not his favourite people. He didn't *dislike* them, he just didn't *like* them, although Crusher wasn't too bad. The doors whooshed open and for several seconds he made no move. Then stroking his pale blond hair into place, he emerged from the lift. He slowly walked into sickbay and painfully staggered up to the bio-bed. Crusher watched him slowly manoeuvre up to the bed; she knew a back problem when she saw it.

"Well, Mr Murphy, what can I do for you?" she asked happily, hoping to cheer up the young ensign. He looked up, his eyes clouded with pain and embarrassment.

"My back's killing me," he uttered between clenched teeth. She slowly took out her tricorder and started scanning his lower back.

"You've really done something here, haven't you."

He muttered something under his breath, which Beverly tried to ignore. much worse.

"How did you do it?"

Sighing and twitching occasionally as she used the healer beam to his sore back, he replied between grunts and groans. "Ambassador Kelro came aboard several days ago and insisted his entire entourage be shuttled up individually. All thirteen servants, and more luggage than I can count. Huge bloody chests, weighing at least seventy to eighty kilos."

She stopped applying the massager for a second and asked a reasonable question. "How did you get a bad back? Why didn't you use the anti-grav units or the transporters?"

"I wasn't allowed to. I had to carry everything up to his quarters."

"Why didn't the servants help?"

He laughed bitterly at her question. "He said he didn't want his things defiled by outworlder technology and that it wasn't his servants' responsibility to carry his luggage. Can you believe that? I mean, they don't do anything else - the only one that does anything is that small fat guy with the bowl haircut."

Trying not to smile, she finished her ministrations and put down her tricorder. "There, all better. If you have any more problems come back and see me. Although you should have come sooner."

Murphy didn't hear her since he was quietly muttering to himself again. "He's got enough gear to clothe every man, woman and child in a good-sized town for the next decade."

As Murphy left in a very bad mood, he had no idea how lucky he was. There were other people on board who felt

Pain and darkness were intermixed with random flashes of golden light. Images floated across his dreamscape and although he fought them, he was powerless to stop airlocks disintegrating and the atmosphere seals splintering, or explosions of the power generators. Screams echoed through the communications system - and then silence, an oppressive silence which pervaded all. He saw his family drawn out into the depths of space, dying a horrible death in that airless vacuum. In his nightmare he saw his family and friends die over and over again. In the real world he screamed.

Data's creator had been a brilliant man and had had the foresight to build in layers of shielding and the knowledge of what to do if the android were ever struck by a massive power surge. That programming had saved Data; his 'being' was safe for the time being. However his uniform, which was usually so precise to Starfleet dress code, was blackened and his epidermis scorched. His hair was frazzled and his golden eyes, usually so inquisitive, were dead to the world.

On the bridge, Picard squirmed in the command chair. "Engage," muttered the Captain as he fought indecision as to whether to visit Data in sickbay. "You have the bridge, Number One," he said as he finally made up his mind.

"Aye, sir," replied Riker and for the second time in as many days he was forced to sit and wait while someone he considered family was in sickbay, with

Riker powerless to help.

La Forge had worked quickly and efficiently ever since Data had been discovered by the second away team. At first he wasn't sure if his mechanical friend was going to make it, but La Forge was forever the optimist. Now, though, Data was going to be all right and the damage to his internal systems had been repaired; the only thing left to do was put the finishing touches to Data's unique appearance.

"Hold it, Data, I haven't finished yet." Part of Data's skull was on the lab bench as La Forge worked on the exposed and intricate working of Data's positronic brain.

"Thank you, Geordi," he replied in a very squeaky voice. "However, I think the octave control level for my vocal abilities needs adjusting."

Captain Jean-Luc Picard anxiously waited just outside the room where La Forge was putting the final touches to Data and was thankful that his Second Officer was going to be fine. While on the bridge he had resisted the impulse to visit sooner, since he knew he had good people and that he would only get in the way. As he stood there, he repressed a smile when he heard Data speaking as though he'd been breathing helium. Satisfied that Data was in no serious danger, he walked into the next room where the shuttle occupant lay motionless on the bio-bed.

In the turbolift coming down, he had had vivid flashbacks to when Tasha Yar was killed on Vagra II. Over the years he'd lost many people and the remembrance of Yar was painful - but

that paled as he thought about his best friend, Jack Crusher. Even now he thought of how things would be different if his old friend were here to see Wesley off to the Academy, and his wife Chief Medical Officer of the Federation's flagship.

Picard's silent journey down memory lane was interrupted by Michael Johnson as he groaned softly, and a look of pure agony twisted his pallid features. His short brown hair was damp with perspiration and his brown eyes were closed. Picard tried to imagine what it would be like to lose an entire world, to see it destroyed, and he shuddered at the imagined thought, thankful he didn't truly know.

At that moment, Beverly Crusher walked into the room with a nurse by her side. She stopped when she saw the Captain. Whispering softly to the nurse and handing her a padd she dismissed the nurse, leaving Doctor and Captain alone with the patient.

"I've done everything I can think of but he still has the nightmares," complained Beverly.

"It is understandable, Doctor. To go through what he has, I'd been having nightmares as well." He looked down sympathetically, dragging his eyes away from the beauty of his C.M.O.

"I trust Data is all right?"

"Perfectly, although we still don't know what happened over there." Picard looked at her once more and spoke with an edge in his voice. "Doctor, there is a lot we don't know." With that he left, finding that the memories were too harsh to block any more.

"Picard, I must speak with you." The Ambassador's voice rang out over the intercom system with an arrogant edge to it, a command and not a request. Picard threw a glance towards his First Officer, a look of distaste clouding the features which were usually genial and diplomatic.

"I'm on my way, Ambassador. You have the bridge, Number One."

Riker looked up with a bemused smile on his lips, taking a perverse pleasure in the Captain's discomfort. "Aye, sir."

Picard entered the turbolift and told it where to go. He wasn't in a good mood and the last thing he needed was Kelro, especially since Picard wasn't up to playing the ever-helpful host. *If he's going to ask again if the replicators can produce a Romulan Ale, thought Picard, I'll scream. Figuratively speaking, of course.*

As Picard entered the guest quarters, Kelro didn't acknowledge the Human. Instead he was gazing out at the stars, his silver hair gleaming in the starlight. Slowly he realised that he was no longer alone and spoke quietly to the Captain.

"Picard, I feel it only proper to inform you there may be problems at the conference."

Picard's brow crinkled as he thought and digested this piece of information.

Of course he had studied the Algonian/Delgarian conflict before collecting the Ambassador from his home world. The two races were separated by a lone star system but that was the entire cause of the problems. One of the planets contained a rare vaccine called feridium, the only known cure for the admenutis

plague, a virulent bacteria which once struck the Klingon people. For the past nine years the ownership had seesawed back and forth between the two planets, and after millions of lives and billions of credits, the people of both races were tiring. That was the only reason for this peace conference. On both sides groups had begun to protest for peace; some of them were quite militant.

"There are people who object to the war and the exploitation of the resources of my home world and also that of the adjoining systems. Others... Some of them might try to use this peace conference as a means of continuing the war."

Picard stood there quietly thinking about the insanity of some people. An enormous number of lives had been lost and some members of the race were only concerned with continuing the genocide.

"As I understood it, Ambassador, the attempted take-over nine months ago was halted and all involved were captured or killed."

"Almost true. Although the followers were detained, the leader of the Nosug was never found and his cohorts never revealed his identity." Looking towards the Captain, Kelro thought that perhaps the situation needed clarifying.

"At first the Riahlor was a peace group holding demonstrations, public lobbying, etcetera, which was understandable. But then a splinter group, called the Nosug, broke away - and believe me, Captain, they were violent. They believed that peace could only be obtained if the complete genocide of the Delgarians was achieved. Bombs were set at military establishments, schools and hospitals, even a centre for the tutoring of the special children. When the attempted take-over began, the Nosug

decided to remove all members of the Riahlor since they might pose a problem." Kelro stopped talking and shuddered quietly as the memories welled up, the carnage and horror of the slaughtered thousands, most of them innocent.

"We never found the leader of the Riahlor, but then there were so many bodies not identified. In their terrorist activities the Nosug used mikrilite dust due to its invisibility to sensors."

"I will do everything I can, Ambassador, but I cannot and will not contravene Federation policy on the matter," Picard responded in a gentle voice, but beneath the gentleness was an edge of steel.

"Of that I have no doubt, Captain."

Standing straight, Picard pulled down his uniform top to clear any creases and decided to broach the real reason why he had been summoned. "May I ask why you think there may be trouble at the conference?"

Kelro continued with his back to Picard, as though he found solace in the stars. "Four days before you arrived at Algonia to collect me, a cargo of refined mikrilite dust was discovered on board a Ferengi trading ship which passed through my system. While it had stopped for repairs a routine search discovered it. My informants tell me that there were three shipments in total - and we stopped only one." He spun around, angry with himself for losing his detachment.

"We missed two shipments, Picard, and that could cost us the peace we so much deserve."

Picard knew from bitter experience what the mikrilite could do. In its ore form it was fairly inert, but once processed, refined and in the form of dust,

it was a very powerful explosive. In the galaxy there were many more explosives which could produce a higher level of damage, but the reason mikrilite was so highly prized was its invisibility to sensors.

"Why didn't you tell me this before you came on board?" demanded Picard angrily.

"I didn't think it was necessary," Kelro replied sheepishly.

"Not necessary?" exclaimed Picard, trying to calm himself down and not having much luck. "You have thirteen servants and enough luggage to fill a cargo bay and you didn't think it was necessary to inform me that an insane terrorist could be planning to meet his maker?" After Picard's tirade had ended Kelro felt slightly indignant. True, Kelro did talk to other people like that, but there was no reason why others should speak to him like that!

Picard finally controlled his anger and after a few moments of simmering he spoke in a low, clear and controlled voice.

"I will do everything in my power to help, Ambassador." The Human turned on his heel and walked out of the guest quarters, leaving the Ambassador to his thoughts. While standing there, Kelro replied softly, "I know, Picard, I know." Neither Kelro nor the Captain gave any thought to the person in the adjoining room.

Worf had just finished a training session on the holodeck when Picard's summons echoed over his communicator. After changing he took a turbo-lift to the bridge, standing rigidly with his hands clasped tightly behind his back. As he exited the lift and walked towards the

ready room, he noticed Data was in the command chair, and the pale android acknowledged the Klingon with a glance. Worf stood at the door waiting patiently for admittance. He heard the Captain say, "Come" and the doors whooshed open. Worf entered. Riker was there, looking up at Worf; the usual grin on his face somehow seemed less intense than normal, while Picard sat behind the desk, his eyes fixed on the information which was scrolling down the screen of his desk monitor. Standing there waiting for the Captain, he wondered what it was about.

"Lieutenant, I want a thorough search of the ship, especially all the belongings of the Ambassador and his party, for any signs of mikrilite dust. I take it you're familiar with its qualities?" He looked up, confident that he was.

"Yes, sir. Sir, may I ask how it got aboard?" If anything, Worf was thorough and he could guess where the possible problem lay.

"It is possible the Ambassador's party could have brought it on board."

Worf took this in and he first thought of a transporter i.d. trace, but he remembered that the Ambassador and his entourage had used a shuttle to board the Enterprise. Only a small amount of mikrilite was needed to cause a large explosion, a quantity which could easily be held in the palm of one hand.

"Yes, sir."

As Worf left, Picard knew that if anyone could find it, the Klingon would.

Michael Johnson was not having a good day - in fact, it was worse than Picard's. He sat opposite the Counselor in the quarters which had been assigned

to him.

"You're not serious!" he exclaimed.

"I'm afraid so," she replied in her dulcet tones.

"Three hundred years? It's not possible. I mean, three hundred years is ridiculous. I was supposed to be in cryogenic suspension for two years." He looked up suddenly and laughed. "That means I'm three centuries past my sell-by date." He continued laughing until he saw Deanna's puzzled expression. "Sorry, it was a joke."

Troi understood his need to play down the enormity of what she had just told him. She stopped for a moment, mentally reviewing his mission profile. After two years he was to have been released from cryogenic suspension to help the remaining survivors on Earth with medical supplies, food and information and how to rebuild civilization. But something had gone wrong with the shuttle's guidance system and he had ended up on the edge of the galaxy. While doing this, she didn't notice that he was staring at her intently. Slowly she became aware that his eyes were probing her, and his thoughts weren't angelic.

"Sorry, I couldn't help but notice you've got the weirdest eyes I've ever seen." He looked embarrassed as soon as he realised what he said.

"What I mean is they're beautiful. I mean... I guess I'm making a fool of myself, aren't I?" He smiled rather lopsidedly.

"I'm half Betazoid." She said this forgetting that he had never seen an alien until a couple of days before.

"Come again?"

"I'm only half Human," she replied.

"Well, I don't know about that, but you look more Human than some of the blind dates I've been on," and he laughed again, but it was a hollow laugh and tears glistened in his eyes, fighting to flow down his face. But he stopped them. Troi felt his bitterness, anger and frustration. He stood and crossed to the window, looking out into space as the universe swept by.

"He is very upset, sir. He won't show it openly and from what he's said, he actually witnessed the destruction of the scientific base."

"Destroyed, how?" questioned Picard.

"Apparently they took a census and decided they would rather meet a relatively quick and painless death than a slow death by starvation and oxygen deprivation." Troi sat there in her light blue dress as Picard thoughtfully ran a hand over his head, digesting this information.

"Yes," he said almost to himself. "With Earth in such a condition, who's going to worry about a few scientists who are not even on the planet?"

She waited until he dismissed her and then she carried on with her duties.

He tossed and turned, never finding the right position in bed, but then he didn't really want to sleep. He knew the dreams would return, but not the dreams of three centuries ago, nor of the first two nights in this time. New dreams - or, more accurately, nightmares - haunted him. He no longer saw the faces of his

father or mother, standing by the first wheat crop on the Moon as the dome broke and they were sucked out into a cold death, but instead gazed upon strange people in unfamiliar surroundings. They died in agony and, just as before, he was helpless.

Slowly, as the night wore on, he still couldn't bring himself to lose the battle against sleep, so as he threw off the metallic purple sheets and decided to tour the ship, this time without an escort.

Somehow he had wandered in the direction of the holodeck. In the turbolift he didn't know where to go, so he asked the computer to drop him off where he could have some fun. Ten Forward was the first destination but he decided against it because so many officers relaxed there, and this was the second destination the computer chose.

"I'd like to see the list, please." Even though he'd tried to get used to talking to thin air, he still felt self-conscious. The screen lit up and program names and authors scrolled down the screen.

"Calisthenics, hmmmmmm. I could do with a bit of a workout... let's see now." He peered intently at the screen to find the author.

"Lt Worf. Strange. I would have thought he'd be more interested in genocide rather than light exercise, but what the hell." He looked up even though it wasn't necessary.

"Computer, I'd like to use the Calisthenics program."

"Which level do you require?" asked the computer in a soft female voice.

"Which is the highest?"

