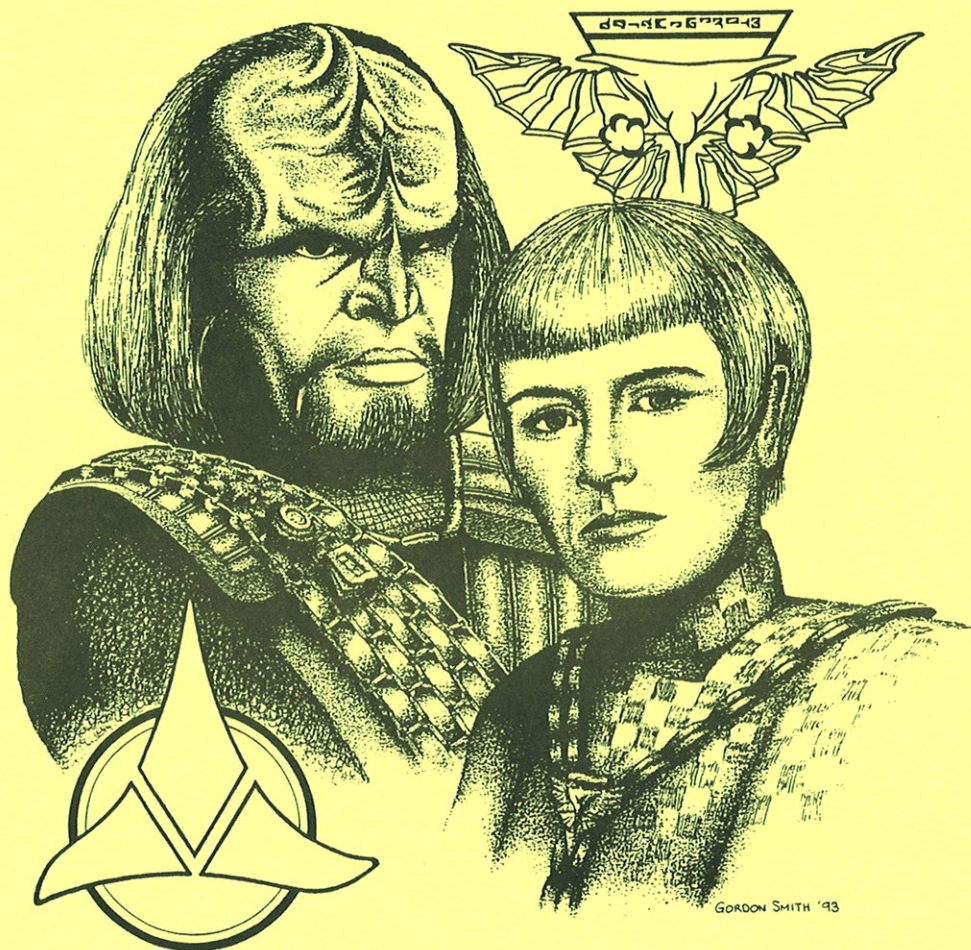


StarPress

MAKE IT SO 23



*a Star Trek
fanzine*

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ScoTPress - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini, Janet Quarton & Shona





by

Kirstie Jordan

It was bored. It needed a challenge, a diversion, something to occupy its mind and time.

Nothing came.

No-one came.

Only silence and darkness... except for the stars. Only endless waiting. Waiting for something to happen. Anything.

Dr Beverly Crusher turned from the console where she was working as the doors to sickbay hissed open.

"Hi, Mom! Geordi said one of your consoles is playing up, and he's sent me to take a look."

Dr Crusher smiled and thought, not for the first time, how like his father Wesley was.

"Here." She indicated the console next to her. "Everything's coming out garbled. Do you think you can fix it?" Even as the question left her lips, she knew it was a stupid thing to ask. If Wesley wasn't capable of fixing it, Lt La Forge wouldn't have sent him.

Something was coming.

It did not yet know what or why. A thrill of anticipation flowed through it. Something was coming.

"All finished!" Wesley stepped into his mother's office. "It was only a loose connection."

Dr Crusher looked surprised. "You mean that with all the advanced technology we possess, we still get 'loose connections'?"

"Nothing is infallible - except maybe Data! I'd better get back to the bridge. See you later!"

On the bridge of the USS Enterprise, Commander William T Riker addressed Data. "How long until we rendezvous with the Lone Star?"

"One hour, twelve minutes, sir." The android always gave precise answers; never "just over one hour" or "Approximately one hour and fifteen minutes" but always the exact time.

"Good. I'll inform the Captain. Mr Data, you have the bridge." Riker vacated the Captain's chair and headed for Picard's ready room.

It was happy.

It had a new toy to play with.

This was going to be fun...

"Come." Jean-Luc Picard did not look up from his book until the doors had

closed again. "Well, Number One, is everything under control?"

Riker knew this was a rhetorical questions. The Captain would be the first to know if something was wrong. "We should meet up with the Lone Star in about an hour, sir."

"Good. I'm sure Jason will be glad to receive his new crew members." Picard stood and returned the book to its proper place on the bookshelf.

"And you'll be just as glad to get rid of them!" Riker grinned at Picard, who, after a moment's thought, I smiled too.

"Yes indeed. I'll be happy to resume our previous course to Olmas 9. It has some ancient ruins that I am particularly interested in."

"You know Captain Morgan?"

Picard nodded. "Jason Morgan and I were at Starfleet Academy together, along with Jack Crusher."

It seemed to Riker that Jean-Luc Picard had known almost every current Captain, and even some of the current Admirals, when he was at the Academy.

"Well, Number One, I believe it's time we returned to the bridge, don't you?"

"Sir, we are within communications range of the Lone Star."

"Very good, Mr Worf. Open hailing frequencies."

Before Picard could speak he heard a familiar voice say, "Come in, Picard, this is Captain Jason Morgan, and I know it's you because I'd recognise that heap of

junk you call a ship anywhere!" The voice laughed. "I'm using visual."

Picard nodded to Worf, who replied, "Viewer on, sir."

The whole bridge crew turned their attention to the Captain of the Lone Star. Anyone who could call Starfleet's flagship 'a heap of junk' had to be seen.

Morgan was about Picard's age, but with dark hair that was just starting to go grey at the roots.

"Well, say something, Jean-Luc!"

Picard was slightly stunned. Jason was being very informal - too informal for Picard's peace of mind. "Jason. It's been a long time." His voice was wary.

"Nonsense! It seems only yesterday since we left the Academy. Where's that rogue First Officer of yours? Crusher! I still haven't forgiven you for stealing Bev away from under my nose like that!"

All eyes turned to look at Wesley. Wesley turned to look at Picard. Picard cleared his throat. "Jason, are you all right? You seem a little confused..."

"Now stop playing games, Picard." The voice became hard. "I think your promotion to Captain has gone to your head. After all, the Stargazer's a good ship, but she's not the best Starfleet has, you know!"

"Jason, this is the Enterprise, not the Stargazer. She was almost destroyed ten years ago, remember?" He tried not to look at Wesley as he continued, "Jack died over fifteen years ago. You were at his funeral."

"What?! That's ridiculous, and you know it. I admit I may have been a little lax about staying in touch, but that's no

reason to mess me about. I suggest you contact me when you're ready to talk sensibly. Morgan out."

"Hailing frequencies closed, sir." Worf, along with everyone else, was somewhat confused as to what had just occurred.