"Level three is the maximum. Warning! When on that level mortality failsafe is disengaged." Thinking about it for a few moments he thought, *Why not?* "Okay, no problem, disengage it."

The computer chattered away as the holograms inside the chamber became real. "You may enter when ready."

The doors rumbled open to reveal a barren landscape with a few clumps of green and brown reed plants dotting the area. A rather nauseating smell made him wrinkle his nose in distaste and the skeletal remains of a structure, all pipes and crumbling brickwork, stood at the end of a mud path.

"What the hell?" He looked down to see what he had stubbed his toe on. The gauntlet was midnight black, with serrated blades running down its length, including a lethal looking blade which ran from the little finger all the way down to the cuff, which was at his elbow. It was strong but light, the perfect offensive weapon, obviously made to inflict the most damage. He had expected some kind of Jane Fonda work-out, all leotards and jogging tops - but this looked much more interesting.

Suddenly someone in a yellow hallowe'en skull mask jumped out in front of him, carrying a lethal looking mace.

"Hello," said Johnson as the mace screamed through the air straight for his head.

"Four broken ribs, fractured wrist, probable concussion and a long list of cuts and bruises. What were you thinking of when you overrode the failsafe?"

He didn't answer, but grunted in pain as she applied the hypo. She had applied it in a very sore part of his body. Dr Crusher was not going to stop there and continued to berate him on his lack of thought.

"I go to all the trouble of getting you out of cryogenic freeze, and then what do you do? You try to kill yourself on the holodeck. Irresponsible isn't the word for it." She stopped talking and looked straight at Michael. "Well, what have you got to say?" she demanded

"That's one hell of a programme. Calisthenics was sure different in my day." He smiled, and although Beverly was still furious her lips did flicker into a smile, but only for a second. Then she continued to tell him what she thought of his foolhardy adventure. Worf walked in with a rather attractive Security officer beside him, and the Klingon looked as though his usual bad mood was even worse.

"From now on you will have an escort." Worf never asked when talking to civilians, he threatened - mainly because anyone on the wrong side of a Klingon has good reason to feel threatened. The Captain hadn't said much to the Lieutenant about the episode but then he didn't have to. Picard could give a reprimand with a glance, and while on the bridge Picard had given the Klingon several such glances.

Slightly amused, Louise Varis stared at Michael Johnson, since overnight he had turned from a pathetic waif to a virtual god, even among the Security personnel. Everyone knew how difficult Worf's light exercise programs were and Johnson had been in there for over an hour, fighting for his life against those monsters which only a Klingon could devise. He looked up at her from the bio-bed and smiled. Worf had left and

he felt it was about time for a drink.

"Okay, then, since you're my escort how about escorting me to a certain place I found this morning?" He was out of the door and halfway down the corridor before she could even answer.

Guinan hovered around the table and glanced knowingly towards Louise as she sat with her orange juice in front of her. It was the first drink she had ordered and there was still half a glass left while Matthew was on his sixth glass of synthanol.

"You'd better slow down," advised the hostess.

"This stuff is as weak as ditchwater. I can't see what all the fuss is about."

Guinan sighed and went to serve another customer who looked lonely. He noticed that some people were staring at him, although very discreetly. *Evidently, he thought, gossiping isn't a thing of the past.*

"So tell me about yourself then," asked Michael. It almost seemed like a date with both of them sharing drinks in a lounge, but she was his escort to make sure he didn't get into any more trouble.

At first she seemed rather coy but soon she loosened up. "My father didn't like me entering Security and wanted me to join Engineering. I'm good with engines - but I prefer physical things."

Michael tried to hide a smirk. Realising what she had said, she looked horrified, and before she could correct the statement, Michael stopped her. "It's okay, I know what you mean." Both of them laughed quietly, since both had enjoyed the innuendo.

"My grandfather's big in the Admiralty and the first Security Officer to make it to Admiral. He's ninety-seven but he looks seventy. I used to practise hand-to-hand combat with him when I was younger." She smiled at the happy memory while Michael sat entranced by her beauty. "I haven't seen him for ages."

The conversation halted for a few moments and there was an awkward pause before Michael took up the reins.

"My dad was a genetic scientist. I was his research assistant. We were trying to alter basic plant life such as wheat, barley and other things so that they could live on other planets and adapt. He'd come up with an artificial nutrient which made the Moon's soil usable with a minimal amount of water. Within a year we'd have been nearly self-sufficient." Faltering, he looked down at his empty glass and couldn't think of much else to say; and he didn't want to talk about the destruction of the base.

"What was Earth like in those days?" asked Louise.

"Crowded, over-polluted and violent. I was glad to get away from it all. We were on rations for most of the time and the exercise necessary to stop muscle wastage was punishing, but I didn't particularly mind it. The air was clean and I could walk all day without fear of getting a knife pushed through my back. Then the world went up in flames and everyone lost hope. How long was it before everything started going right?" He looked across the table hoping for something, but didn't know what.

"About fifty years. Not long, considering, but there was only a limited nuclear exchange. Most of the deaths were caused by bio-toxins released into the air."

Looking up sharply at her, a look of confusion spread over his face. "We tied into the remaining weather satellites and they said Earth was all but destroyed, with little pockets of life. Immense amounts of dust had been thrown into the upper atmosphere and the radiation levels would take decades to subside."

She shook her head slowly and Michael knew he wasn't going to like this. "Within a hundred years, Cochrane had discovered FTL travel and interstellar trade began with an emphasis on colonisation."

Numbly he held the glass in his hand and then looked at her. In the soft lighting of Ten Forward she was even more feminine and charming. "Have you killed anyone?" he asked quietly.

Louise was startled by the question and wondered why he asked it. She shook her head and let it go at that. He didn't volunteer any more information and thankfully, Louise didn't press further. Quietly they sat together while other people walked around them. It wasn't until Worf strode in, his massive frame towering over the other officers seated at the bar, that Johnson moved.

Louise followed Johnson's gaze to the Klingon as he picked up his glass. "Excuse me, I'll be right back."

"I doubt it," she muttered under her breath. He crossed the room with glass in hand to where Worf was waiting impatiently to be served. The Klingon noticed the Human and felt his anger rise.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"Having a drink, want one?" replied Johnson, rather offhandedly.

"Where is your escort?" rumbled the

Klingon.

"Over there," replied Johnson and waved to Louise. She looked at both of them, wondering why Michael was waving.

"The usual," said Worf as Guinan served him. Guinan didn't usually serve anything stronger than synthecol but she knew that Worf didn't socialise that much so she occasionally turned a blind eye when he started asking for those strange and powerful Klingon concoctions. She looked towards Michael and asked him the question with a glance.

"The same as he's having." Guinan looked at Johnson, then Worf, and back to Johnson. While walking away, no-one saw the smile on her face.

"That would not be wise," muttered the Klingon in a rather ominous tone of voice.

"Why not?"

"Klingon wine is not like Human alcohol."

"God, I hope not, this synthecol isn't what it's cracked up to be."

The drinks were deposited in front of them.

"Okay, so what's the best thing to do when drinking this stuff?" asked Michael. He wasn't sure if it was palatable since it looked like a drink Morticia Addams would serve. A white mist hung over the brown glass and it bubbled like a tar pit. Worf turned to face him, looking him straight in the eye.

"Inform sickbay."

Michael gave a weak laugh and wasn't entirely sure he was joking. "Well,

here's mud in your eye." He drained the glass in one go and smacked his lips together, his eyes glazed for just a second while Worf stared incredulously at Johnson - mainly because he was still vertical instead of horizontal. *The replicator must have synthesized the wrong drinks*, thought Worf as he picked up his glass and took one long gulp.

On the bridge Data looked down at his console as he monitored the power systems. "Commander, the computer reports a minor energy fluctuation in the secondary subsystems. It is the fourth in twelve hours."

Riker peered over Data's shoulder and looked down at the screen. "Where, Data?"

"Forward saucer section. I am sorry, Commander, I cannot be more specific," replied the android.

Riker chewed his lip for a few moments and decided there wasn't anything he could do about it. "Keep a look-out, Data."

"Yes, Commander," and Data went back to work, trying to pinpoint the power problems.

By now they had made it up to Worf's quarters. Louise had been dismissed by Worf, since he would continue to watch their guest. Although at first he was displeased with Johnson since the holodeck incident had put him in the Captain's bad books, Worf had to admit he admired this Human. Worf was the one who had found him. He'd just been relieved of duty since it was the end of his double shift and every so often, especially at the end of the day, Worf had

to work off some steam. So when he reached holodeck four he was surprised and angry that someone was using his program, albeit an old one since he had upgraded his holodeck programs periodically. As soon as he realised the mortality failsafe had been overridden, he'd frozen the programme, and as the doors opened he had seen the bloodied figure of Matthew Johnson amongst the bodies of twelve holodeck creations. He was more than a little surprised to find out that he'd been in there for over an hour, battling his way through the repertoire of the computer. That had been then, this was now.

They had been drinking for several hours and sporadic discussions about life, death and certain Klingon mating rituals had brought them together in friendship. No doubt the quantity of alcohol had helped also. Worf had recovered from the goblet of klingon wine he'd taken earlier. Nobody had seen the Klingon rush around like that before and they found it rather amusing, although no-one dared laughed openly.

"So how many's that?" Johnson asked in a slurred voice.

"Thirteen," answered the Klingon.

"No it wasn't, it was twelve. You've got one left."

Worf looked down at the three glasses in front of him and slowly, as he focused, they melded into one. He reached out and then stopped in mid reach. Slowly he toppled forward unconscious and hit the floor with a muffled thump. Johnson looked at the Klingon, picked up the remaining drink and with one deft flick of the wrist, emptied the entire contents into his mouth and swallowed. After several more drinks, he joined Worf in his

alcoholic oblivion.

"I'm still checking, Commander," replied La Forge in a very tired voice. He rubbed the back of his neck and wished he could just finish his shift and take a bath.

"Do you have *any* idea, Geordi?"

"No, sir." He'd been doing double shifts on the first power loss and now the problem seemed to be back, although instead of a massive loss, there were many little ones. All two thousand power systems had to be checked. Again. "Commander, if I find out anything, you'll be the first to know."

Riker wasn't satisfied with that answer but he trusted La Forge to get the job done. However, now he had to tell the Captain, and that wasn't something he was looking forward to.

Michael sat on his bed looking very unhealthy. He'd woken up in Worf's quarters feeling like death warmed up and his situation hadn't improved.

"You seem a little distracted today," Troi pointed out.

He smiled at the understatement. Overnight he had become even more of a legend since not only had his holodeck adventures become a subject of gossip, but he had also drunk a Klingon under the table. A first, to be sure. Troi felt that he needed to be in familiar surroundings, which was the reason why this session was in his quarters on deck nine. A part of the room was taken up by a large chest, things which he'd packed centuries ago, personal belongings and items which he obviously couldn't look at.

"No, not really, I'm just a little hung-over."

"You feel great anger."

"I'm not in the mood for this, Counselor," he replied as he cradled his head in his hands.

It was exactly what Troi had expected. The realisation of the truth had finally been accepted by Johnson. His sacrifice had been for nothing, and that resentment was finding escape. The holodeck incident showed that. "I can come back another time if you wish."

He sighed and apologised. "I'm sorry. Counselor, I'm just..."

She interrupted him. "A little hung over."

He smiled even though his head was still pounding and his hands were shaking slightly.

"These feelings are natural, but you cannot allow them to fester. Tell me what really happened to the scientific base."

"I've already told you," he replied, but the anger in his voice was plain to hear. You didn't need an empath to see that. Troi felt not only the rage but also the guilt, a feeling which was almost on the subconscious level. Almost. Now these feelings were starting to break through, to invade his waking thoughts.

"No, you haven't, not all of it. Does it have anything to do with the destruction of the base?"

He looked up sharply and the smile had vanished from his lips. He stood and walked to the window, watching the stars flash past in tight lines of light. From his body language and her empathic abilities, she could tell his anger was rising.

"What would you know?" he demanded in a harsh voice.

"Nothing, which is why I asked the question."

"That's right, nothing!" He finally let go of his anger. "You know nothing of how it feels to kill your family, friends, how it feels to have the blood of a hundred and two people on your hands. To kill those you love."

Troi looked shocked since she wasn't expecting this. Her expression told Johnson as much.

"What did you expect?" he sneered. "Stealing some apples from my neighbour's garden?" His voice was thick with emotion. "You have no idea how it feels to press the button, to question yourself a hundred times, to have the images stay in your mind forever." The pent-up tears were finally released and flowed down his face.

"It was a bloody scientific base, mining explosives only, and the generators couldn't be put on overload because of failsafes. Don't you think I wanted to be with them? Don't you think I would have rather died there and then than have to suffer like this? Why me? Why not someone else? I couldn't get it right then so what good am I now?" His face was a mask of anger and frustration. His voice became normal once more as the final dregs of emotion were sucked from him.

"What good am I here? Nothing. That's all I'm good for, nothing." He leaned against the wall and slowly slid down to the floor, his head buried in his hands.

quarters of the ship's unexpected Human guest, Worf hesitated. From inside the room he could hear sounds which the Klingon had never heard before - loud noises and clashes reverberated into the corridor, and Worf quickly entered the room, assuming his warrior stance, ready to meet anything that dared attack him.

He was greeted with the sight of Michael silhouetted against the stars. The noise was deafening, even to the Klingon, and it reminded him vaguely of Klingon opera. The young Human was moving and waving his hands; it seemed a combination of shock therapy and a heart attack. As he gyrated he turned and noticed Worf standing there with an expression on his face that resembled pain. Johnson froze in mid jive and a look of embarrassment made him turn red as he turned off the music program.

"Hiya, Worf, how's life?"

"What was that?" enquired the Klingon.

"Rock, or more precisely Cabal, a group I liked on Earth a few centuries ago. Would you believe it, they even released a few albums after the war. Mind you, they were getting on a bit." Suddenly wondering why the burly Security Chief had come to his quarters, he asked him pointedly.

Appearing uncomfortable, Worf placed his hands behind his back and stood to attention. "Since you insist on using the holodeck, perhaps I could instruct you to its proper use." Worf didn't have many friends and making them never seemed to be one of his priorities, *but this Human is different*, thought Worf. After surviving the holodeck and a serious drinking session with Worf, he was making the effort.

As he stood outside the guest

Smiling rather strangely, Michael

shrugged his shoulders. "Okay, when?"

"Tomorrow, eighteen hundred hours.

"Right, I'll be there."

Mendik was putting the finishing touches to Kelro's clothes for the next day. The Ambassador looked up towards his servant and asked a question which surprised Mendik. "How is everything with the other servants?"

Kelro never showed any interest in the welfare of the lower classes, except when his clothes weren't pressed the way he liked them.

"They are well, Ambassador." Mendik was unsure of what Kelro wanted him to say.

"Any difficulties? Any discontent?" pressed Kelro.

"They are unhappy about being away from home. They are simple people, lord, but they understand the necessity."