Riker stood waiting patiently for the Captain to turn his attention from his fish tank. The two of them had returned to Picard's ready room and had been joined by Counselor Troi.

Finally Picard turned and, indicating that the two officers should do likewise, dropped into his chair. "Well, Counselor?"

"Captain Morgan may appear confused to us, but he really believes that this is the Stargazer, sir."

"But why?" asked Riker. "And why did he act so oddly when you tried to correct him?"

"Two very good questions, Number One," mused Picard. "Unfortunately, I don't have the answers."

Captain Jason Morgan paced up and down the bridge of the Lone Star. What was Picard playing at? Why? Of course Jack Crusher wasn't dead, and certainly not fifteen years! He'd only been married a couple of years, and Beverly had not long borne his son.

Maybe Picard's promotion had come too soon? Maybe he wasn't ready for the responsibility? Maybe... maybe he wasn't really Jean-Luc Picard! Maybe he was a cunning alien who had taken over the Stargazer and was now going to

attempt to take over the Lone Star! Well - let him try!

"Sir." Lt Worf looked up from his station. "The Lone Star is arming all weapons."

"Why?" Picard asked. "What are they aiming at?"

The answer chilled him to the bone as Worf replied, "Us, sir."

Riker leaped to his feet. "The Lone Star's weapons are no match for the Enterprise, sir. With our shields on full power, her weapons are virtually useless!"

Picard nodded, his face grave. "Yes, but Jason thinks this is the Stargazer; he thinks he can cripple us. A more interesting question is, *why* is he preparing to fire at us? Mr Worf, go to yellow alert."

This was even more fun that it had first hoped for. Now it had two toys, and one of them was about to be destroyed... or maybe not. It hadn't decided yet...

"This would suggest that whatever is affecting Captain Morgan is also affecting the rest of his crew," Troi explained.

Picard looked round the faces of the officers seated around the table in the observation lounge. All were grim. "Theorise," he said. "Who or what could be responsible?"

"Some kind of halalucinatory virus?" suggested Dr Crusher. She had

been told of Morgan's communication, and had been more than slightly disturbed by it.

"What about an impostor?" asked Riker.

La Forge shook his head. "The computer verified Captain Morgan's voice print. It's definitely him, sir."

"Whatever the reason, it would seem that he's waiting for us to make the next move." Riker was referring to the fact that the Lone Star had armed her weapons over half an hour previously, and since then nothing had happened.

"What about sending an away team over, sir?" asked La Forge.

"If it is a virus we'd all be at risk," replied Dr Crusher.

"True." Picard leaned back in his chair. "But it would be less of a risk than if Morgan decided to pay us a visit." Once more he took silent note of the expressions on the faces of his colleagues. "Number One, prepare an away team - " Riker instinctive knew what was coming next - "which I will lead."

"Do you think that was wise, sir?" Except for Riker and Picard the observation lounge was now empty.

"Morgan knows me. Considering our earlier conversation, I doubt that he'd accept that you are my First Officer. He'd expect to see Jack Crusher. No - it's better if I go. And... yes, ask Dr Crusher to join the away team; he knows her too."

"Open hailing frequencies... This is Captain Jean-Luc Picard to Captain

Morgan."

Morgan's face appeared on the screen. "Yes, Captain?" His voice was hard.

"I'd like to come over and see you, Jason, with a minimal away team, naturally."

Morgan looked thoughtful. *This could be a trick. But surely it's better for him to come to me. He can hardly take over my ship with all my security people around.* "Very well - you may beam aboard, Captain."

As the transporter beam dispersed, the first thing that Picard noticed was that he was surrounded by security guards. Turning to look behind him, he saw that the rest of his away team - Dr Crusher and Data - were also surrounded.

The Security Chief stepped forward. "Captain Morgan is awaiting your presence in his ready room."

The three Enterprise officers stood silently waiting for permission to enter Morgan's ready room. Finally the word "Enter" was heard and the security guards ushered them in.

Morgan studied each one of them as they came to a halt at his desk.

"Jason, may I introduce Lt. Commander Data, my Second Officer - "

Morgan held up his hand to indicate that he had heard enough, and then turned to Dr Crusher. "Beverly! You should be at home looking after your son."

"My son is perfectly capable of

looking after himself now, Jason." She glanced at Picard as she spoke. "In fact, at the moment he is on bridge duty on the Enterprise."

"And I suppose - " Morgan's voice turned cold - "that you are also going to try and tell me that Jack is dead?" Beverly winced involuntarily. "I had hoped," he continued, "that you had decided against this silly game, Jean-Luc - if indeed you are Jean-Luc! Guards!" A security team stepped forward. "Show these 'people' to the brig!"

"Somehow - " Dr Crusher watched as the security team walked away after securing them in the brig - "I don't think inviting me on this picnic was a good idea, Jean-Luc."

Data looked puzzled. "But we are not on a picnic, Doctor."

Dr Crusher rolled her eyes skywards. "It's a figure of speech, Data."

"Sir, shouldn't we have heard from the away team by now?"

Riker detected the anxiety in Wesley's voice. He nodded wearily. "Open hailing frequencies. This is First Officer Commander William Riker of the Enterprise. Lone Star, do you acknowledge?"

The Lone Star vanished, to be replaced by Morgan. "I want to speak to Lt Commander Jack Crusher. Now!"

Riker frowned. He looked around the bridge, and his eyes fell on Wesley. "Lt Commander Crusher is unavailable, but - " He paused, wondering if this was a good idea. He decided it was his only

option. "You can speak with his son."

Wesley's head snapped round as he looked at Riker. "Me?" he whispered. Disbelief weighted the word.

Morgan looked angry. "Jack Crusher's son can't be old enough to talk coherently to anyone yet. What is all this nonsense?"

Riker indicated that Wesley join him in front of the viewscreen. "Sir - " he guided Wesley to stand in front of him - "this is Ensign Wesley Crusher."

Morgan's jaw went slack. He stared in disbelief at the face on the viewscreen in front of him.

Jack ?

No. He was too young to be Jack. But he looked...

Morgan shook his head from side to side as if debating with himself. Finally he looked at Wesley again. "Are you really Jack Crusher's son?"

"Yes, sir."

Morgan turned to his Security Chief. "Fetch Captain Picard and his officers immediately." He turned his attention back to Wesley and Riker. "This makes no sense!" he intoned wearily. "The last time I remember seeing Jack was just after Beverly told him she was pregnant." He paused as the Enterprise away team arrived on the bridge. Morgan turned to look at Dr Crusher, then he regarded Wesley again. "You look like your father," he said simply.

"Disarm all weapons, lower shields. Beverly." He stepped over to her and took her hand in his. "Am I going mad?"

Everything had gone wrong. It had failed. It was gradually losing its hold over the toy. The toy had a mind of its own.

A strong mind. Too strong.

It thought of the other toy. Maybe...

But no. It must accept defeat... for now.

"I remember getting the memo saying that my new crew members would arrive on the Enterprise." Morgan paused to sip his coffee. He was seated in Picard's ready room. "After we arrived at the specified rendezvous point, things start to get a little vague."

"The brain scans I took show some kind of mental interference with Jason and his crew." Dr Crusher stood and walked over to the window from where the Lone Star was just visible.

"Some kind of alien interference?" asked Riker.

It was Troi who answered. "Most likely, yes. There has been a powerful mind in this area recently. On the other hand, that mind may have been here and left again long before we arrived."

"So what halted the 'interference'?" wondered Picard out loud.

"Well - " Riker sat back in his chair - "I remembered your telling me some time ago how much Wesley reminded you of his father. You said, and I believe this is an accurate quote, 'He looks more like Jack every day!' unquote. Captain Morgan was so adamant in his desire to see Jack Crusher that I decided to allow him the next best thing!" He turned to Morgan. "I'm sorry if Wesley came as a shock to you, but I'm sure you'll agree, sir, that he had the desired effect?"

"Definitely, Commander." Morgan nodded in agreement. "Beverly - " He turned guiltily towards her. "I'm sorry this 'interference' caused me to be so insensitive about Jack," he added regretfully.

Beverly Crusher smiled. "Before you leave, perhaps you'd like to meet our son?"

"Your father," said Captain Morgan as he placed a friendly arm around Wesley's shoulders in the now otherwise empty ready room, "was a fine officer and a good friend. He loved his job only second to your mother and you. I wish he could have lived to see how well you turned out. I've read your record - very impressive. Jack would have been very proud."

Wesley took the offered hand and shook it firmly.

"If you ever decide you've had enough of Jean-Luc and want to serve under a real Captain," Morgan smiled, "I'd be happy to have you aboard the Lone Star. And that has nothing to do with your family. It's because you show great potential for the future."

"Thank you, sir." Wesley looked embarrassed.

"Well, Jean-Luc, thank you for my new crew members. And thank you for not blowing me out of the sky with my madness!"

Picard smiled at the face on the viewscreen. "My pleasure, Jason. On both counts! I hope our next meeting is soon, and less... *exciting*."

"Goodbye - until next time, Jean-Luc!"

Once more the image of Captain Morgan left the viewscreen to be replaced by the Lone Star; but this time there was no hostility, only the knowledge that two old friends had renewed their relationship.

"Mr Crusher, set course for Olmas

9. Number One, we have a date with some ruins!"

"Course laid in, sir!"

Picard returned to his chair and watched as the Lone Star vanished from view. He said a silent "Au revoir!" to his friend, and then gave the command,

"Engage!"

*NB - The use of the term 'It' to describe the creature in this story and in *That Which Hungers* by Gaile Wood in MIS 9 is pure coincidence. When Kirstie wrote this story she had not read Gaile's.



CURIOUS INTERLOPER

by

S P Edge

"Let's have them aboard, Chief," instructed Commander Riker. The Transporter Chief implemented the transporter sequence and the replacement members of the crew materialised. There were four females, all originating from Earth colonies; three of them were ensigns while the fourth was a lieutenant. Commander Riker smiled at the new crew members as they stepped down from the pads and stood in line to introduce themselves.

"Ensign Fiona Thursby reporting for duty, sir."

"Ensign Dillon Henry reporting for duty, sir."

"Ensign Celest Bodiely reporting for duty, sir."

"Lt. Jenna Ersatz, reporting for duty, Commander."

"Welcome aboard the Enterprise. Your things will be taken to your quarters. You are required in sickbay for a standard check-up, after which you may acquaint yourselves with the ship as your duty rota doesn't begin until tomorrow. I have prepared schedules for your induction to the Enterprise and your assignments. Please study them and if you have any questions or problems, you can talk to your departmental heads. Thank you for your attention and good luck with your assignments. Dismissed." Commander Riker handed each new crewmember her assignment schedules and then showed them to sickbay; and after Dr Crusher pronounced them all fit and ready for duty, they decided to go to

Ten Forward for a celebratory drink.

Some time later Dr Crusher, mulling over their scans, knew something was not quite right, but she couldn't quite pin down what.

As she was poring over the results, Commander Riker came in and asked, "Were they all OK?"

Dr Crusher looked up from her console and frowned. "Yes, Commander, they have all passed fit for duty."

Commander Riker caught the Doctor's expression, and asked, "If they are all OK, then why the frown?"

"You know, Will, I'm not sure. They all checked out perfectly, absolutely perfectly, no problems at all. One exceeded the weight norm slightly, but in every other respect they all tested perfect."

"Then what's the problem, Doctor?"

"That's just it, Will; I don't know, but it bothers me. I think I'm going to keep my eye on this intake for a while."

"Fine, Doctor, you do that, but in the meantime they can all begin their duty assignments. Thanks, though, and let me know if you find something." Commander Riker smiled at the Doctor, turned and left sickbay.

They sat around a table by the

windows staring into the stars, each in awe of the wondrous view. Guinan stood by them, smiling, and said, "You know, you are all very fortunate to be here on the Enterprise. It has been said that this is the best view anywhere in Starfleet and I tend to agree with that." As the new crew members turned, smiling, to look at her, Guinan had the most unusual feeling of something like *deja-vu*. Still smiling at the new crewmembers, she took their orders.

They had not been together long, just since Deep Space 3, when Lt. Ersatz had joined them. Prior to that, Ensign Bodiely had joined the other two ensigns on Starbase 12. They had been together for almost 6 weeks before rendezvousing with the Enterprise. In that time, however, they had come to know and like each other, and had become firm friends. Each held up her glass to give a toast.

Dillon looked at her friends, saying, "We are finally here, on the Flagship of the Fleet, and here we sit, like... like the Four Musketeers of history. Yes, the toast is, 'One for all, and all for one!'" Laughter rang out from the table and all agreed that the toast was apt.

Fiona held her glass up, gave a little cough, and said, "The Enterprise. May we all have a wonderful tour and may all of our officers be as cute as Commander Riker."

All at the table gave a rousing, "Hear, hear!"

Celest raised her glass up, still smiling, and her toast was, "May all our expectations be exceeded."

Finally, Jenna held her glass up and quietly said, "To be here, to be among the finest in Starfleet. May we meet the challenges, and become simply the best. To us. Let this journey be all we want it

to be and everything it can be!"

Some time later they left Ten Forward and decided to separate and explore the ship, agreeing to meet later and compare notes. Ensigns Thursby and Henry stayed together; they had known each other longest - since the Academy, in fact - and the Enterprise was their first posting. Each had worried about being separated when they had graduated from the Academy. Fortunately - and most unusually - they got the same posting, mainly because their areas of expertise were so different. Fiona Thursby's prowess in systems was nothing less than brilliant; her innovative approaches had amazed her tutors and her appointment to the Flagship Enterprise assured. Dillon Henry's tactical and strategic analysis, her unusual but very effective simulated battle solutions, had given her the highest recorded rating in the Academy's history since the legendary James T Kirk. As with Fiona Thursby, her results made her an automatic selection for the Enterprise.

They found, to their delight, that they were again sharing quarters. As they unpacked, they began to wonder about their commanding officers. Fiona Thursby looked at the schedules that Commander Riker had given to her, and frowned while saying, "Dillon, what will it be like, I wonder, working with the android?"

"Fiona, you will be fine! At least an android can't get mad at you, and shout or worse! Just think - I've got a *Klingon* as Chief of Security to worry about. Scuttlebutt at the Academy had it that he's very, very tough and exacting with his staff."

"Dillon, yes, you're right. Never mind, he's not allowed to really damage

you, is he?"

"I hope you're right, Fiona. Enough about that. Did you see that there are holodecks on board, and all sorts of clubs, societies and game teams. It's going to be fun!"

Ensign Celest Bodiely had found herself in engineering and looked in awe at the warp drive. Somehow, the Academy mockup, though accurate in every detail, wasn't quite the same... As she was backing away from the rail, she stepped on some one's foot; at the cry of pain she jumped away, turning to find the person bending down holding his foot. He stood up, half smiling while complaining about the pain. She realised that the person was a Lt Commander and, more horrifyingly, probably her boss.