It occurred to Kelro that this was the most Mendik had ever spoken to him outside of his duties, even though they had been servant and master for more than twelve years. "Could one of them be involved in the Nosug?"

Mendik looked up in surprise. "I do not think so, sire, they are loyal to you."

"Thank you." Kelro dismissed him with a wave of his hand and he left the Ambassador to his thoughts, *such as they are*, thought Mendik.

The Algonian servant walked out into the corridor and stood there for a few

moments, thinking. The Security teams had not yet searched the Ambassador's quarters but instead concentrated on the other servants' belongings and the luggage. *The time is not yet*, he thought, *but I need somewhere to hide it.*

As Michael walked into Ten Forward he was wearing blue jeans and a white T-shirt. His hair was ruffled since he had forgotten to comb it on the way out of his quarters. He looked around and saw the person he was looking for.

"Commander, can I have a word with you?"

He looked pointedly at the young lieutenant Riker was trying to chat up, with success. She took the hint and left, while Riker watched her depart with a wolfish grin on his face. "Of course, Mr Johnson, what can I do for you?"

"Could you call me Mike?"

Riker smiled. "Okay, Mike. What's the problem?"

"I talked to Counselor Troi and she said that you were the best person to talk to."

For a moment distrust clouded Riker's bearded features before Michael continued, "I've asked out this Lieutenant, and..." He broke off and Riker completed the sentence.

"You need help."

"Exactly. Look, I'm a few centuries out of date and I haven't got a clue what happens nowadays. I didn't have a clue then, but that's a different matter."

Riker's smile grew into a grin. "No problem, I'll show you what the best-

dressed entity this side of Alpha Centauri is wearing."

Michael's face lit up. "I was kinda hoping you'd say that." With that, they left for the holodeck.

Louise was standing in front of a large full-length mirror in her quarters. When Michael had asked her out on a date (as he put it) she'd been flattered. She'd originally felt sorry for him, losing everyone like that, but he was settling in. She was going to make the first move but decided against it. She'd read in the history books that males of that era made the first move. Unfortunately she'd mixed up the twentieth century with the nineteenth century and was slightly wrong in her evaluation.

"Well, what do you think?" Louise asked Troi.

"Very nice," replied the Betazoid.

"I hope he likes it," replied Louise. She had tried on many outfits, but none of them seemed right. At the time, Deanna Troi had seemed the perfect choice to advise her, but now Louise was coming to regret it. The Betazoid could never say a negative thing about any of the clothes.

"Have you decided on this one?" asked Troi, suddenly having vivid flashbacks of when she was helping Data and his daughter Lal to choose an appearance.

"Yes, this one definitely." She turned with a triumphant smile on her face, a smile which faded when she noticed a rather nice Altairean blue dress with pleated frills and neck scarf.

"I can't wear this," complained Michael. "It makes me look as though my name should be Coco the Clown."

Riker looked dubiously at the outfit and agreed. "It is a bit colourful, isn't it?"

"Colourful isn't the word. It looks like a rainbow on bad acid." He looked to where the other outfits were stacked and came to a decision.

"Thanks for all the help, Commander, but it looks like I'll just have to stick with denims and a t-shirt." He paused, hoping to push his luck. "But I still wouldn't mind some advice on technique."

Walking to the android's quarters, Michael wondered if he was doing the right thing. After all, it was now ancient history and some things were better left alone. After a few fleeting moments of indecision he decided to take the plunge and to find out.

The door chimed and Data answered, "Enter."

As Michael walked into the quarters of the Commander, he noticed how spartan it looked. Data was sitting behind his desk with the multiple terminal screens facing him, digesting the information which scrolled down it with superhuman speed. In his pale golden hands, a cat purred softly. Putting down his feline friend, Data idly brushed a few stray cat hairs from his uniform.

"May I help you in some way?" enquired the android politely.

"Yeah, I need to find out some information and I figured you'd be the best guy for the job."

You couldn't say that Data was *happy*, but at least he felt pleased. In one go Michael had acknowledged him as Human, something which other people had difficulty with.

"I will help you to the best of my abilities. What is the information you require?"

"I need to know what happened to Earth after WW III and what happened to the Moon base."

Tilting his head slightly as his hands danced quickly across the panel, Data studied the information as it passed down the screen. Wringing his hands, Michael waited with baited breath and noticed an easel with a silvery blue fabric covering it. Sneaking a look at Data's achievement, he was a bit disappointed by the blue vortex which greeted him. Turning, he found Data staring at him.

"Have you found anything?" asked Michael.

"Yes."

Walking to the terminal, Michael looked down towards the words on the screen. Data compressed the information to its most vital information. "There was a limited nuclear exchange. Bio-toxins were released on both sides and these claimed more lives than the radiation. However civilization recovered swiftly and had achieved spaceflight by 2134." His words fell on deaf ears since Michael was oblivious to everything. He'd read the screen and he felt numb and slightly sick.

"All for nothing. I could have gone back to Earth. We all could have," Michael said vaguely as the nausea continued.

"Fourteen days after WW III a

supply shuttle attempted to unload supplies at the Newfoundland scientific Moon base but found that it was destroyed. It was assumed that the enemy had taken advantage of the conflict and destroyed it, something which they had threatened to do. However, the work accomplished on the genetically engineered strains of plant life proved a solid base for colonisation during the twenty-first and second centuries."

Smiling strangely, Michael stood straight and wiped a stray tear from his eye. "I'm glad."

"If it is not too personal a question, why?"

"It means that dad, mom, Alexa and the others didn't die for nothing. They left behind a legacy, something for the future, which is something we all hoped for." Turning slowly and leaving the room, he said a farewell to the Commander.

That night, Louise dreamed again. It was a strange dream, like many of the others - a cold plateau with a harsh wind and a menacing voice, full of evil; something she wouldn't encounter for some time. Echoes of the future travel to the past.

Night after night they came to haunt him. He awoke, the sheets soaked with sweat and tangled around his muscular body, the room alight with the sullen glow of the stars. While staring out of the window, he wondered which was sun he was born under. Hell, he didn't even recognise any of the constellations! Slowly fragments of the dream came to the surface. The faceless

people were no longer faceless - he recognised Louise, Picard and Worf. There were bright lights and people screaming.

Something in the corner of his eye caught his attention. He turned around sharply and saw it was the trunk that was aboard the shuttle. After all these days he still couldn't bring himself to open it; he couldn't face what it contained.

Perhaps Troi's right, he thought bitterly. It's better to face the past rather than let it eat away at me and fester. Slowly he got out of bed and walked quietly in bare feet to the heavy wooden box. The shadows of the room seemed to take on a more sinister quality. He reached for the handle and hesitated. *Do I really want to do this?* he whispered to himself. There seemed to be some kind of compulsion. *Yes, I do,* was the answer, and he wrenched at the handle. The lid flew open and he fell backwards, landing with a thump on the floor.

The room filled with a golden glow. Two spheres of golden fire drifted up from the trunk. They circled each other as though disorientated. He scrambled back, fearful of what was happening, and stood there, back against the cold wall, watching these things float about his room. Slowly they glided over to his bed, hanging there for a few moments as if searching for something. As his fingers sought the communications key, they shot towards him, striking him in the chest. There was a flash of intense light and pain, then darkness descended.

The bridge lights dimmed and panels turned blank. The viewscreen died and spluttered.

"Sir, massive power loss, all systems," commented Data.

"What the hell was that?" demanded Riker.

"Unknown, sir." A massive shudder went through the ship, almost throwing Riker out of his chair.

"Sir, explosive decompression. Saucer section decks 7 through 11 damaged." Disbelief shone on Picard's face as he looked down at his chair displays.

"Hull integrity has been re-established, sir." Worf was in the turbo-lift and heading towards the explosion site before Picard had even turned around.

When Worf reached Deck 9 he stepped out into a blackened corridor. The fires had been extinguished by the computer and bodies littered the floor, where unlucky crewmen and women had borne the brunt of the explosion. Data had informed the Klingon that the epicentre of the explosion was the guest quarters of Michael Johnson.

Worf had to wrench the doors of Michael's room open. Energy burns covered everything and a thick smoke stung his eyes while it gnawed at his throat. The outer wall was non-existent, but a forcefield kept in the atmosphere. By what was left of the food dispenser was a figure, scorched and charred beyond recognition. Worf knelt down beside it and bowed his head. Then flinging back his head with a mighty roar, he warned that a warrior was entering the after life. *He might be Human, thought Worf, but he had the heart of a Klingon.*

Michael Johnson, born 12.10.1970, died stardate 44832.6.

"Data, there must be some kind of explanation. Possibly a bomb?" Picard hazarded a guess but he was fairly sure he was right.

"Possibly, sir; sensors have not as yet gathered any information to suggest a bomb, however, that does seem like the most likely cause."

"Could it be mikrilite?" asked Riker.

"The tests for mikrilite are difficult and complex, and the scan has already been completed with negative results. However, it is a very difficult examination, open to much error." Data looked towards Picard and he nodded swiftly, sending Data to recheck the findings. As Data left the observation lounge, they all sat wearing faces of disbelief and Worf was extremely angry, at one point threatening to put every member of the Algonian delegation in the brig. Picard had vetoed that, although it did secretly appeal to him.

"However," continued Picard, "we could assume that it had something to do with the massive power drain we experienced just before the explosion. Lieutenant, how are the repairs progressing?"

La Forge looked up, idly stroking his VISOR with one long finger. The Captain's voice brought him out of his silent anguish as the VISOR seemed to hurt more now than a few years ago. "I've got people repairing the hull breach and we'll be ready for warp in three to four hours." La Forge half expected Picard to disagree and say one to two hours, but he didn't. The Captain sat there, lips pursed as he ran a hand over his head.

"I'm sure it's mikrilite," he muttered to himself. "However, I want every possibility thoroughly checked before we

enter warp. Data should have finished those tests within the hour." The Captain paused, thinking of something which had not occurred to him before this. "But why kill Johnson? He had nothing to do with the Algonian/Delgarian conflict. Why would the bomb be placed in his quarters?"

"Perhaps he didn't know what it was," offered La Forge, "or he didn't know about it at all."

"It's possible," added Troi. "The bomb could have been placed in his quarters without his knowing about it. He didn't place a security lock on his quarters."

Riker looked around at all those seated, and added, "And that mistake cost him his life."

The privacy lock had been engaged since she didn't want to see anyone and the last thing she wanted to do was work today. Thankfully, Worf hadn't pressed the matter and had been sensitive enough to understand. Even though you couldn't call the Klingon sensitive in normal matters, he had lost a friend and he dealt with it in his way while others dealt with it in theirs. The Klingon was now working industriously interrogating the Algonian servants and was slowly working his way to the Ambassador.

Strange, she thought, for years I never bothered about relationships outside of the professional ones. As she grew up, through the Academy and various assignments, she had spurned all attempts at a relationship. Now when she finally talked herself into one, the person was cruelly taken away from her.

The tears had long dried up and they left streak marks down her

unblemished face, her eyes red. Glancing up she looked over to the table and noticed the dozen roses he had given her when he asked her out on a proper date. At the time, she had thought, *How romantic*. Michael thought that Riker's advice would never work, but evidently a lot had changed over three centuries. She noticed that the flowers were slowly wilting, their rich red blossoms dropping to the surface of the glass table. Slowly she turned over in her bed and stared out of the window, her mind numb.

After an hour, the meeting was reconvened to hear Data's information.

"So it's confirmed, then?" questioned Picard.

"Yes, sir, however in the light of the amount of damage caused we were... lucky," answered the android.

"Lucky!" exclaimed the Captain. "Do you call the deaths of thirteen crewmen and a civilian lucky?"

"I do, sir, considering the amount of mikrilite dust used. The dust contained actinium chrysallites, which had a dampening effect on the mikrilite. Had the actual amount amount been pure mikrilite nineteen percent of the saucer section and eight percent of the drive section would have been completely destroyed."

Picard looked over to his Chief of Security. "Lieutenant, confine the Ambassador and his servants to their quarters."

"Yes, sir," growled Worf, who thought they should have done that sooner, especially when the bomb threat was discovered.

Picard stood and as the others were

dismissed, Data remained seated. "Captain?"

Picard looked down to his second in command. "Yes, Data?"

"I have completed my analysis of the transport shuttle used by Michael Johnson."

Picard didn't really want to know since the occupant was now dead. However he did admit to a certain curiosity as to how Johnson arrived in an unexplored section of the galaxy. Picard was resigned to the fact that Data was going to tell him sooner or later. He might as well get it over now. The Captain resumed his seat and everyone followed suit.

"All right, Data, what have you found?"

The android walked over to the wall display, calling up a diagrammatical representation of the shuttle and other information gleaned by the ship's sensors and the away team.

"Stress patterns along the hull are comparable with early warp field experiments. Structural integrity fields were then designed to hold the structure of a vessel together without malformation at high warp. However, the shuttle did not contain warp field technology and there is no possibility that it could have survived warp without some outside involvement." After looking at the faces around the table, the android continued. "The shuttle has been in orbit of the pulsar for three hundred and fourteen years. Photometric analysis of the hull detected large amounts of crysidium compounds which are easily measured, much like the rings on a tree, indicating its age. Unfortunately this information only goes to further the mystery."

"A mystery is a wonderful thing, Data, but only if it doesn't remain a mystery for too long," commented Picard.

"Yes, sir," answered Data.

Riker summed up Data's briefing in his usual style. "So, Data, you're saying that this shuttle travelled though warp even though it had no warp capability, and even if it *could* enter warp it wouldn't survive." The sarcasm in Riker's voice was plain to hear but as usual the android completely missed it.

"Yes, Commander." The corners of his lips twitched upwards and he was gratified they understood the information.

"Well, I'm sure glad that's all sorted out."

"I'm sure that we all have things we should be getting back to," said Picard and with that they left.

Beverly Crusher stood at the side of the bio-bed with padd in hand. Brushing a few errant wisps of burnished hair away from her eyes, she looked down at the charred corpse of Michael. It was an autopsy and she hated doing them - it reminded her of her lack of ability to cure everyone. They also reminded her of Jack, although she didn't cry the way she used to. A nurse called out from the next room, where the injured were being treated; evidently there was some problem. She put down her padd and without a moment's thought she went to treat the living. She felt slightly guilty since she hadn't had time to apologise for her tirade at Johnson after the holodeck incident.

In the next room she saved lives, but if she had stayed in the autopsy room

a few moments longer she would have noticed a bright golden glow coming from the inert body - and possibly, after a few minutes more, fingers moving on an unblemished hand.

"Why am I being treated like a commoner?" demanded Kelro in a loud voice.

"I'm sorry, sir, you can't leave." The Security Officer wasn't comfortable trying to restrain the Ambassador from leaving his quarters, but orders were orders. "Captain Picard will explain everything when he gets here."

As Kelro returned inside he fumed quietly until Picard entered. Kelro reiterated the question he'd asked the guard earlier. "Why am I being treated like a commoner?"