"Commander! I'm so sorry - I... I didn't see you, I was... Oh! I'm so sorry!"

"Ensign, Ensign... Who are you, anyway?"

"Ensign Celest Bodiely, sir."

"Ah! my new Ensign. I'm Lt Commander Geordi La Forge, your new boss. Almost breaking my toes isn't a great way to introduce yourself."

Celest's face paled as he spoke, and as she stiffened to attention, he suddenly broke out laughing.

"Ensign, please don't look so worried, I'm joking, I'll live. It's nice to see you here looking around, and I'm sure we'll work together just fine. I've read your file and I'll be most interested to hear more about the enhancements you made to the Academy runabouts' warp drives. However, that can wait until you officially begin your duties. Have you

been to see the holodecks yet?"

Lt Jenna returned to her quarters to unpack, and had decided to inspect the science labs and review the current science projects and the proposed projects. She watched the information subjects scroll in front of her and stopped the flow when a cybernetics project flashed in front of her. Her main interest was cybernetics, and the opportunity to watch, work and learn about Lt Commander Data had been her prime motivating force in joining the Enterprise crew. She was so intently scanning the scrolling screen she was unaware of the entrance of the officer who now stood behind her, watching the scrolling screen.

"You must be the new Science Officer. I'm Lt Warren Clever. How can you review data that quickly?"

Jumping slightly, she quickly altered the speed of the scrolling screen and then she turned to look at the owner of the voice.

"Hello, I'm Lt. Jenna Ersatz. I wasn't reading the screen, I'm moving it to another section. You're right, I'm the replacement Science Officer."

"Well, Jenna - I can call you Jenna, can't I? I'm Warren. What's your speciality?"

"Cybernetics - and of course you may call me Jenna. What interests you, Warren?"

"Apart from you, Jenna, the project I'm concerned with at present is the correlation of data from the recent mapping of the HDQ-60 nebula. Beautiful system, and the raw data is proving fascinating."

"Tell me, Warren, what is Commander Data like to work with? How does he interact with humans?"

"Oh, no! Not another Dataphile? That's what we call the females on board who all seem to be very interested in Commander Data. The times I've worked with him, I've found him to be very patient - he has to be; I can't begin to keep up with his formidable computing powers. Mostly I would describe him as an innocent, and yes, he can be unwittingly very funny. It's a shame he doesn't always appreciate his own humour. Now, Jenna, I recommend you stick to Human males for company - especially me! Would you like a drink in Ten Forward after my shift, at... say... 7pm?"

"Thanks, Warren, but I'll have to decline, I've already made arrangements. Maybe another time. I'll have to go now." She switched off the computer and left.

A little after 7pm the buzzer on Lt Ersatz's door sounded. She opened the door to the three Ensigns. As they entered her quarters, Dillon Henry let out a long whistle and said, "So this is how the other half live. No sharing - gosh, look at the closet space!"

"Now, Dillon, you know you too can have all this! All you have to do is make Lieutenant. That should take you four, maybe five, years! All of you, please sit down. The drinks are on the tray. Help yourselves. Good. Now, how has the research gone? You start, Celest."

It was almost midnight before they had all recounted their initial reactions to their first day on board. Dillon Henry looked at her friends and commented that it was time to call it a day. She had an appointment with the Chief of Security,

Lt Worf, on holodeck 3 at 7.00 am and she'd need to be sharp to have any chance of staying in one piece. As the Ensigns left her quarters, Lt Ersatz smiled at the way the first day had gone and remembered she still had one more task to complete before settling down to sleep.

During the next few weeks the new crewmembers settled in to their respective duties and met regularly in Ten Forward to 'gossip and bitch' about their assignments and colleagues. Dillon had passed all Lt. Worf's security level calisthenics and had scored highly in the intership marksmanship play-offs. Fiona's fears about working alongside Lt Commander Data had been set aside; she had become a confirmed Dataphile, almost to the point of driving Dillon to distraction, with her 'Oohing and Hahrring' over his every word and nuance. Celest rarely talked about her boss; most of what she said was in admiration of Lt Commander La Forge and his exceptional knowledge of the warp drive engines. All of the group had suggested that Celest was more than just in awe of his knowledge; that she did, in fact, 'really' like him and she should 'take the bull by the horns and DO something about it'.

Celest, as ever, would blush and say, "You're all quite wrong about this. Commander La Forge is my boss and has an exceptional mind, but that's all. Please, leave it at that."

Jenna usually talked about the ever faithful Warren Clever, who just continued asking her out. Occasionally she spoke of her work in the cybernetics lab, and to Fiona's delight, of Commander Data.

Almost six months later, Commander Data had been monitoring what seemed to be log inconsistencies. He had been aware of them and their spasmodic occurrences for nearly a month now. Something appeared to be sifting through all the ship's restricted files; but for the temporal time shift experience of four weeks previously, these anomalies would not have been found. He could not fathom how the breach had occurred, or who was responsible. It was time to inform the Captain.

Dr Crusher and all the senior bridge crew convened in the observation lounge.

A slightly irritated Captain asked, "Why, Mr Data, did you not report this earlier?"

"Captain, at first, the inconsistencies were not specific enough to warrant my involving you. Later, when the inconsistencies, though spasmodic, exhibited a pattern, I began to monitor all entries in all areas of the ship in an effort to locate where the breaches occurred."

"And have you, Mister Data?"

"All restricted files have been compromised, Captain. As yet I have not been able to determine how long the breaches have been occurring. For the moment I do not know how it was done, or by whom."

The Captain frowned and looked at his senior crew members as he said, "We have to find whoever is doing this and why. Suggestions!"

"Captain, whoever is responsible has to have very specific knowledge to access these levels of encrypted files and then be able to conceal the breaches. Who on board has that type of knowledge?"

"Agreed, Number One. Mr Data, access all the crew files. How many on board are capable of this kind of security breach?"

"Accessing, Captain. Besides myself, Commander La Forge and Commander Riker, there are only 5 others. Lt. Warren Clever, Lt. Jenna Ersatz, Ensigns Fiona Thursby, Celest Bodiely and Dillon Henry. The last four only came aboard recently."

Geordi looked at the Captain, and commented, "Captain, Ensign Bodiely was assigned to me in engineering. She is very capable and I have found her to be most reliable. She is quick, intuitive, very responsive to new ideas and very bright. An excellent officer."

"Captain, Ensign Henry has passed all levels of tactical and security training with distinction. Her ability to analyse situations quickly and provide solutions to the problems are formidable. She is a valued member of the security team," growled Worf. The others seated at the table looked at each other, amazed; for Worf to speak of anyone in such glowing terms was unheard of.

"Captain, as Science Officer the others are assigned to me. Ensign Thursby is a very competent systems analyst. Her work is always excellent; she does however at times exhibit signs of extreme nervousness and is easily distracted. Lt. Clever has the required ability and has been on board since stardate 41153.7. His work is excellent; however, he does not respond quickly to new information and his progress has not been anything other than average. Lt. Ersatz is highly intelligent and her cybernetic theories and applications are remarkable. Her knowledge of Dr Soong's work is extraordinary and her abilities are exceptional."

"Thank you. It's a pity Counselor Troi is still away - her abilities could have been most useful. Doctor, do you have anything to add?"