Picard sighed and wished life was easier. "It is for your own protection, Ambassador."

"I have no objection to being protected, but I will not allow myself to become a prisoner."

"You are not a prisoner, Ambassador. Fourteen people are dead and forty-three others were injured in the explosion, an explosion which was caused by mikrilite dust. You are to remain in your quarters until we reach Caleste IV, and so will your servants." Picard's tone of voice suggested forcefields, if necessary, so Kelro didn't push it. "Ambassador, you yourself warned me of the possibility of a bomb. Someone in your entourage must be responsible."

Kelro stopped his pacing and looked directly at the Human. "You are mad! You cannot truly believe that."

"I do. You say the leader of the Nosug was never found, correct?"

"Yes."

"Then what is the possibility that he has gained new followers and they are trying to disrupt the conference? If your system doesn't obtain peace soon with the Delgarians it could mean destruction for both civilizations."

Kelro looked at Picard, shocked at hearing the words which echoed his own thoughts. "I am sorry, Captain, please accept my apologies."

"There is no need to apologise, Ambassador."

"Yes, there is. Ever since coming on board your vessel I have been uncivilised, treating you as one of my servants. I had no right to do that. Please accept my apologies."

"It is understandable, Ambassador. Repairs will be complete within the hour and then we will make up for lost time, I assure you." With these last words Picard left the guest quarters. He needed to talk to someone badly - and he knew just the person.

She awoke with a start, breathing heavily, the sweat glistening in the half light of the stars which came through the windows. Although the nightmare was in itself terrifying, she wasn't scared. It was as though she was witnessing the events through another person's eyes. There seemed to be some kind of congregation, the Captain, various Starfleet personnel and, strangely, Michael; also aliens she had never seen before, more reptilian than Human. She asked the computer what time it was, and realised she was going to be late for her

date. As she got out of bed, she saw the red roses on her table.

The memories came flooding back - the explosion, Michael's death, everything. The memories returned but not the pain. For some reason she continued to dress, *why*, she didn't know. As she left the room on her way to Ten Forward wearing an Altarean blue dress with matching scarf and soft slippers, she didn't notice that the roses were now in full bloom, looking even more beautiful than when the computer had replicated them.

On board the Delgarian warship Ced'rath, an argument was in full flow between the peace delegates.

"I will not speak to them, Chazdak!" hissed Legok.

"You will," another voice hissed. He sounded much older than his companion. Both stood in the sleeping chamber of the First Delegate.

"They are filth! We should destroy them now! Slaughter every last one of them!"

"Fool!" shouted Chazdak. "Do you dare talk against Soledra?" The voices were now whispers at the mention of the Hierach's name.

"Of course not, she authorised this mission. Our people are becoming disillusioned with the fighting and we need something to inspire them. Let us attack *now*, while their defences are lax!"

The fierce look in Legok's glowing red eyes sent a shiver down Chazdak's spine. He'd been an ambassador of peace for many years and his new companion, only transferred to his department for this

mission, spoke like one of the fools who sought only to prolong the war. "You will do as I say."

A brief look of submission clouded the younger Delgarian's face, but that look was gone in an instant. He stormed out of the chamber. There was almost had an organic feel to the place; there were no lights since the walls had a certain quality built into them which made it possible for the occupants to see.

Slowly Chazdak realised why Legok had been transferred and chosen as second delegate. After spending many years in the service, the Ambassador knew a security agent when he saw one. The only problem now was, what was he going to do about it?

At one of the tables in Ten Forward Louise Varis sat rather stiffly, her back aching slightly. She was waiting - for what she wasn't sure, but she knew that she *had* to wait. The place was empty since no-one felt like enjoying themselves after what had happened. Even Guinan, who seemed a permanent fixture, was conspicuously absent. Louise watched the stars as they glided by.

Managing to pull her gaze back to the room, she noticed something strange - a single red rose placed in the centre of the table. She hadn't noticed when she came in, but rationalised that she just hadn't seen the flower, whose luscious smell promised happiness.

The doors whooshed open to reveal a young man wearing a t-shirt and jeans, possibly in his mid-twenties, with short brown hair. He looked healthy considering he had recently died, and she returned his powerful gaze. She asked herself what was wrong with him and then realised that he had no pupils; his

eyes were totally white. He slowly walked to where Louise sat, stood for a few moments beside her and then lightly kissed her cheek. His lips felt hot on her smooth skin and he seemed remote, but she couldn't think why.

He sat down and smiled gently. "Thank you for joining me, Louise." His voice was hollow and there was an echoing quality to it. "There is much to discuss."

In a brief flash it all came back to her once again. She wanted to believe it was all a cruel nightmare. She was about to say something when the doors whooshed open, revealing a figure wearing a command uniform.

"Merde!" Picard exclaimed as his hand jerked up in a reflex action and hit his communicator. "Security to Ten Forward."

Louise looked back and forth from Michael to Picard, unsure of what was happening.

"Please, Captain, no," begged Michael. He'd assumed an unreal quality since Picard entered the lounge, his image wavering slightly. With every passing moment he grew more insubstantial. A Security team burst through the doors with Worf at its head.

"NO, THE TIME IS NOT YET," he boomed and Picard put his hands over his ears to protect them. Worf reached for his phaser, which was precisely the wrong thing to do. Johnson raised a hand and Picard, Worf and the two Security officers were picked up and hurled towards the wall, damaging the panelling as a result.

Louise felt numb at what she had witnessed. "No," she whispered softly and he gazed at her with a sad look on his

face, a tear in his eye.

He vanished. Without light or sound - one second he was there, next second there was empty space where he had been. She looked towards the people who were slowly picking themselves off the floor. Blinking rapidly, she felt dizzy, then fell to the floor unconscious.

Picard's mood had worsened after Crusher gave him the all clear. He felt bruised and irritated as he sat in his command chair.

"How long until we reach Caleste IV?"

"Six hours, 12 minutes and 39 seconds," replied Data.

"Ensign McKnight, increase to warp 8," ordered Picard.

"Aye, sir." With calm assurance, the ensign at the conn increased the speed of the Enterprise.

"Join me in my ready room, Number One." The Captain lifted himself painfully from the chair and headed towards his sanctuary with Riker in tow. "Data, you have the bridge."

The android was already summoning his replacement as he took command of the Starship.

In the ready room, Riker sat down, thinking that this was going to be a formal meeting. Picard stared at his First Officer.

"How is it possible?" asked Picard.

Riker knew what he was referring to. Michael Johnson, the person who had become an enigma. The man had died -

but now, it seemed that he hadn't completely died.

"I don't know, sir, although you've got to admire him."

Picard looked up in surprise and confusion at Riker's comment, "Well, all that just for a date takes one hell of a guy."

Picard gave him a withering look - he found the comment in bad taste. "I'm serious, Will. A few hours ago Michael Johnson was lying on the autopsy table in sickbay, his body burnt beyond recognition and yet... yet there he was, sitting in Ten Forward on a date." He tried in vain to make any sense out of it. "Did sensors pick up anything unusual while all this was going on?"

"I'm not sure, but I think we can safely say all the power problems were down to our Mr Johnson. Perhaps the initial massive power drain, followed by all the little ones in between, gave him enough power to sustain himself. Perhaps all those centuries orbiting the pulsar affected him. Hell, perhaps the way he got out there did it. Who knows?"

Picard looked sceptical at the suggestions but conceded, "Possible, I suppose. Do you think he'll return?" He looked directly at Riker.

"Definitely." Riker spoke with a tone of assurance which surprised the captain.

"Why?" asked Picard as a large grin appeared on Riker's bearded features.

"Because he's not the type to stand a girl up."

"Ambassador Chazdak, we are now

in orbit of Caleste IV," announced the Captain of the Delgonian warship Ced'rath. His voice was full of contempt because of the Ambassador's mission to this 'peaceful planet'. If it had been up to him he would have destroyed this world, looted it and then moved on to the Algonian systems.

"Thank you, Captain Raitha. The conference does not start for another six hours; I will remain on board until then," replied the First Delegate.

"As you wish," muttered the Captain, although his tone suggested he didn't care one way or the other.

"Has the Federation vessel arrived with the Algonian delegate?" This brought a lot of muffled curses and hisses from the control room since many had lost family members in the war.

"No."

Chazdak broke the connection, since the hostility he had faced since coming on board had grated on his nerves - it came not only from the Captain but also the crew, and even his own delegation committee. He had been against the idea of having warships escorting the 'peace' committee to the conference planet, but understood the deranged mentality behind it. The Algonian had hitched a ride with the Federation's most powerful starship, which was to stay for seven days until the first part of the conference was finished. He tried to get his long tongue around the name of the Starfleet vessel.

"Enterprissse." *This accursed war must end now*, thought Chazdak, and with that he lay down to meditate, hoping that his opposite number would feel the same way.

"Captain to the bridge," said Data. Picard and Riker strode out of the ready room straightening their uniforms, both looking towards the main viewer. "We are now entering the Epsilon Kirani system. The Delgarian delegation is presently in orbit of the fourth planet."

Picard acknowledged Data's information as he stared at the enlarged images of the three fierce-looking warships which were circling the planet. The android relinquished the command chair and returned to ops. Picard looked up towards Worf who was hunched over the tactical station.

"Mr Worf, what is the tactical standpoint if things become... unpleasant?"

The Klingon looked down to his panel, checking the information he had already gathered. "One warship is no match, two would be an even fight although it would slightly favour the Enterprise, while three warships would pose a threat to the ship. However the Enterprise is much faster and more agile than the Delgarian ships; we could easily outrun them." The Klingon said this with distaste since he had no qualms about dying in battle and the prospect of a fight put a gleam into his eye.

Just what I need, thought Picard. He called over the intercom network, "Captain Picard to Ambassador Kelro."

"Kelro here, Captain, what is it?"

"We will shortly be arriving at Caleste IV. I suggest that you are ready when we arrive. The Delgarian delegation is already in orbit, with three warships."

For a few moments there was silence. "They always did like to show off their strength. Very well, Captain, I and

my servants will be ready to be transported down shortly." you?"

Picard cleared his throat and tried to sound as polite as possible. "Ambassador, do you think it is wise? After all, one or more of them is responsible for the attacks."

"It may not be wise, but I have need of them at the conference. You may take whatever precautions you deem necessary."

Picard glanced at Riker. "Thank you, Ambassador," he said with a wry smile on his face, since he intended to do that anyway.

Deanna Troi was in Ten Forward contemplating a chocolate sundae. She looked at it with a hungry longing, but her heart just wasn't in it.

Guinan sidled up besides her and sighed. "I never thought I'd see you lose interest in chocolate, Deanna."

The Betazoid smiled and felt that sometimes even a Counselor needed to talk to someone. "Guinan?"

"Yes?"

"What do you know about Michael Johnson?"

"That he has a future ahead of him."

"He told me about dreams he had, dreams which scared him. One of them was that he was going to die in an explosion." Afraid to look at Guinan, Deanna stared at her chocolate dessert.

Guinan sat down and sighed again. "You know that my race has a different relationship to time from Humans, don't

Deanna nodded. Yes.

"Well, there are occasions when events of the future are so intense that they send echoes into the past. Some people act like magnets and cause the same precognition in others."

"I don't understand."

"When the Borg ripped through my home system, I felt it months before it happened. The problem was I didn't know what I was dreaming."

Deanna mulled this over and didn't like where this was going. "One of his dreams was about meeting the devil."

Guinan smiled. "That is in his frame of reference. What about the creature that killed Tasha, couldn't he be called the devil?"

"I suppose so."

"Perhaps it's just an occasion some time in the future when he meets a great evil. Dreams like that happen more often than you believe."

Sighing slowly Deanna played with her spoon. "I wonder if anyone else has been having strange dreams," she said quietly.

There was a lookout in the corridor to make sure no-one overheard them. The huddled group of servants was afraid of everything since they didn't understand what was happening.

"Are we agreed?" demanded Mendik. The huddled group looked at each other, seeing nervous fear in each others' eyes.

"I do not know; it might not be safe," spoke up one of the individuals, a young lanky youth with a shaven head. If Mendik had been concentrating he would have noticed the young man's show of fear was just that - a show.

"Safe," he said scornfully. "The only thing that matters is that we end this futile war. Are we agreed?" They could no longer stand against his words and they bowed to his will. "Is this matter settled?"

"Yes," they chorused.

Alexander Murphy was fuming. After recently recovering from back trauma caused by carrying the Ambassador's luggage, he was now asked to do exactly the same thing again, except in reverse. He would have argued except it was Worf giving the orders - and no-one argued with the Klingon. It would be some time before anyone would be transferring down, at least an hour. Federation personnel were trained to be honest and proficient and Murphy was reasonably honest, but he wasn't stupid.

Bigger that, he said to himself as he loaded up a shuttle. He was using an anti-grav sled to load up the luggage to save himself from further misery. *No-one will ever know.* He quietly laughed to himself as he finished loading up the boxes of clothing and other items.

"Captain, we have received landing co-ordinates."

"Thank you, Data. Mr Worf, please escort the Ambassador and his party to the shuttle bay and down to the surface."

"Aye, sir."

The Klingon left the bridge as his replacement assumed the tactical station. A Security contingent was already on its way to the guest quarters, ready to 'escort' the Algonians. Worf watched as Kelro finally entered the shuttle and Murphy closed the door, looking rather guilty about something. Worf thought that the Ambassador looked particularly ridiculous in the plumed head-dress and gown, but his Human-taught tact won over his Klingon side. Dismissing the remaining Security personnel, he made his way back to the bridge. He wasn't pleased that his investigations had turned up nothing and that the Algonians appeared innocent, but there was no other explanation. *After this shift, he thought to himself, the holodeck will be in use.*

In her quarters, Louise Varis looked out of the window and gazed at the beautiful blue and white jewel that was Caleste IV, a perfect place for shore leave; and at any other time it would have been granted. The door chime sounded and the word "Come" was said as a reflex. She didn't want to speak to anyone at the moment. Deanna Troi walked into the room with a warm smile on her face, doing her best Counselor 'I'm here if you need to talk' routine.

"Hello, Louise." The Betazoid could tell that she was not in the most receptive mood.

Louise turned to face Deanna. "What can I do for you, Counselor?" There was no smile on her lips and in the half-light of the room, her face seemed drawn and unhealthy.

"I just thought you might like to talk. May I sit down?" She looked towards the young Lieutenant for permission.

"Why not?"

Deanna broke the uneasy silence which followed, feeling guilty about being so blunt. "He is dead."

Louise's head jerked up and a look of pure anger filled her features. "Is he? Then who was that in Ten Forward?" she asked.

"I don't know, but it wasn't Michael Johnson. He was killed in the explosion." Deanna didn't like being so brutal but she felt it necessary. Normally she would help her patients help themselves over grief, but here there was no grief since Louise believed he was still alive. To some degree he was. Also Deanna had felt some of the power of Michael when he was in Ten Forward and she didn't like it one bit.

"Do you know, Counselor, Michael complained of having nightmares, firstly of his family then of people on the Enterprise?"