"Only that when the four women came on board their scans were almost perfect for each one of them, and it bothered me. On their subsequent check-ups they all scanned exactly as before, however, so maybe I was worrying over nothing. Maybe they are all exceptionally talented women and that is the way they scan! Sorry, but I cannot be of more help!"

"Number One, find out as much as you can about all of them - their backgrounds, their service records, as quickly as possible. Until we find out more about them, they are all under suspicion. We must not alarm them, but we must ensure we are vigilant, to entrap the guilty and protect the innocent. Dismissed."

A few days later, Commander Riker received transcripts of the service records and personal files of the suspects. He and Commander Data pored over every detail, trying to solve the mystery. Dr Crusher meanwhile had been going over her results and had discovered something very strange. She reported her finding to Commander Riker, which only served to deepen the mystery around the new members of the crew. Life on board the Enterprise seemed to carry on as normal.

During their next meeting, Fiona was extremely on edge and when asked what was the matter, her answer found echoes in her friends' minds.

"Yes, I definitely had the feeling that he was watching me, but not like he does usually. It felt different. Today, he started talking to me about his latest

poetry recital and whether I would be going to it. My god, he has to be aware by now that when he's around I seem to turn into a 'gibbering idiot'. It was most odd! Have you noticed anything, Dillon?"

"Lt Worf has also been behaving strangely towards me. I couldn't figure it out; there's something going on, only I don't know what! Now how about you, Celest?"

"Commander La Forge is always fine with me and I haven't noticed him acting any different from usual. Although he's given me an alignment task, which means I'm facing him all the time. Not that I mind too much! Jenna, how about you?"

"My work requires me to be in Commander Data's workshop lab and he does spend a lot of time in there with me, when he's not tied up with his other duties. So far I'm not aware of anything out of the ordinary... You're all getting paranoid, prime symptoms of space sickness. We are all in need of some R&R, but I'll keep an eye out anyway. Why don't we book holodeck 3 for one of the TLC programs? I think we are all free tomorrow night? If we all in agreement then, I'll book the holodeck for 6 pm."

Later, in her quarters, Jenna brooded over the group's revelations. She felt somewhat disturbed, as she hadn't told them the whole truth. Commander Data *had* been reacting differently, watching, and she definitely had the impression that he seemed to be waiting for something to happen. She needed to know what was going on, for all of the group's sake. Bypassing the file restrictions would be easy, but making sure the accesses were not logged required a consummate 'hacker'. As she

got into bed, she began thinking about the problem and its solution.

Meanwhile, Ensign Bodiely sat with her friends in their quarters. Discussing the problem on their way from Ten Forward, they had decided that they were justified in worrying, and they needed to know what was going on.

"I didn't quite believe Jenna. She is an officer, after all, and they always stick together. We need to check the computer logs to find out what's going on!" blurted out Fiona.

"Fiona, Dillon, I agree that Jenna was hiding something, but I think she's on our side and didn't want us to get into trouble trying to find out what's happening. I think she's more likely to use her rank to sort out the problem. However, I want to know and I think we should try to find out ourselves!"

Dillon, who had listened to both her friends, spent a few moments thinking and then addressed them. "Valid points, both of you; I think I agree with you, Celest; Jenna has never pulled rank on any of us. I believe she is our friend and as such feels she is in the best position to 'hack' the computer. I think, however, it is in our best interests to find out for ourselves. Our combined abilities should make cracking the restrictions very simple. Covering our tracks - now *that's* going to be the clever bit! Remember our first toast on arriving on the Enterprise?"

The three Ensigns stood in a circle and held up their arms; their clenched fists met in the middle. A chorus of, "One of all and all for one!" echoed around the room. They were all smiling as they sat down and began to plan how to 'hack' into the Enterprise's systems and - importantly - how not to get caught.

Commander Data entered the workshop earlier than usual the next day; Jenna watched him come in and begin working on his computer terminals. As the screen scrolled, she noticed that he had speeded up the scroll rate and that even she was having difficulty scanning the information. She had spent the previous night pondering the problem and had decided that the solution needed two approaches. To that end, she stopped what she had been doing and crossed the room and stood to the right of Commander Data, looking directly at his terminal screens.

She saw enough to realise that he was checking the restricted file logs. *Why*, she wondered - maybe she would ask. Commander Data interrupted the process and cleared the screen, then turned and asked, "Is there a problem, Lt. Ersatz?"

"I'm not really sure, Commander. Is my work not up to standard? Is there a problem? Why has someone has been accessing my restricted work files without my permission? And recently I have felt a change in the way you react towards me! Why is that, Commander?"

"Your work is exemplary. What makes you think someone has been accessing the restricted files? Do you mean me? As your superior officer I do have the right to access any of your work records. I have observed that you are an excellent Science Officer and your progress in memory chip production is quite remarkable.

" Lt. Ersatz - Jenna - your desire to emulate Dr Soong and produce an 'emotions' chip for me is portentous."

"Agreed, Commander, you do have the right of access to my work. But why not ask me for it? I assumed our working relationship permitted either of us to say what was on our minds! Are you saying

it wasn't you?"

"Jenna, I am not responsible for any breach in your restricted file access. You are correct in your assumption; during the time I have spent with you on the cybernetics project, I have become accustomed to you and would miss your daily input, your solutions to problems are quite fascinating. You have not answered why you think someone has been accessing your files?"

"Commander, much of my early training was in security programming and anti-hacker system testing. I suppose that the lessons I learned then have stayed with me. I always protect my special files using those techniques. Lately I have been aware of small inconsistencies; nothing major, but significant, if you know what you're looking for! Data - er, Commander, if it was not you, then who was it?"

"Jenna, please do nothing. Leave it to me. Continue with your work schedule. If you notice anything else, please tell me!"

Jenna nodded her agreement and walked back to her terminal. So, she thought, *that's the problem*. The Enterprise's systems have been compromised and they were the prime suspects. *Does anyone else qualify?* she wondered. How could she find out who else was under suspicion? How close was Commander Data to solving this puzzle? His love of a mystery was legend amongst the crew. Orders or not, it was time to put phase two into operation.

Unknown to Jenna, the other Ensigns had also decided on a two-pronged approach and during the day they implemented their plan. Unlike Jenna's, theirs called for the 'Hacking' to begin immediately. By the time they all met up in the holodeck, it was clear they

all knew they were under suspicion. Lying on their sunbeds, the group was very subdued and quiet until Fiona burst forth with,

"My god! We are all suspects, and here we lie, sunning ourselves as though nothing is happening. Our careers are on the line. All that work for nothing. We have to DO something. I... I can't stand this inactivity! Jenna, you know, don't you!!!"

Dillon and Celest also turned to look at Jenna, until finally she said, "Yes, you are right. A little while ago, Commander Data ordered me to do nothing. You shouldn't, either. *They* are trying to resolve the problem. I *can* say we are not the only ones - there is another suspect. Yes, waiting is going to be difficult, but who said being in Starfleet was easy? Are we agreed that none of us does anything to jeopardise either her own or any of our careers? Fiona, Dillon, Celest, we must agree - it's the only way."

In turn they looked at one another and indicated their agreement, each holding one hand behind her back with fingers crossed. Then they stood up in a circle and began their ritual musketeer chant.

Commanders Riker and Data had entered the holodeck as the group began their chant and watched them dissolve into the distinctive laughter of deep friendship. The subsequent discussion and jokes caused Commander Riker to look away, smothering his laughter but leaving a grin. Had Commander Data been able to blush, the main subject of the discussion would have caused him to do so from his toes up. Fiona updated the rest of the group with the 'Dataphile' club and its members' designs on Data. During one of the more descriptive recommendations from one of the 'Dataphilers', Celest turned over on her

sunbed and saw the Commanders watching and listening. At her startled cry, the rest of the group spun around towards the exit. Jenna stood up, put on her robe and walked over to the Commanders, looking a little flushed. She arrived at the same time as Lt. Worf, leading a couple of security guards, walked through the entrance.

Looking back at her friends, her facial expression signified *keep calm and follow my lead*.

"Commanders, Lt Worf and friends, please do come in. Can I offer you some refreshments?"

"No, thank you, Lieutenant. We want you all to come with us; there are some things we need to discuss," said a now stern-faced Commander Riker.

"Commander Riker, why all this show of force? We are all officers in Starfleet, and we do respond to orders."

"Lt. Ersatz, you will come with me and you Ensigns follow Commander Data and Lt Worf."

Jenna turned and looked at her friends, her eyebrows arching; giving them a half smile, she nodded that they should accede to the Commander's orders.

"Commander Riker, are we all to go like this or do we get the opportunity to get dressed?" asked a very defiant-sounding Dillon.

"Of course, but hurry. You have three minutes, ladies."

"Three minutes? My god, it takes me longer than that to brush my teeth. I'll bet he doesn't say that to his latest lovely."

"Ensign Thursby, did you say something? You're wasting time. Just get on with it!"

A little over five minutes later they left the holodeck. Lt Worf positioned the guards at either side of the Ensigns, leaving Lt Ersatz between Commander's Riker and Data. Before Commander Riker could lead them all off the holodeck, however, Lt Ersatz moved to position herself in front of all them, demanding to know what was happening and why they were being treated this way.

Commander Riker stepped towards her, and taking her arm and pulled her to one side. Still holding her arm, he ordered the others to leave. Lt Ersatz, like the Ensigns, were much taller than most and when she squared up to the Commander she was able to look him directly in the eyes. Her voice was now very deep and barely recognisable as hers.

"COMMANDER, LET GO OF MY ARM."

He looked into her very expressive face and as he heard the edge in her voice he decided on a change in tactics. Letting go of her arm, he took a big breath and relaxed the tension in his face, explaining.

"Lt Ersatz - Jenna - I'm sorry if I hurt you. It's just that something has come up and we need you and your friends to help clear it up. Please follow me. This shouldn't take long. Who knows, there may still be time to return here for the rest of your program."

As they walked along the corridor, Commander Riker looked at this incredible woman out of the corner of his eye, mulling over the task ahead. It was not going to be an easy matter to break down any of these women, especially this

one. They had all been classified as brilliantly talented and gifted; their records glowed with their achievements in every area. While he had been reading their files with Commander Data, he had marvelled at the scope and depth of their individual and combined abilities. What he had found most intriguing was their similar backgrounds; they had all been adopted by childless middle-aged couples. Their adoptive parents had been members of Starfleet and had found the children as babies on different worlds. All the worlds had recently been at war, which resulted in there being the inevitable victims of wars, orphans.

All of their scholastic files showed more similarities. They had all excelled, and as a result they had all attended the very select academies for the ultra-intelligent - where even amongst the brightest minds in the Federation their extraordinary abilities had showered them with acclaim, but amongst their peers they had all been ostracised. Until they met in Starfleet, their records showed them to be loners and while they could relate to other members of Starfleet, there were no records of their having any close friends. All of which explained why they are all so close now; to find one like minded friend - but to find three? It must have felt as if they had found Nirvana. In spite of himself, he found himself liking them and as he looked at Lt Ersatz another feeling began to take shape and form.

Lt Worf and Commander Data led the Ensigns to a security lounge and ordered them to remain there until told otherwise. On leaving the lounge with Commander Data, Lt Worf ordered the guards to stay with the Ensigns. After the two officers had left, the guards positioned themselves on either side of the door. One of the guards had been in

the same training squad as Ensign Henry. Knowing her abilities, he decided to ask what was going on.

"Dillon, what's happening? We've orders to stop you leaving here!" His hand gently touched his phaser.

"Engelhart, I don't know what's going on. You have no need to worry, I - er - we won't give you any trouble... for the moment. You can relax until we know what's happening. Seems we're here for a while! Fiona, Celest, how about we play some cards?"

Meanwhile Lt Worf and Commander Data had joined Commander Riker and Lt Ersatz in the main interview room on the security deck. They entered and saw Lt Ersatz sitting at one end of the room and Commander Riker standing at the other, staring intently at her. She seemed to be looking directly at the opposite wall; the tension in the room was evident. Commander Riker turned to look at the incoming officers. He indicated that Lt Worf should remain by the door on her left and Commander Data should sit directly opposite from the her. He sat diagonally to her right; as he sat he smiled the famed Riker 'I mean you no harm, but beware, I will if I have to' smile.

"Lt Ersatz, this is an informal meeting, not an official inquiry. We simply want to ascertain the magnitude of a problem we have and its implications. Do you have anything to say before we begin?"

When the others had entered the room, she had looked up and to each of them in turn. On the journey from the holodeck she had been aware of the Commander looking at her and evaluating her. Admittedly, she had been

doing much the same to him; at this moment she was having difficulty in quantifying her feelings for him personally. That, however, would have to wait; what mattered now was how to answer the problem. Without creating other problems, she needed to know what they knew and what they suspected, and - more importantly - what they could prove. Her mind had been racing and had hardly registered the Commander's question; his expression said he needed some sort of reply and his question formed into the forefront of her mind.

"Commander, until you tell me what the problem is, I can't make any kind of comment other than 'why have you arrested my friends and me?' When the problem has been explained, I may be able to help."

The Commander began to explain and how long they had been able to monitor the problem. During his explanation, he asked, "How long have you all been aware that you are sisters?"

Her eyes blazed and then narrowed, her voice barely audible. "What do you mean, Commander?"

"Lieutenant, your DNA shows you are all half Human, and so closely patterned that you must be from the same gene pool. As to the other half, it's not from any race within the Federation. You all share a parent, most probably a father. Are you saying, Lieutenant, you didn't know?"

The implication of what the Commander had said began to permeate her mind. It answered so many questions. All through her childhood, she'd known something was very different about her. Not just the intelligence, something she couldn't quantify. When she met the others there had been a feeling of symmetry and

completion - and their instant friendship had been strange - the way they all knew what they were feeling and how to solve problems without words sometimes. *Commander Riker is only partly correct, she decided. We're not just sisters, we're something closer - not clones, but close.* They needed to have time to discuss this revelation and its consequences; to do that she needed to convince Commander Riker that they were not responsible for the initial breaches.

Realisation of the time factor began to bubble and something she couldn't quite formulate started to ring alarm bells in her mind. She was totally absorbed by the feeling of something left undone; something she should know about. It was a very odd feeling; in all her life she had been in control, always knowing what was happening.

"LT. ERSATZ, ARE YOU LISTENING?" a very irate Commander Riker, bellowed across the table.

Even his volume had little effect on her; she sat staring, unfocused, on the wall opposite. Getting more irate, Commander Riker looked at Commander Data, who had left his seat and walked over to the Lieutenant. Using a tricorder, he began to scan her and a few moments later raised his head with a look of incredulity.