Deanna slowly nodded, since he had told her most of them in their discussions. She had told the young Human it was simply his subconscious trying to cope with the horror he had seen. After her conversation with Guinan she wasn't so sure.

"I started to have the same dreams before he came on board."

Deanna could feel the despair of the young woman and wished she could help in a more tangible way.

The room was illuminated by the stars and the reflection of the sun off the planet's atmosphere, but in one corner of the room a golden glow seemed to emanate from nowhere, and at first neither of them noticed it. Slowly a spinning vortex of golden light appeared,

as though it was a whirlwind of raw power. A strong wind sprang up and lashed at both of them while a loud voice deafened Deanna, although Louise seemed unaffected.

"THE TIME IS SOON."

Louise slowly nodded her head. The voice was definitely Michael's, but amplified and more commanding than it had ever been before.

"What time? What is supposed to be happening?" pleaded the Betazoid. She fought against the wind and pushed towards the vortex which was more than six feet tall. She realised that the closer she got the more she could read from Michael. It seemed that there was more than one entity there but she had difficulty reading any more. She pushed on.

She strayed too close and a wisp of energy picked her up and threw her across the room. She hit the wall with a sickening thud then fell to the floor, her blue dress stained red with her own blood. The vortex disappeared leaving Louise and the unconscious Deanna in the room alone.

"You may enter when ready."

The doors opened and the Klingon entered. The holodeck simulation had accepted all of Worf's commands and he felt a surge of raw excitement at the prospect ahead. The humidity and rancid smells seemed more than real enough to Worf and the ground underfoot had a squelchy quality to it, half solid and half not. A rotting structure of old pipes and brickwork threaded its way across the view and the path that the Klingon was on led up towards the remains of the building. A few metres in front of him a

figure stood, unmoving and silent.

"Begin programme," barked the Klingon. Immediately the figure raised its armoured hand, which was swathed by a black gauntlet decorated by serrated blades.

Worf had felt that the greatest honour he could bestow on Johnson was to fight side-by-side with him. They had planned such a battle before Michael was murdered and Worf needed to work off a little steam.

A large white-furred beast leaped down off the first floor of the building and with an exultant scream in his throat, he raised his own weapon. Sword clashed against mace and the clatter of steel rang out over the holodeck. The shaggy beast forced Worf to retreat a few steps as it swung again. Worf brought his sword up in a sweeping arc and the mace was unable to stop it. Around it went and while the horned beast was off balance, Worf swung with all his strength which had been amplified by his anger. The wickedly sharp blade bit deep into its neck and a scream rang out. The Klingon looked down at his dead opponent as it slowly vanished, clearing the way for another creature. Worf glanced over to where the computer simulation of Johnson had already finished his first opponent and was battling his second. A few hairs on the back of Worf's neck stood on end and it was instinct rather than knowledge which made him duck. A pronged club whooshed just centimetres over his head, threatening to do serious damage.

The next holodeck creature was tougher than the last one. It had been created by basing it on an actual creature. The Gorns were powerful reptiles who were violent, to say the least. The three foot club swung again and the spikes threatened to damage the Lieutenant, and

it was luck rather than skill which saved his life since he stumbled backwards. As he fell, the Gorn, his large eyes glinting with malice, raised his club and swung downwards at the spread-eagled Klingon. Worf rolled to one side as the club buried itself deeply in the soft ground.

On his feet again, Worf swung his sword, which bounced off the hardened club of the lizard and was jarred from his hands. The sword flew several feet and landed in a bush of green thorns. Weaponless, he did the only thing he could do and leaped towards the Gorn, which was the last the thing it was expecting. Grappling with the creature, Worf fell to the ground on top of it, the club separating them. Growling with pleasure, the Klingon ripped the club from its scaly hands and leapt to his feet with a scream. He brought down the club straight onto the Gorn's domed head and the spikes buried themselves deeply into the creature's skull, yellow ooze issuing from the wounds. Letting the club fall to the ground Worf turned to face Michael who was standing a few metres away.

"Not bad, Worf, you've got a good technique."

Worf stared in surprise since he hadn't instructed the holodeck for an interactive Johnson, only the visual representation and fighting techniques of the dead Human.

"Is it really you?" he asked in amazement.

"Yes," replied Michael as he toyed with the gauntlet.

"How is it you are here?" Worf showed no fear or anger since he knew that Johnson was no danger to him. The logic escaped him when he thought of what happened in Ten Forward but it was a gut reaction.

"I had to say good-bye, Worf. I don't think there'll be another chance."

"I don't understand," admitted Worf.

"Neither do I, my friend. Tell the Captain and also Counselor Troi that I'm sorry for what happened. I didn't realise what I was doing. It's not the easiest thing in the world - or should that be galaxy?" Michael smiled slightly. The Klingon only partly understood and was going to ask further when a voice came from his com-badge.

"Lt Worf to the bridge." It was a summons from Picard and he turned to leave; as the doors opened revealing the corridor beyond he looked back to say a final farewell to his friend. But there was no-one there.

As Kelro entered the shuttle, he tried to forget the look of disdain and forced politeness exhibited by the Klingon. As he sat down for the trip to the surface, he wondered if the Delgarian delegate was having as much trouble.

The security field which surrounded his surface accommodation was deactivated and the shuttle landed. Murphy allowed the servants to unload the luggage and smiled as he re-entered the shuttle, slowly ascending through the blue sky. He chuckled quietly.

The courtyard was pleasant enough, with green trees shrouding high white walls. Flower borders lined the garden as a crystal fountain sprayed complex patterns through the air. Slowly a figure shuffled from a large oval doorway. Its head was bowed and it was covered from head to toe in a silken white fabric, the hood concealing the features of

the creature.

"I greet you, Ambassador." Straightening slightly, the being pushed back the hood to reveal himself; the pale white skin and long nose which extended over its forehead identified it as a Sylak. The small slit blue eyes peered at the Algonian, and the Ambassador thought that the Sylak had an almost unfinished look to it. A three digit hand was held outstretched in the Algonian sign of greeting, and Kelro reciprocated.

"Welcome to my residence. I am known as Sithar. I am honoured that such an important person is staying at my humble quarters."

Kelro puffed up like a peacock (which he resembled anyway, due to the plumed blue and green head-dress) at the compliment. "Thank you. It is a pleasure to share your dwelling," he replied diplomatically.

"Come, I will show you to your quarters." The figure turned around and slowly shuffled towards the doorway.

The building reminded Kelro of the palace he grew up in as a child - a building which was now a ruin due to an attack by Delgarian suicide ships. The cool air refreshed Kelro and he felt good about being in the open once again. He breathed in deeply, smelling the scent of flowers on the brisk breeze which blew through the courtyard. Before entering the building he noticed, on the high walls, cannon emplacements and sensor beams all around the perimeter.

The Sylak noticed Kelro's stare and followed it, answering the unspoken question. "They are guards, Ambassador."

"Am I to be a prisoner?" he asked quietly.

"Of course not," Sithar chided gently. "They are there for your own protection."

Kelro looked at the figure which continued its shuffling walk inside the grand building. "I thought the Sylaks were a peaceful race."

"We are. However, not everyone on Caleste IV is Sylak. There are many races here, including Delgarian." Kelro could see Sithar's hidden warning, and felt if he had not made a friend, he had at the very least made an ally.

"Was that all he said, Worf, nothing more?"

The Klingon was in the Captain's ready room after changing his uniform. He could hardly report to the Captain in a soiled uniform.

"Yes, sir. He apologised for what he did to you and the Counselor." The Klingon paused, realising something. "But Troi was not with us in Ten Forward." He looked mystified.

Picard put down his cup of Earl Grey with exaggerated slowness. "That is what I called you here for, Lieutenant. Counselor Troi is in sickbay after coming into contact with whatever Johnson has become, and from what you say it's possible he hasn't achieved control over what has happened to him. However, I don't want a similar episode occurring again. Data has some information which might prove useful." He picked up his half empty cup and brought it to his lips.

"I don't want anything like this happening again either." With that the Chief Security Officer left the room, disturbed by the power Michael seemed to possess, torn between his feelings of

friendship and his duty.

In his ready room, Picard massaged his temples since his headache was back again.

The entire room was silent and almost everyone looked at each one another with expressions of mute distrust, although there were some exceptions. The room was ornate beyond belief; long fluted columns made their way up to the high ceiling. Everything was white marble except the rugs of woven gold on the walls and the midnight black conference table, which was in stark contrast to everything else. The floor had a sparkling quality, like dew in the early morning, and the building was roofed by a huge crystal dome. The low hum of anti-grav generators was barely audible.

"Delegate Kelro, may I introduce Delegate Chazdak."

The two Ambassadors eyed each other uneasily as they took their seats, both quickly assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the other. The Delgarian delegate held out a scaly hand, palm downwards. Kelro looked at it for a few moments and then placed his palm on Chazdak's. A sigh of relief passed through all those present.

At the head of the black conference table a Sylak named Kimon presided as mediator between the rival species. On his left sat Chazdak and on his right sat Kelro, while next to the Ambassadors sat their aides, Legok and Mendik. Mendik, on this occasion, was raised to a new status merely to even out the personnel at the table. He and Legok looked at each other across the table with barely concealed contempt for each other. Kimon cleared his throat and picked up a

small ceremonial tizak and struck a golden gong, opening the peace negotiations.

A beginning - and everyone knew that the ending would be a long time in coming.

In sickbay, Beverly Crusher looked down at her patient and smiled. Sweeping the tricorder sensor back and forth, she knew that Troi's injuries were relatively minor but she wanted to be sure. Troi's blue dress had been stained with blood when she was first beamed into sickbay, caused by two broken ribs which had broken the surface. All injuries were now repaired and apart from being very sore and suffering from a mild headache, she was going to be all right. Beverly glanced towards Riker, who was holding Deanna's hand. He'd been in sickbay ever since Louise Varis had notified the bridge.

"He didn't mean to hurt me, Will, I got too close."

Riker looked unconvinced but didn't say anything to contradict her. His eyes were soft and a worried smile flickered across his lips. "I'm just glad you're all right." He looked up towards Beverly who nodded slightly to confirm his words. She turned and left, knowing that they wanted to be alone.

"If anything had happened to you, I..." He stopped, unable to contemplate it any more. Even though they had more or less broken off their relationship, they still felt a certain bond with each other. Despite feeling sore and battered, she could feel his worried thoughts, concern and relief washing over her. Riker stayed with her in sickbay until Crusher threw him out, since she wanted Deanna to stay

overnight.

Back in his quarters in the house of Sithar, Kelro reviewed what he had accomplished during the day's negotiations. True, they hadn't travelled much towards peace, but he had discovered that his opposite wanted peace as badly as Kelro wanted it. However, the second delegate despised Kelro and didn't mind showing it.

The Algonian stretched out in the large bath until his toes touched the other end of the tub, the warm water lapping at the sides. Mendik was in the other room preparing the evening meal and clothing they would wear for the next day's meeting.

Mendik entered the bathing area with a worried expression on his features. "Master, I have no Saurian brandy."

"Ask Sithar," he muttered impatiently, wanting to be alone to relax.

"I have, he has none. Shall I go down to Penast?" Mendik tried to say this in an offhand manner, and almost succeeded.

Kelro looked at him, trying to keep the suspicion out of his eyes and voice. "Very well." For the first time Kelro had sense enough to have suspicions about his servant.

Mendik left the room and travelled to the centre of town, without an escort.

In the half light of the back room, two figures huddled together. They didn't like each other's company but both felt it was necessary.

"Tomorrow, then?" said a voice with a sibilant hiss.

"Yes, but I do not think it will stop the negotiations," replied Mendik.

"Then we must do something which will."

"Don't you think I know that, you fool? If we attempt something and it fails it will be the end for all of us."

The half-light of the brothel room started to irritate them almost as much as they irritated each other. They tried to calm themselves, since shouting at each other was non-productive.

"We must do something simple but effective," muttered Mendik.

"What do you mean?" asked the Delgarian.

"The Federation vessel is still in orbit and the Captain would be obliged to take Kelro's place if anything happened to him."

"So?" Legok answered impatiently.

"If we disable Kelro in a natural way, an illness of some sort, then attack, killing Federation personnel as well as Algonians and Delgarians will make the situation much worse."

The Delgarian looked at his companion with a look of distaste on his reptilian face. "That would be acceptable - but when?"

Mendik looked down thoughtfully at the floor. "I must return soon otherwise *he* might suspect something. However we need something to stop him from carrying on the negotiations."

Both of them tried to think of a way

to take Kelro out of the picture without incurring too much suspicion. "I know exactly what to do!" said Mendik in an excited voice.

They parted company a few minutes later.

On his way back to the house of Sithar, Mendik stopped by a back street chemist.

As Worf strode out of the ready room, he walked to where the android was seated.

"The Captain said you had information regarding Michael Johnson," the Klingon growled. He towered over the pale android but knew that in a fight Data was more than a fair match for him.

"Yes," Data answered.

Worf's patience was virtually nonexistent to begin with and the last thing he needed was the android being obtuse. "I need it."

His raised voice brought a few curious glances from the other members of the bridge crew, but since it was the Klingon's, they regarded it as nothing out of the ordinary.

Rising from the command chair, Data walked to science station one and called up the engineering sensor log on the dilithium reaction chamber. A detailed version of the interior was displayed across the black screen.

"There were remarkable occurrences on both occasions the Johnson entity appeared. The stream of antimatter momentarily shifted polarity through the crystal chamber. Matter became antimatter and vice versa.

Fortunately this happened only within the chamber, otherwise the ship would be floating debris."

Worf looked at Data curiously since that was a distinctly Human thing to say. Obviously he must have copied it from somewhere. Dismissing the thought, Worf concentrated on the sensor information which was scrolling down one side of the screen, though none of it making much sense to the Klingon. "So what are you saying?"

"I am not sure. But it may be possible to capture him by employing a negative/positive charged ionic forcefield, each layer protecting the other if he alters the polarity. However, since he has the capacity to absorb energy directly from the chamber, the Enterprise does not possess the required energy output to construct such a field. He could simply drain it without having invert the polarity. It may be possible to construct a device to drain his energy. It is a most perplexing problem."

The Lieutenant by the tactical station interrupted Data's briefing. "Lieutenant, one of the warships is changing orbit."

Worf turned his back on Data and relieved the young Lieutenant. Quickly reviewing the situation, he called the Captain to the bridge. Data was already easing himself into the ops position as Picard and Riker left the privacy of the ready room, both pulling down the fronts of their crimson uniforms to straighten out the wrinkles.

"What's the problem, Lieutenant?" asked Picard.

"Sir, one of the warships has taken up a higher orbit, which puts the Enterprise at a greater tactical disadvantage."

"Very well, Mr Worf, keep a close eye on them. Match any moves they make but try not to be too obvious." Picard sighed quietly to himself, since asking the Klingon not to be obvious was one of the more futile things he had ever said.