"Commander, Lt Ersatz's brain activity is remarkable. All her synaptic impulses are centred in her subconscious. She is accessing her brain in much the same way as I access memory files. You must have triggered off a memory; until she has completed her search, this state will remain. She is truly extraordinary."

For almost five minutes, they watched Lt Ersatz sitting immobile. Commander Data stood monitoring her. Just as suddenly as she 'stopped', her

hand moved and she turned to look at Commander Data, looking somewhat surprised to see him standing over her.

"Commander Data, how far back have you been able to track the intrusions? Please be completely specific regarding the file access."

Commander Riker, intrigued by the inquiring tone of the Lieutenant, indicated that Commander Data answer her questions. As the Commander did so, her facial expression changed visibly from confusion to realisation. Quite suddenly she began to beam, the smile lighting up the room. Commander Data, noticing the tension, slipped away from her, and Commander Riker, who also had seen the change in the Lieutenant, asked her,

"Lt Ersatz, why are you smiling? Share your thoughts, please, I do not understand your behaviour!"

"I'm sorry, Commander Riker. But I've just realised what the problem could be, and in some respects it's as much your fault as mine!"

"Lt Ersatz, you'd better explain that!" said a relieved Commander Riker. Quite why he felt relieved he wasn't sure, but the feeling was overwhelming.

"Yes, you're right, Commander. I will explain. Some six months ago, when I came on board, I was assigned to work with Commander Data. This, you understand, was my main motivation for wanting to be assigned to the Enterprise. My abilities allowed me to select my assignments in Starfleet. So here I was, exactly where I wanted to be, and assigned to the individual I wanted to be with. The work of his creator, Dr Soong, fascinated me - his approach to cybernetics far exceeded brilliant. Before arriving on board, I had been able to

'read' some of the Enterprise missions - specifically, the one where Commander Data had been summoned to Dr. Soong's new laboratory for implantation of an 'emotions' chip. Lore unfortunately got it instead.

"My interest led me to believe it might be possible for me to recreate the 'chip' for him. To that end, early in my experiments, I produced a chip that could interact with other systems and 'learn'. The chip needed to learn, from other programs, how an event was handled by the crew - for instance, how Dillon prepared for the intership team games. With her permission, I allowed the chip to access her personal logs and the ship's games scoring logs. From that data, the 'chip' had learned about how Dillon mentally prepares for combat. The information I gained from this chip, encouraged me to produce other generations of the chip, each enhanced. I believe, Commander, that your interloper is in fact one or more of these chips, still working, as you have no evidence of any information leaving the ship, only that it is being collected. I have to say, though, I am not sure how and why these chips did not cease functioning when the tests had concluded. It is possible that as they began learning they could have acquired 'consciousness'. To answer that, I'd need to find them!"

"Commander, with regard to my friends and me. I was not, and I have no reason to believe the others were, aware of our origins. We all knew that our backgrounds were similar - we have all grown up knowing we were adopted. I assumed, as probably they assumed, that our parents were indigenous to the planets we were found on. For myself, all the previous medicals have never shown me to be anything other than Human. When this is over, I will want - and I'm sure my friends will want - all the medical information from Dr Crusher.

However, Commander, our parentage is not the issue here, possible sabotage is, and that must be our first priority. I suggest that for the moment you don't reveal the DNA results to my friends; I would like the opportunity to do that."

Commander Riker had watched the Lieutenant as she had described her theory about the interloper; on the whole, he believed that she believed in her theory. He nodded his agreement to allow her to tell her friends about the DNA results. He continued to watch her, as with Commander Data she devised a plan to test her theory. A few minutes later a plan had been devised. It required her friends' help, so they were recalled from the other security lounge. Their tension on entering the room was evident, as was their subsequent relief as they turned to look at Jenna. Jenna explained the problem and the devised solution to the group. Commanders Riker and Data cast glances at each other, impressed at how they seemed to know instinctively what was required and how to increase the probability of success.

Almost two hours later they had programmed the computer and set their traps; at the same time they had all ceased their own system breaches. When they had finished working they began to stretch and relax; Jenna looked at her friends, smiling, and suggested they should all have a drink while they waited.

Waiting became minutes and the minutes became one hour then two; an increasingly impatient Commander Riker began to pace beside the table directly behind Jenna. At first she just smiled at his impatience, but after 10 minutes of the constant pacing she got up and stood directly in front of his path and said,

"For goodness sake, Commander! It will take as long as it takes. This pacing is not going to speed up matters. You're

like an expectant father! Please either sit it out or find something else to do!"

A somewhat startled Commander Riker stared into her very blue eyes and felt as though he was drowning in deep pools of oceanic blue. Protocol demanded he should reprimand her, but he really wanted to be somewhere else talking to her. Duty of course won out, although she was correct; it must be really irritating to have someone pacing continually.

"Lt Ersatz, you are way out of line. My tolerance of your continuing insubordination is limited. Commander Data - "

Before Commander Riker could finish, the terminal alarm sounded and they all gathered around it. Screens of information scrolled and both Commander Data and Jenna scanned it. Jenna's smile turned into a beam and she nodded to her friends that some chips had been found accessing the files. Commander Data confirmed that Jenna's theory had been valid and that some of her experimental chips were currently accessing restricted files. Tracing the chips to a little used area of the systems, they found that they had indeed achieved a kind of 'consciousness'. Commander Data and Jenna studied the latest generation of the chip and realised that it hadn't evolved far enough to be of help to him as yet, but the prospects were encouraging.

When all of her friends had gathered in her quarters, she seated them, offered them drinks and began to explain the Doctor's findings and the subsequent conclusions. For several minutes the ensigns said nothing, just sat looking at each other, face to face. Finally they began to chant and laugh, knowing that they had always known it deep inside their psyche. Friends, sisters, it didn't

matter as long as they were together. They decided that they would try and discover who was their errant father and where he came from and what they were. They all started to have the strangest feelings of knowing something but not quite being able to access or touch it, for all that they knew something important was quite near.

Commander Riker informed the Captain of their findings and recommended that no further action should be taken. Captain Picard agreed and noted the recommendation in his log.

Later, in the holodeck, Lt Worf looked up and gave a very rare smile to his subordinate officer. "Lt Henry, punctual as usual. I believe you were going to show me the 'Henry 37' manoeuvre?"

Meanwhile, in Ten Forward, the Chief of Engineering was buying his exonerated, favourite Ensign a drink. Ensign Thursby was also in Ten Forward being wine and dined by the head of stellar cartography, the newly arrived Commander James Zulawski, with most of the 'Dataphile' club watching and making notes - Commander Zulawski looked very much like a Human Commander Data and as such had been put on the 'hit' list of the club members.

Jenna had been working in the labs and was on her way to her quarters when Commander Riker entered the turbo lift. After giving the computer deck instructions he looked towards Jenna,

who had turned to look back. They both stood silently staring at one another, willing the other to speak. The lift doors opened; Jenna walked to the door and turned to look at him.

"Commander."

"Lieutenant."

As he continued his journey he leaned against the wall; as she walked to her quarters the thought, *Erm, mm, mm, another time*, passed through both their minds.

At the end of his shift, Commander Riker had delivered the crew rotation schedules to Commander Data in his quarters.

"Commander, inquiry. When we went to the holodeck to collect the Lieutenant and the Ensigns..."

"Yes, Data."

"Ensign Thursby was describing a physical act in a zero gravity environment, with me and several other Ensigns."

"Yes, Data."