The room was quiet and dark; the stars and twin violet moons couldn't illuminate this shuttered place. In the middle of the room, surrounded by thick white carpeting, lay a large double bed, its occupant quietly groaning in his fitful sleep. Underneath the thick, soft material, clutching his stomach in a foetal position, Kelro gasped in pain and his shriek rang out through the corridors of the palace. After a few moments, light and muffled discussions drifted beneath the heavy wooden doors. Someone started banging on the door with their fists but Kelro was oblivious of it, since he had lost consciousness.

Clutching the communicator in his pudgy hands, Mendik opened a channel to the Enterprise.

"Mendik to Enterprise! Please, Enterprise, do you hear me?" His voice had a tinge of fear, something which Mendik had been practising for several hours

"Enterprise here, what's the problem?" asked Riker in a confident tone.

"It is Kelro. There is something wrong with him. I think he's ill."

"Hold on, we'll beam him up to sickbay."

Muffled orders were given and

Mendik felt the tingle of the transporter as his molecules were taken apart. The private sleeping chamber of the Ambassador was replaced by the soft blue of sickbay, a flurry of activity following as Kelro was gently lifted onto the bio-bed. Beverly Crusher and her emergency medical team were dealing with the situation.

"Heart rate down, blood glucose 8% higher than norm. I want him in stasis, NOW!" commanded the Chief Medical Officer. She brushed hair away from her eyes as she inspected the inert body of Kelro with a tricorder, its quiet beep beep the only sound apart from the laboured breathing of the Algonian. As the stasis field was lowered over the bio-bed, Kelro was stable enough for Beverly to obtain some information. She walked over to where Mendik was, quickly asking questions.

"Did he drink or eat anything unusual?"

"Yes, many things."

Walking back the bio-bed, she continued to take readings. "Alcohol - did he drink any?"

"Of course," replied Mendik in a bemused tone.

"Dammit! All right, get ready for a full blood purge."

Mendik tried to see what was happening as Beverly's team swarmed around the Ambassador. He rested against the wall, watching Starfleet do all the work. *It's turning out better than I hoped,* he thought.

A young nurse gulped and pointed to the display screen over the bed. "Vital signs dropping."

"What? I want him on full life support, *now*, dammit!" The voices took on an urgent tone which Mendik didn't like.

"Maximum life support engaged."

One of the blue uniformed figures announced something which chilled the servant's blood. "Flat line, no brain wave activity."

"Lock in the neural stimulator." A machine was wheeled up to the bio-bed and placed it around Kelro's pale and sweaty head.

"Lock complete." The nurse glanced up at the continuing fall of readings. "Synaptic network breaking down."

"Inject neurolite," commanded Beverly. A Vulcan picked up a hypo and placed it against Kelro's neck; a hissing sound came from it as she efficiently injected the immobile ambassador.

"Neurons beginning to depolarise."

"Let's go for direct reticular stimulation."

"Direct?" questioned the nurse.

"Do it!" instructed Beverly. Kelro's body jerked as the electrical current surged through his brain in a vain attempt to bring him back from death.

"Increase to fifty microvolts." The med team stood back from the body as again the body jerked once more. "Increase to 75 microvolts!" Each time a charge was administered the nurse looked over to Crusher. "Again." No movement. "Again." No movement.

While looking down at the Algonian, Crusher felt tears well up in her eyes. Always when losing a patient

she felt like crying, but always resisted. But the tears were only partly for Kelro; they were mostly for a friend who had died a long time ago after the same treatment. Tasha Yar had been in her care and she had failed to save *her* life, just as she had now failed to save Kelro's. Slowly she laid her tricorder on the lab bench and walked to her office.

In the corner Mendik simply stared at the corpse of the Ambassador, stunned into silence.

"Ambassador Chazdak, please answer the summons."

Chazdak glanced over to the view screen and voice activated it. "Chazdak here. What is it, Captain?" The Delgarian's mood was surly due to a remark Legok had made during the third day's negotiation, something about a Darian blowfish and a certain Algonian high priestess. Chazdak's mood lightened slightly as he remembered Kelro's response, and would have laughed if his bone structure had allowed it. Acting as though it was a compliment was bad enough, to Legok's thinking, but to ask how the Second Delegate could have survived without a father was a masterly stroke which put the younger Delgarian in his place. If times were different, Chazdak would have welcomed the proud Algonian as a friend, and hoped that he would be able to do just that after the talks were completed, and peace established.

"It is the Algonian delegate. He is dead." The Captain's tone was smug but his expression remained neutral.

Chazdak digested this and came to a swift decision. "Very well. Establish communications with the Federation vessel." Shocked speechless, the Captain

didn't have time to interrupt before Chazdak continued. "*Now*, if you please; also a secured channel." The screen went blank as the elderly Delgarian switched off the viewer. Slowly walking over to a large chest while waiting for the communications link, he extracted from the jumbled mess in it a small hand-held device with a long, thin antenna.

"Communications established. Channel is secure, Ambassador," announced the First Officer. Chazdak aimed the device at the screen. It made some unhealthy sounds and its minute display screen lit up as symbols flashed across it.

"Captain Raitha, I would appreciate it if the channel was secure between myself and the Enterprise, not between myself, the Enterprise and you."

An expletive barked over the communications system, and once again the machine bleeped. Instantly Picard's features filled the screen.

Although the Ambassador was tolerant, he still found the Humans' appearance repugnant. In the background, Will Riker was standing behind his Captain. He had to fight down his revulsion, since hair was something the average Delgarian found sickening, and that Human was covered in it. Fortunately Picard had only a few tufts here and there.

"First Delegate Chazdak, I am honoured to speak to you," said Picard in his best diplomatic voice.

"Forget the niceties, Human, *is* Kelro dead?" The Delgarian was in no mood for being diplomatic and the grimace on Picard's face confirmed his question before the Human had even answered.

"Yes."

For a moment there was silence since both of them knew it could mean the end of the peace conference. The reptilian face turned away from the screen for a few seconds as he noticed the golden Alizar which Kelro had presented to him when they exchanged gifts as a sign of peace.

Could I desert a friend and abandon his dream of peace? thought Chazdak as he looked back towards Picard. "I will expect you at noon, Picard."

"I understand, Ambassador."

"But I thought you said he died from alcohol poisoning, an extreme allergic reaction to the Saurian brandy." The Captain looked perplexed as Beverly reported her new findings.

"I know, but I found it strange that he should die because of a few glasses of alcohol."

"A few glasses?" questioned Picard thoughtfully, "I thought Mendik said he drank more than four bottles that evening alone?"

"He couldn't have, Jean-Luc, not unless there was something wrong with it. Kelro didn't die because he drank too much. The Saurian brandy on board is weak compared to the alcohol on his home planet - they say it's even stronger than Romulan Ale. Besides, Mendik is definitely lying about one thing; Kelro did not drink four bottles - a few glasses at most."

"How do you know that?" enquired the Captain, feeling his headache return.

"Saurian brandy has a unique

dichromatic bonding complex in its formula, which stays in the body for more than forty hours. I found enough to suggest only a few glasses - five, six at most, certainly not the amount Mendik was saying."

Picard looked at her for a few moments and dragged his wandering mind back the situation. The last thing he wanted to do was embarrass himself by staring at her. "So how did he die, Doctor?"

Beverly let out a sigh. "I'm not sure - but I can tell you this, if you go down there tomorrow, they'll try to kill you as well." The pleading in her voice was evident because the last thing she could bear was to lose Jean-Luc Picard. They had a purely professional relationship which neither of them wanted to compromise, but he had been Jack Crusher's closest friend.

"I'm afraid, Doctor, I have no choice."

"I want sensor sweeps and guards posted at twenty metre intervals around the conference chamber. If there are any problems, Chief O'Brien will initiate a mass beam out. However, he will be concentrating on the Captain. Pay particular attention to the Captain at all times." Worf glanced at each of his officers seated around the table. True, it was difficult for the Klingon to trust anyone, but he had his distrust firmly under control. "Are there any questions?" he rumbled.

"Sir, what about phasers? After all, we are beaming down to a peace conference."

"Only type one personal phasers, to be set on stun at all times unless

otherwise instructed. I do not foresee any problems - but let us not forget Ambassador Kelro died in very mysterious circumstances and perhaps his murderers will attack more openly the second time." He glanced around for any more questions, but there were none.

"Prepare for primary Security beamdown in twenty minutes. I'll go down thirty minutes before the Captain is due to arrive, to make sure everything is satisfactory." He eyed each one in turn to make sure he was understood. They all did, since they all knew they could die on the planet, but if they failed the Klingon he could do much worse to them.

"Dismissed."

Worf sat there as his team filed out. He relaxed in the soft padded chair for a few moments and then sat straight, wishing that everything wasn't so comfortable. He picked up his padd and exited the room, making his way back to his quarters. Since he was now off duty and purely a Klingon for a few hours, he was going to enjoy himself on the holodeck - after picking up a few choice weapons.

Just as he was about to enter his quarters he was stopped by Louise Varis. Since the episode in her quarters with the Counselor, she had been relieved of duty. Her appearance was immaculate although she looked slightly pale.

"Lt Worf, could I have a moment?"

Worf looked impatiently at his door but decided it was the least he could do. He walked in and unbuckled his sash, laying it on the small table next to his sleeping shelf. Louise followed behind, glancing around in the dim reddish light. She noticed various weapons draped on the walls. The harsh light made the room seem oppressive.

"What is it you want, Louise?" She was brought back from her quiet thoughts by Worf's inquisitive voice, and was mildly surprised that he had used her first name.

"I want to be part of the Security contingent when you beam down to the surface." She stood there, staring at the Klingon, already knowing what the answer would be.

"Why?"

She seemed unprepared for this question since she was expecting a direct *no*. There wasn't any answer she could put into words. "I must."

"That is no reason," answered Worf.

"I know, but it's the only one I've got."

"You know my answer. You are not cleared for duty."

"Worf, I must go down, he's expecting me," pleaded Louise.

"How do you know that?"

"I just do," she answered.

"My answer is still no," grated the Klingon from between clenched teeth. "I am sorry, but that is the way of things."

Louise bowed her head and almost ran out of Worf's quarters, tears stinging her eyes. Worf wanted to comfort her, to know why it was so important for her to reach the conference, but the only thing he could do was notify Counselor Troi and hope that she could help.

"We have the beam-down coordinates sir," announced Chief O'Brien

as he ran a hand through his mop of curly hair. Worf had already beamed down with the Security teams although Picard had cut the number Worf had requested by more than half. Obviously Worf was taking no chances with the Captain's safety, but Picard felt the Klingon was overdoing things slightly.

"At your convenience, Mr O'Brien."

Miles O'Brien smiled slightly; that was the Captain's way of telling him to hurry up. He initiated the transporter sequence with a sweep of his hand, and Picard dissolved in a curtain of light.

"What are you waiting for? Quickly, you fools!"

Mendik hurried the timid servants, who had lost their resolve since the death of Kelro. All except for Dimak. Mendik wondered about the lanky youth, since he had never seemed particularly militant, but had now progressed to the point of almost refusing Mendik's orders.

This made Mendik think about his loyalty, and where it lay. But he then dismissed the thought - *After all, who cares about how the servants act? thought Mendik, just as long as they carry out their tasks.* He had planned this carefully, and now the plan was being put into operation. He glanced down the corridor as the remaining servants slowly shuffled towards the conference chamber. He saw Dimak staring at him with undisguised contempt and managed to return the stare, even though it sent a shiver through him.

Glancing down at his wrist chronometer, he decided it was time for phase one. As the servants disappeared around the corner, heading towards Picard and the Delgarians, Mendik made

his way to the centre of the huge circular building, towards the beating heart which gave out its energy to the security systems.

The power complex was his target. If he was going to go out, he might as well go out with a bang. After all, they would soon find out what really happened to Kelro. Mendik still found it difficult to believe that his master was dead, even though he had witnessed it with his own eyes. The dose of savana had been small; small enough to make Kelro feel unwell, but obviously it had done much more than that.

He heard guards marching down the corridor and he waited until they were out of sight before re-emerging from behind a set of drapes. His informant had told him there were only two guards protecting the energy core but this was an honour guard, not real professionals.

His hand strayed to where the phaser was hidden and he silently thanked his Ferengi contacts.

"Lieutenant, what can I do for you?" Beverly said as she looked up in surprise.

"I've got a slight headache, I was wondering if you could give me something for it."

Beverly smiled and glanced around for her tricorder. She excused herself as she went to her office in search of it, and sure enough, there it was sitting on her desk. Picking it up, she returned to find that Louise did have a slight headache and she relieved the mild pain. After giving Louise a hypo shot, she told the young woman to get some rest.

"I will," promised Louise. As she

went back to her duties, Beverly Crusher didn't notice a hypospray was missing from the bench top.

"Picard, I greet you."

"And I greet you, Ambassador Chazdak." Picard looked over to Worf and hoped the Lieutenant could take his advice about not being too open about his feelings for the Delgarians. A Sylak shuffled past the Klingon and as he stared, he grimaced in distaste. The robed figure gently placed a long rectangular box on the black table, in front of the Delgarian ambassador.

"I present you, Captain, with a gift of peace." Chazdak opened the case, bringing out a long curved blade. Worf started towards the table but Picard waved him back into place. Chazdak seemed amused by the Klingon's response.

"He seems quite distrusting, Captain."

Picard tried to think of a polite way of saying Worf would rather disembowel every Delgarian in the conference chamber than stay there, and that it was his Human training and upbringing which was preventing him.

"It is his way. However, he is a very competent officer." Picard turned the blade over in his hands and marvelled as a shaft of sunlight struck it, sending out a myriad of sparkling colours. It was unlike anything Picard had ever seen before.

"I am sorry that I cannot bring you anything of more substance but the peace offering I brought was given to Kelro; the sword is from my own family."

"Then I cannot accept it when it is obviously something you treasure."

Chazdak slowly shook his scaly head from side to side. "No, Captain, it is a gift, please accept it as such."

"Thank you, Ambassador," answered Picard in an appreciative tone, "and may I offer you something which is equally precious to me." The young Ensign next to him handed down a leather bound volume. "I know of the Delgarians' fondness for poetry. Here is my own copy of a handcrafted book, more than two centuries old. The complete works of one of our Earth writers, William Shakespeare." Picard handed over the volume with a slight feeling of loss as the Delgarian turned it over in his scaly hands, admiring the craftsmanship, just as Picard had done when examining the dagger.

"A great gift, thank you. I am glad you are here. Captain, please tell me, how did Kelro die?"

"As yet we are not certain, but first indications say it was natural causes."

Chazdak looked sceptical but didn't press further.

Mendik edged towards the end of the corridor, trying to make as little sound as possible on the bare metal floor. There were no ornaments or plush floor coverings, no things of great beauty or value since only authorised personnel were allowed here, but at the moment, Mendik was the exception. He heard the guards complaining about the food served in the mess hall, grumbling about superior officers and the lack of things to do. If they had managed to stop Mendik from vaporising them and completely destroying any trace of them, no doubt

they would have complained about things being too violent.

While looking at the access panel, he extracted a small padd from beneath his plain robes. He peered at it, comparing it with the screen on the door. The large metal doors exuded a feeling of strength and solidity, the bare gun-metal-grey surface showed none of the elegance of the other rooms; it looked impenetrable - and was, if you didn't have the proper authorisation code.

Mendik tapped out a long sequence of numbers and there was a painful pause as he expected alarms to scream and guards rush out from all directions, blocking off any possible escape. He felt his heart beating against his ribcage as finally the bars inside the chunk of metal slid out, the door slowly opening to allow him entry.

As he entered, Mendik could feel the vibrations from the reactor as it poured out its energy. He quickly located a terminal and started his final plan. After some time he wiped his forehead and sighed, pausing only to initiate the programme sequence.

It started to count down.

Thirty minutes was not a long time, but it was all he had. It was all anyone had.

"Picard to Enterprise."

"Riker here. What's the problem?" His voice showed sudden concern.

"No problem, Number One, however there is a short recess and I would appreciate it if you could send down some Earl Grey. They don't have any palatable tea here." Picard could

imagine Riker's bearded features smiling even though he couldn't see the Commander, and Picard smiled at the thought.

"I'll send some down right away sir. Is that one lump or two?" His First Officer found it rather amusing, since Earl Gray was one of the few vices he did have, and was laughing at his expense, but Picard didn't mind Riker's irreverent humour.

"The usual, of course." He paused, wanting revenge on Riker. "By the way, Counselor Troi told me a while ago about an incident at Starbase 74, where a young Lieutenant was in sickbay for four days after becoming entangled with an Orion dancer." Silence was the only thing to be heard from Picard's communicator. Riker squirmed in the command chair.

"After all, Number One, you did say you were in sickbay, but I thought you were injured during a game of paresse squares."

There was muffled laughter from the bridge crew since Riker was a well-known ladies' man. Obviously the notorious female Orion had been more than the young Riker could handle.

"You win, sir, I'll send down a flask."

"That would be appreciated, Commander." Picard waited and glanced around the room with distaste. It was too lavish for his taste, especially the drapes woven in gold, the glass sculptures which adorned the room on marble plinths and various exotic blooms. He heard the transporter whine and looked down. A silver flask had materialised beside his right foot. Obviously O'Brien had been diligent with the transporter lock on his com-badge. Picking up the container, Picard unscrewed the top, poured a liberal cup for himself and then sat back

and relaxed. He laughed gently as he let his mind wander, remembering a lewd joke which Riker had once told. Picard had found it amazingly funny, which was strange since he usually had good taste. There was a quiet tapping on the door and Picard placed his cup on the table, stood up and straightened his uniform.

"Come."

The Sylak messenger shuffled in, its long white robes dragging on the smooth marble-like floor.

"The Delgarian delegation has returned to the conference chamber."

"Thank you," replied Picard as he put down his cup. He left the room with a confident smile on his face and felt ready to cope with what lay ahead.

Dimak looked cautiously over his shoulder to where Worf's Security people were standing and hoped they didn't notice that he and the other servants were slowly taking up the positions which Mendik said were the most suitable. He wondered what Mendik was up to, since the ex-servant didn't explain his orders. He ran a long hand over his head, the stubble rasping quietly. He idly caressed the phaser under his robe and pledged that he would avenge Kelro's murder.

"Proceed to perimeter, we have a sensor disturbance in grid A28-138Y. It's probably those damn semlas after food again, but it pays to be sure."

The Human hunched over the Security station console didn't hear Mendik enter, and continued to order the guards around. He also didn't hear Mendik creep up behind him to slide a

dagger into his back. The Security Chief gasped silently and sank to the floor.

Mendik looked around quickly and closed the antique wooden doors. He thanked the corrupt ex-Security guard who was now enjoying a shallow grave. The security codes and general information had been sufficient to allow him access to all areas. He located the emergency shields for the complex and activated them, making sure that no-one could enter or leave.

"Hello, Chief, are you busy?"

Miles O'Brien looked towards Louise and smiled that infectious smile which Louise reciprocated.

"No, not really, I'm just keeping a lock on the com-badges," replied O'Brien.

"Well, I have a problem, you see it's the..." She pointed towards the part of the console which monitored the primary energizing coils. Turning his head to follow Louise's hand, O'Brien didn't notice the hypo-spray as it was placed against his neck. He lost consciousness, and she gently laid him against the wall. Quickly programming the computer for an eight second delay on beaming, she entered sub-commands into the mainframe which cancelled bridge control. She stepped onto the pad and waited for transport.

Data looked down as the console warned of an unauthorised transport. "Commander, transporter room three is in operation."

"Re-route to another transporter," urged Riker.

Data's hand entered the commands

but nothing happened. "The computer will not accept commands. It is too late, Commander."

Riker narrowed his eyes and stood behind Data, his eyes looking down at the ops console. "Who was it, Data?"

"Internal scan of communicator signal suggests it was Lt Louise Varis."

Riker closed his eyes for a moment. "Try to get her back, Data." As he was about to order a hailing frequency to warn the complex, Data interrupted his train of thought.

"Sir, a shield has been placed over the conference area. Transport to the complex is now impossible"

The sounds of discharging phasers could be heard in the corridors, as security systems were used to eliminate the true protectors of the building. Mendik had used the access codes he'd bought and knew it would be easier if the automated systems were doing the job. Everyone in the chamber looked around, startled by the noise, as Worf instructed some of his men to stay behind and guard the Captain while he and the rest of his team went to investigate the sounds of battle. Picard suddenly realised that the Algonian servants were in the room and holding phasers, although some of them were using the weapons inexpertly. The Delgarian and Enterprise guards realised too late what was happening, as lances of ruby fire struck down almost all the guards. Only a few had sense enough to drop their weapons.

"What is the meaning of this?" blustered Legok, as he stood at the side of Chazdak. Mendik's phaser was now pointing towards him and the look on his face sent a shiver down the Delgarian's

spine.

"I'm taking over, you inane lizard. Did you really think you could fool me that easily? All along I knew who you were, Mr Security Agent!" The Algonian pressed the trigger and a beam of light threw the Delgarian across the table. He landed on the other side of the table with a thud; obviously the phaser was set on stun. *For the moment, at least,* thought Picard.

Footsteps thundered down the corridor as Worf and the remains of his Security team returned. The others were lying dead in the corridors after encountering the automated systems. As the Klingon entered the chamber, Picard shouted a warning.

Worf dived and rolled, stunning two servants before being stunned himself. Lying face down on the cold marble surface, Worf groaned softly, since he was stronger than the average alien. Mendik walked over to Picard and hit him savagely, knocking him out of his chair. He stood over him as the Captain wiped the blood from his lips.

"You won't get away with this, Mendik," hissed Chazdak.

"You don't know what I'm doing here, lizard." The cold inhuman smile had returned; he raised his phaser, increasing the setting to kill, then slowly lowered it again, making sure that everyone understood.

"It's not worth it. In another twenty minutes it'll all be the same. One way or another." The servants glanced at each other nervously, trying to make sense of what Mendik was saying. Meanwhile, Dimak was slowly edging into a better defensive position.

"Commander, if we attempt to penetrate the complex using phasers, the orbital defence satellites will perceive us as a threat and seek a way to eliminate us. Also the Delgarian warships would seek to match any moves we made. I suggest we wait." The android sat impassively at ops, explaining the situation to Riker.

"Wait for what, Data? We don't even know if the Captain's dead or alive." Riker slowly lowered his head in thought.

"Are the transporters or communicators available?"

"No, sir, they are dysfunctional due to the shielding of the complex. However, it may be possible to penetrate the complex using a physical ground link."

"Try it, Data. We need to know what's going on down there." The young Lieutenant at the tactical station looked down at her panel as it beeped urgently.

"Commander, an incoming transmission from the warship Ced'rath."

Riker sighed and wished the Captain was here to deal with it. "On screen."

The lizard-like features were barely visible in the inky blackness, and the only reason Riker could see him at all was due to the image-enhancing system of the computer.

"What have you done, Human?" demanded Captain Raitha impatiently.

"I take it you're referring to the conference chambers?"

"Don't play the fool, ape."

Riker could feel his anger rising and he tried to stop himself saying the wrong

things. "We don't know, it activated without warning."

"We detected a molecular transport beam just before the shield was activated."

"That's correct." Riker stood there, hands clasped behind back, striking the best pose he could.

"Well?"

Riker decided that honesty was the best policy - besides, he didn't have any other ideas on the matter. "It was an unauthorised beamdown; one of my officers did so of her own accord. If you monitored her transport, you must have detected our attempts to bring her back."

The stern look and silence offered testimony that he did know. The viewer suddenly returned to the view of the planet, as the Captain of the warship severed the link.

"He must really do well at parties," muttered Riker. His mood was dismal, and getting worse by the minute. He stroked his beard with a long finger, and quietly walked up to the science station where Data was trying to penetrate the complex. "Any luck, Data?"

"Not yet, Commander; however, I am making some progress with an outside communications link." His golden eyes absorbed all the information as it quickly scrolled down the screen, trying out new avenues of entry.

Lt Rodgers, who was occupying Worf's position at tactical, suddenly called the Commander to the tactical station.

"What is it?" replied Riker.

"The Delgarrians, sir. They've raised their shields, but until they alter their

orbit, they're no danger to us." The console bleeped again and the lieutenant swallowed hard. "Sir, they're changing orbit."

"Great. Just great."

In the power centre, the program which Mendik had entered was slowly completing its task. Unlike the bomb which he'd originally hoped to use, the program he'd inserted into the computer slowly released the protective layers which shielded the core, making sure that no-one could stop the slow release of raw energy. The consoles which lined the room looked like chocolate left under a hot sun, and shafts of blinding white light thrust out from the reactor. Mendik would have released the core while he was in the control room - however there were safety controls which prevented a simple release of the reactor core and Mendik wasn't skilled enough to rewrite that program.

Slowly but surely it led to a core breach which would vaporise everything within a twenty mile radius, and leave enough radiation to make the area uninhabitable for the next few millennia.

Thirteen minutes and twenty seconds is not a long time to make peace with whatever God you believe in, but it was all they had.

Louise Varis appeared in a corridor far from the dome of the main conference chamber. She cautiously looked around to see if her unauthorised appearance was noticed. There was no-one there - at least, no-one alive. Bodies littered the floor and phaser wounds clashed with the stark whiteness of their robes. Evidently this group of Sylaks had wandered into an active security system. She located the

nozzle of the weapon and disarmed it, sending a shower of sparks into the corridor. Putting away her phaser and taking out her tricorder, she quickly scanned for other security obstacles and found many. While scanning she also found a massive build-up of energy, which seemed to be located at the power complex. There was no proportional value to the increase, which meant an overload and breach was inevitable.

She made her way to where Picard and the others were, knowing what would happen there, and feeling no fear at the prospect.

"What do you hope to accomplish?" Picard's lip still throbbed from the blow and he touched it gingerly as he spoke.

The Algonian sighed and turned slowly to face the Captain, his phaser held loosely in one hand. "Why would I want anything, Picard? After all, you have nothing I want." He was lost in past memories for a few moments before returning to the present. "All gone," he said in a quiet voice. "They killed them. Don't you understand, Picard, no matter how long it takes, we will win. Every Delgarian will be slaughtered and their worlds pillaged. Every piece of filth will be obliterated from this galaxy!" He screamed this out and to make his point he aimed his phaser and fired. The Delgarian guard screamed in agony as the beam sliced into him and the acrid smell of burned flesh filled the chamber. From where Picard sat he could see the beam pierce the body. Nausea swept over him and he felt ill at such wanton violence.

"Who's next? You, or maybe you." He swung around, pointing his phaser indiscriminately at different people while the Algonian servants looked shocked by Mendik's actions. He had described a very different scenario.

"So, Mendik, I think it's safe to say

you're not with the Riahlor."

He slowly turned to face the Captain, his phaser aimed directly at Picard's chest. "The Riahlor!" he exclaimed, "It was a great day when I finally exterminated those peace-loving fools. When they first started interfering with my plans, I had to slaughter every one of them."

Picard noticed that a young lanky Algonian was slowly raising his phaser while Mendik was busy talking.

"I'm afraid, Captain, you've outstayed your welcome. Goodbye, Captain Picard, it was nice having you here. Sweet dreams from the leader of the Nosug." The Algonian's thumb strayed to the trigger, while a cold smile crept across his face.

Edging her way down the corridor, Louise knew she wasn't far from the main conference chamber. Ducking from reflex when she heard the whine of a phaser, she knew it was almost time. Putting away her phaser and tricorder, she knew that there were no more dangers until she reached the chamber itself. She sighed softly to herself and wished her dreams had more reality.

The ops panel beeped frantically as it detected the build-up in the power centre. Data looked down at it, assessing the situation while simultaneously correlating information on how to establish contact with the Captain.

"Commander, we may have a problem."

Riker pushed himself out of the command chair and strode to ops, resting an arm on the high back of the chair,

looking over Data's shoulder at the readings. "What the hell?"

"I believe the Captain is in danger," commented Data.

"Oh, you don't say," Riker muttered sarcastically. Data was silent and waited for the Commander to carry on.

"How long?" Riker asked in a very weary voice.

"Taking into account the type of reactor and unreliable sensor readings due to the shielding, twelve minutes."

Riker slowly eased himself into the command chair and sighed. A look of guilt flashed across his face as he accused himself of not taking enough precautions with the Captain's safety. Beside him, Troi was silent, understanding Riker's need to be alone.

"Twelve minutes for a miracle, Data. I just hope we haven't used up all our luck."

Footsteps echoed silently down the corridor as a lone figure made its way to the power centre. As he approached it, he became aware of the metal doors which had warped and buckled under the onslaught of the energy release. The security shutters were open and a blazing light struck out of the chamber into the corridor. After looking both ways down the corridor, he entered.

The Enterprise shuddered as the warship fired another salvo. Lt Rodgers informed Riker that the other two ships were also joining the fray. Resembling huge disks, the Delgarian warships unleashed shafts of incandescent light, attempting to penetrate the Enterprise's

shields. Red lights flashed all over the ship, while mothers hugged their children and La Forge did his best to increase shield strength.

"That's all I can give you, Commander."

The ship shuddered once more under the barrage and everyone was jostled by the force of the onslaught.

"Do we run or fight?" asked the Ensign at the conn.

"Neither," replied Riker and prayed under his breath for that miracle to happen.

Outside the chamber, Louise crouched behind a large sculpture. She could see Picard, Worf and the Delgarians. Mendik was aiming his phaser at the Captain, saying something, but he was too far away for Louise to hear. She felt it was time to act, just as Mendik was about to fire.

"NO!"

The scream echoed across the hall. Mendik fired, but not at the Captain. The beam threw her violently against the wall and she lay there as blood trickled from her chest wound.

"Mendik," whispered the lanky Algonian youth. "Enough of this."

Mendik slowly turned to face the youth, noticing for the first time that a phaser was pointing directly at him. "Put that down, you fool," he hissed.

"Riahlor," whispered Dimak.

"What?" Mendik looked a lot less

sure of himself and a questioning look filled his face.

"I said Riahlor. It took a lot of time and effort to arrange this conference, and I will not see it destroyed by a madman bent on revenge."

"So you're the great leader," laughed Mendik. Dimak nodded slowly, watching every move the Nosug leader made.

"Well then, I'm killing two birds with one stone."

As Mendik said this he raised his phaser, but Dimak fired first, striking the madman in the chest. As the lifeless body of Mendik fell to the floor with a sodden thump, Picard rushed over to Louise, carefully feeling for a pulse. It was very faint, but she was alive. A servant rushed over to help Picard while the remaining Algonian servants milled about aimlessly, some of them weeping openly, horrified that they had been following the leader of the revolt which had cost so many innocent lives.

"Picard to Enterprise." His com-badge held no rescuer's voice since the shield was still in place. He plucked the tricorder from Louise's belt and activated it. The machine urgently informed him of the imminent explosion. He sighed and muttered to himself in French.

"What is it?" asked Dimak as he saw Picard's worried expression. Slowly he realised why, when he saw the tricorder readings. It became clear why Mendik hadn't issued any threats or ultimatums, why he just waited. Picard cradled Louise in his arms as she coughed feebly, whispering something. Picard leaned closer to hear her final agonising gasps.

"Michael, he... is..." She slumped and closed her eyes. *At least she's at peace,* thought Picard as he started to wonder

just how the hell he was going to get out of this one.

Swirls of pulsating energy floated around the room, as the final protective layers were seconds from complete failure. Michael walked up to the central column, its outer structure now bare metal. He placed his left hand on the cold surface, jerking in pain as his hand made contact. He felt the power course through his veins and sinews.

Four seconds.

Behind him, two round objects were riding the energy waves, dancing in the whirlpool of energy.

Three seconds.

He placed his other hand on the structure and waited.

Two seconds.

He wondered what it would have been like, living a normal life on Earth with a family, to be around people who loved and respected him.

One second.

Zero.

The core exploded with an unquenchable fury as it released its pent up energy, and in that instant, Michael Johnson ceased to exist.

The building shuddered, jerking Picard from his thoughts of escape. He fell backwards, the large crystal dome overhead splintering as the anti-grav generators failed. Destroyed by its own weight, huge jagged pieces of its glass plummeted into the chamber. Screams echoed from those unlucky enough to be

caught beneath them. Statues fell from their plinths and out of the corner of his eye Picard saw Dimak launch himself at Legok, pushing him away as a knife-edged shard of crystal threatened to take the Delgarian's life. As it hit the floor, it threw up a myriad of minute glass daggers, ripping at the flesh. Picard knew he was going to die.

The ship was rocked by another phaser shot, almost yanking Riker out of the command chair. His temper frayed, he felt it was time to act.

"Aim phasers. Fire!"

The viewscreen showed the attacking vessels in formation, a beam of orange fire licking at the Delgarians' shields.

"Commander, the reactor core has det..." Data was silenced by a massive burst of energy which was funnelled up from the explosion site. Before the viewer lost power, Riker noticed the Delgarian ships were also struck by the same beam. Lights flickered and died, throwing the bridge into darkness. The status lights no longer flashed red. Sparks flew from panels which were overloaded and slowly the emergency lights flickered on as Riker pulled himself off the floor. He knelt, helping Ensign McKnight back to the conn.

"Data, what was it?"

There was no answer from the android. Riker looked towards the ops station; Data was silent but still in his chair, although at the expense of most of the ops panel. His grip had crushed a major portion of it.

"Data?" Riker asked quietly, slowly

placing a hand on the android's shoulder. He flinched as a small electrical shock ran up his arm. Slowly Data's golden eyes took on signs of intelligence. They blinked, then blinked again. "Data, are you all right?"

His eyes flashed back and forth, running an internal diagnostic. "I am undamaged, thank you, Commander."

"How badly are we hurt?"

"Checking," replied the android and agonising seconds ticked away before Riker heard the reply he'd hoped for.

"Commander, there is no structural damage to the Enterprise. Curious."

"What is it, Data?"

"The amount of energy which struck the ship was the precise amount required to overload our shields and disrupt main systems without causing any major damage." The remains of Data's panel bleeped pitifully, giving out a warning before it finally spluttered and died.

"Sir, the warships were hit by the same beam. They have lost engine power and are drifting into a decaying orbit."

"Can we pull them out?" asked Riker hopefully.

"One moment, sir." The bridge lights regained full intensity and the main viewer snapped on, showing the ships in orbit of Caleste IV.

"Main engines are returning to operational capacity. Tractor beam emitters are functional and there is enough available energy to operate them. However we can only extract one ship at a time."

"Do it."

He opened his eyes and coughed quietly as the dust stung his throat. Glancing around, he noticed others were also picking themselves off the floor, some looking confused while others were just looking. Pushing himself off the debris-laden floor, he let out a sigh of relief and unconsciously brushed his jacket with a few casual swipes of his hand. Someone groaned behind him; he turned, to see it was Chazdak, his legs pinned beneath the bronze statue of a warrior. Picard slowly made his way through the rubble to the Delgonian ambassador.

"I am glad to find you well, Captain."

Picard nodded and used Louise's tricorder to scan the Delgarian's wounds.

"It's not serious, but you will need medical attention." He stared at the Delgarian and a look of mutual understanding passed between them. Picard nodded and hit his com-badge; it chirped, proving the shields were down.

"Captain, is that you? Are you all right?" Riker's voice boomed in the silence that followed the explosion.

Picard nodded. "Yes, Number One. However there are others here not so fortunate."

"Yes, sir, medical away teams are beaming down now."

Picard looked at the tricorder in his hand and sighed. "Louise Varis is dead, Commander."

"Somehow I knew it," commented Riker.

"Quite. What's the situation up there, Number One?"

"The three Delgarian warships are virtually powerless but we're pulling them out of a decaying orbit."

"Good work, Will." Picard stood and cast his eyes around for his Klingon Chief of Security. Worf was organising the remaining members of the security detachment, ordering them to hold the Algonian servants, just in case they tried anything.

Picard could see one of the Delgarians kneeling over the body of a fallen Algonian. Slowly walking through the glass and rubble, Picard noticed it was Legok, the second delegate. As he crunched towards him, the Delgarian looked up, a puzzled expression on his face.

"Why?" asked Legok as he looked down at the bloodied body of Dimak.

"Because he valued life and it didn't matter who or what it was, whether it was Algonian or Delgarian."

Legok seemed unable to grasp the idea and placed a hand on the chest of Dimak, the leader of the Riahlor, and offered a silent prayer to travel before him.

Riker walked out of the corridor and saw Picard standing over a Delgarian. Relief crossed his features as he saw his Captain was unhurt. He threaded his way to him, through the massing crowd of patients and doctors.

"Good to see you, sir," commented Riker.

"It's good to be seen, Number One."

Riker took a deep breath before reporting. "Sir, at the moment we're still pulling people out of the rubble. At least thirty have died so far, but considering what happened, we were lucky."

"How?"

"The force of the explosion was funnelled into space and that saved the complex."

"But what could affect that much energy?"

Riker didn't reply and Picard noticed his First Officer was staring past him. Picard turned; kneeling beside the cold body of Louise, was Michael Johnson. His head hung low, his hand caressed her cheek, tears rolled down his face. Slowly becoming aware of the scrutiny, he stood, placing her hands onto her chest.

"Why?" questioned Picard.

"It was the way of things."

"People are dead," muttered Picard menacingly.

"I know, but it would have been worse if I hadn't interceded."

Picard couldn't dispute the fact and felt that he had judged the young man too harshly. Before anyone could say anything else, Michael's face twisted in effort. His fists clenched and his eyes squeezed closed. A sudden and powerful wind blew through the remains of the conference chamber, stinging their eyes as the wind disturbed dust and glass particles. A bright glow emanated from Johnson, blinding Picard and Riker. As the dust storm slowly subsided and calm descended, Johnson was nowhere to be seen.

Slowly Louise trembled, her eyes flickering open. Running her tongue over dry lips, she tried to speak but couldn't. She passed out from exhaustion.

"We may never know, sir," replied Riker.

Back on the Enterprise and rested from his ordeal, Picard and his First Officer were speculating about Michael Johnson, saviour and sacrifice.

"Anyway, Dr. Crusher has discovered what happened to Kelro. It was an allergic reaction to what is considered a relatively harmless drug. Under normal circumstances it would have produced severe stomach cramps when misused, but that's all. Mendik probably gave it to him in an attempt to stop the negotiations."

Picard grunted his agreement as he held his china cup of Earl Gray in both hands.

Riker continued his update to the Captain. "Louise Varis is almost fully recovered, apart from some genetic changes which Dr Crusher is working on, and the Delgarians have acceded to all the Algonians' requirements. I think Legok had a lot to do with it. No doubt he still doesn't understand why Dimak gave his life to save his, but at least it's stopped the hostilities."

"Yes," replied Picard, "but they're not out of the woods yet. There is a lot of enmity between the two peoples, but I think they'll come through it all right."

Riker smiled, something which he hadn't a lot of time to do over the past few days. "I wonder if we'll see him again?" he mused.

"What makes you think you won't, Commander?"

Picard half stood, almost spilling his tea, and Riker nearly dislocated his neck as he spun around. Michael Johnson was wearing the same clothes as when he had visited Louise in Ten Forward. He sat crosslegged on the sofa, a mischievous smile on his lips. For a horrible moment, Picard thought it was Q making another appearance.

"I had to come to explain everything. I owe you that at least."

"I appreciate that, Mr Johnson."

He stood and walked to the window. Caleste IV looked as beautiful as ever, showing no sign of what happened on the planet. While looking out at the planet, he called out into space.

"Mizzra, Kizzra, show yourselves."

From where Riker was sitting he could see out of the window. His eyes narrowed as he noticed something approach. There was no sound of perimeter alert, or of Worf activating the shields, as the twin balls of energy floated through the tritinium skin of the Enterprise. They hovered above Picard's table, both officers looking up in amazement as the balls danced and wove complex patterns in the air.

"Captain Jean-Luc Picard and Commander William Thomas Riker, may I introduce my saviours, Mizzra and Kizzra."

Picard was sure that they acknowledged the uttering of their names by throwing out little sparkles of silver light. The Captain turned in his chair, trying to keep an eye on both Michael and the balls of energy at the same time. He waited in awe for an explanation.

"You see, the transport shuttle I was on drifted, due to a malfunction in the guidance control. It took me out of the moon's orbit and threw me into Earth's orbit. Unfortunately there were automatic defense satellites which would have destroyed me if the Reorans hadn't interceded."

"Reorans?" questioned Riker.

"Yes. They're made up entirely of positive energy and the release of unexpected energy on Earth, in the form of nuclear warheads, attracted them. They discovered me and felt a certain protectiveness for me, so they decided to take me away from the danger."

Picard's gaze wandered back to the Reorans, who were still floating but appeared to be playing cat and mouse around the room, hiding under Riker's chair, the table, and actually phasing through Picard's model of the Stargazer, perched on a platform.

"How did they do that, precisely?"

"Well, you see, Commander, they travel using artificially created wormholes." Michael smiled at the looks of astonishment on the faces of both Federation officers.

"The first power drain on the Enterprise was to re-energise the ship, and help in the reconstructing of my body. Three hundred years of cryogenic sleep is all right when the damn thing works properly, but unfortunately the atmosphere seal had cracked, and I needed some repairing. Besides, it helped my body for the transition and..."

Picard interrupted, "My passing out on the bridge?"

"I'm afraid I was responsible for that. My mind needed the stimuli since it

had been a lollipop for several hundred years. The Reorans connected my mind to yours for a split second. Unfortunately the communication went both ways, and you felt a measure of what I was feeling."

Picard looked thoughtful and rubbed his lips idly with a finger. He remembered the pain and suffering, the hatred and loathing he'd felt on the bridge, now realising it was Johnson's own hatred, hatred for himself for killing those people.

Riker was feeling left out of the conversation so decided it was time he should ask some questions. "Did you know what was going to happen at the conference?"

"Yes and no. I did have dreams about it, but I didn't know what they meant. I knew something was going to happen." He snorted with laughter. "Echoes of the future aren't always exact."

"What about Louise? What is your connection to her?" enquired Riker.

Michael sighed. "She has her own life. I don't know where it takes her, the future is cloudy for her, and for me. He's out there, I can feel him."

Picard and Riker exchanged baffled looks but before they could ask any further, Michael beckoned to the Reorans. They flew towards him; as they melded into his body, the glow they remembered from the planet's surface pulsed once more.

"Although Louise and I are joined somehow, I don't know the specifics. The future is not an open book, not even to those who look upon the present as the past. Perhaps we'll meet again." With that, he raised his hand in an old fashioned salute, and vanished.

In her recently redecorated quarters, Louise sat in her chair, reclining gently. Mildly curious about the genetic changes which Dr Crusher was concerned about, she gave it no more thought. Gently holding a red rose clasped in both hands, she closed her eyes. They would meet again, but the outcome of that meeting was unknown, since her dreams didn't have an ending. They were grey and undefined, a sure sign that Michael was leaving.

Picard lounged in his command chair. Glancing towards Riker and Deanna Troi, he felt overcome with happiness for some reason. Perhaps it was the 'Johnson Effect' as some of the crew had started calling it, but whatever it was, it felt good.

"A penny for them, sir?"

Picard laughed gently at the question. "Nothing in particular. But I was thinking that if the Earth hadn't suffered the Third World War then Johnson wouldn't have gone into cryogenic sleep, Mendik would have succeeded and the Algonians and the Delgarians would be fighting to the death and possibly both species would have been destroyed."

"Fate, sir?"

"I don't think I'd go that far, Number One."

Worf snorted at the idea that something controlled their lives and Riker, Deanna and Picard grinned at the Klingon's response. Worf looked down as a subspace message bleeped onto his station.

"On main viewer."

The screen was filled with the image of Admiral Sypher Irandiss, someone Picard had known for many years. Her features were still as beautiful as when Picard had met her more than twenty years previously. Her wide eyes and black skin were complemented by her sandy white hair.

"Admiral, it's good to see you."

"It's good to see you, Captain. However your next stop at Regikina Minor has been cancelled. You are to travel directly to Esirpretne Delta at maximum warp."

"May I ask why?"

"No," was the curt reply. Her features softened slightly since she understood his predicament. "Jean-Luc, I will explain everything as soon as you reach your destination."

"It would seem I have no choice."

"I'm sorry, but all this cloak and dagger business is necessary. You'll understand as soon as I brief you." Her image flickered out and was replaced by the starfield. Picard ordered the Ensign who occupied the conn position to lay in the necessary course.

"Well sir, what do you think?"

"I'm not sure, Number One, but I think it will be interesting to find out."