"Why would a group of Ensigns wish to try to perform such an act, which I have calculated would be almost impossible to achieve?"

"Ahh, well, erm, you see Data, it's like this....."

END [maybe]



SPOT'S MUSINGS

by

Christine Carr

Well, the coast is clear, so...

I dig my back claws deep down into the carpet and reach forward, stretching until I can stretch no more. My back is curved so my tail and rump are pointing up towards the ceiling and my chest is flush against the floor. I yawn cavernously then begin to rip at the carpet, dragging my front claws back and up through its closely woven fibres. It tears and makes a satisfyingly terrible noise. My ears are cupped forward with the excitement, and, if I were human, I'd be smiling right now.

What do you expect? I'm a cat, and, let's face it, there is precious little to do in here all day.

Let me tell you a bit about myself. My name is Spot, and I own a humanoid called Data. When I was a kitten I had ambitions of owning a human. However, some things just aren't meant to be, and I suppose that Data is an adequate substitute, all things considered. I mean, he never forgets to feed me, and he is meticulous about keeping the litter tray spick and span. It's just that, well, he's so tidy, and his hands are cold. Not that that's his fault, of course. I've heard it said that he's an android, so I imagine that cold hands are a characteristic of the species. (Incidentally, can anyone tell me where Andrus is? I'm sure that the Enterprise hasn't been there.)

Humans may think neatness is a virtue and that Data is a paragon. I would disagree on both counts. Data doesn't own many possessions, and there are no exciting nooks and crannies to

explore in his rooms: no boxes to rummage through; curtains to climb; plants to pat; leaves to shred... When I first moved in, I used to play with the strings on his violin. You can get a really good twang out of these if you try hard enough, and if you pick at them in just the right way. But then I remembered what Mama once said about catgut, and I steer clear of the instrument now.

Mama used to tell us lovely stories when I was a kitten. My favourite ones were about food. She used to tell us about the banquets they served centuries ago on Earth. Delicacies included tongue with rabbit, pilchards in aspic and smoked turkey slices. Excuse me a moment: my gastric juices are flowing, just thinking about all this. I open my jaws, flick out my long pink tongue and thoughtfully lick my chops, blinking dreamily as I do so.

Data doesn't serve me food like that. I suppose what he does give me is adequate, but I just wish I had more success in training him to provide me with something more appetising than Feline Supplement 143. I've tried walking off with my tail in the air. I've tried sniffing at the food and ignoring it. I've tried everything, but he doesn't seem to get the message! He is really very slow, sometimes!

Still, things could be worse. I'm told that owning a Vulcan is remarkably unrewarding. Sprockett, one of my siblings, owns a Vulcan, and he says he only ever gets vegetables to eat. Ugh! Not that I believe everything that he says: I know for a fact that one of his Vulcan's

crewmates sneaks him some decent food each morning. Wish that he'd sneak me some, too.

Uh oh! That sounds like the door sliding open in the next room. I'd better retract my claws and play nice. I quickly roll over into a saggy heap of fluff, and close my eyes.

"Ah. Hello, Spot." Data bends down and calmly tickles my chin. I suppose that I had better reward him for this show of affection and so, after a few moments, I start to purr at him. This does not keep him with me for long, however. He soon stands up and sets about gathering things together for the evening's sport: it's Tuesday and that means that it is poker night. I get to my feet slowly and follow him through into the outer room.

The entry bell sounds, and Data calls out, "Enter."

The door slides open and I see that I have got a visitor; Geordi La Forge. "Are you ready yet, Data?" he asks, as he crouches down next to me.

"Almost," Data replies.

Geordi reaches out to me, offering to play. He is a very rewarding human: he really knows what fun is and he is prepared to enter into the spirit of a game. Unlike a lot of people, La Forge does not seem to object if things get a little rough. He waves a finger in front of my face and laughs as I snag it with my claws. Then he rubs my stomach hard. I roll over onto my back, and pummel his palm with my back paws while I grasp his hand with my front ones. My claws are sharp, but my thunderous purring

tells La Forge that this is all in fun and that I would never do anything to hurt him. He laughs with me, enjoying the game as much as I do.

Data never plays with me like this. There is something almost cautious about the way he treats me. When I was a kitten I thought that perhaps he was afraid of harming me. Now, though, I am an adult and I know better. After all, I am brave and very strong. Data must be afraid that I will hurt him. That's much more likely! I am very good with my teeth and claws. Geordi, though, shows no similar fear, and I like it when he comes to visit me.

Ah! I see that Data has been using his time productively. He sets down a bowl of food on the floor, then straightens. Geordi also stands up, saying as he does so, "Sorry, Spot, but the game's over for today." Even though he has apologised for cutting the game short, I look at the human reproachfully. He senses my irritation and looks down at me, shrugging guiltily. Then he laughs. "Sorry, Spot," he says again. "Gotta go."

Data and Geordi leave the room together, and I find myself alone once more. I amble over to the food bowl and sniff at it. It is Feline Supplement 127 again. I shake my tail slightly in disappointment, and walk away. Perhaps I will fancy some later. Then I leap onto the desk chair and, from there, I jump onto the work station. The displays are warm where they are lit within, and I curl up on it to doze. In the lazy torpor of impending slumber my final, delightful, conscious thought is to wonder just how many cat hairs would it take to upset this delicate machinery?



DEBUTANT

by

Christine Carr

In just a few years aboard the USS Enterprise, Data learned more about Human behaviour than he had in the preceding twenty-six years of his life. If Data was that quick to learn and keen to understand Humans, why had he not learned more before his tour of duty aboard Picard's vessel started? And what was different about the Enterprise that made Data's acceptance into the ship's community possible? This story tries to answer these questions.

"Lights!"

Admiral Fortescue sat up, blinked in the room's sudden brightness and sighed. The elderly man could not sleep. Perhaps that was not surprising; the vessel on which he had arrived worked a diurnal cycle that was eleven hours out of sync with HQ. He knew that he should rest because if he did not his age would catch up with him, and he would pay in the morning. However, sleep eluded him for the moment, and rather than continuing to toss and turn frustratedly he got up, dressed, and headed out into the warm night air.

Starfleet Headquarters, San Francisco, Earth, had not changed much in the last one hundred years. The buildings stood as stark outlines in the moonlight, and the stone beneath his feet was flat and smooth. Whoever designed the complex had forgotten to pay homage to nature's gentler touches; Fortescue missed trees and plants, and the unaggressive lines to be found beyond the complex's walls. For whatever

reason, the buildings' architects had neglected to give the structures even the most basic ornamentation. The buildings were functional; perhaps they were designed as a planetside reminder of the elegantly smooth lines of the Fleet's ships. Perhaps in space this functionalism was appropriate, but here on Earth Fortescue found himself thinking that the design was overly severe.

The Admiral's boot heels clicked against the ground and echoed noisily in the silence of the San Franciscan night. He breathed in deeply, revelling in the fresh air, and he cleared his lungs of the building's recycled atmosphere that was so reminiscent of the starship upon which he had spent the last three months.

On the far side of the forecourt there was a platform with a view across to the Golden Gate Bridge, and Fortescue made for that. As he walked, the breeze gently whipped from the land behind him, catching in his thin white hair. Once on the balcony he stood still for a long time, simply enjoying the feeling of being planetside. Every time he came home, or visited another world, he rediscovered the pleasure anew.

A shuttle sailed down from above, its pilot guiding it neatly to an allotted slot near the main entrance to the HQ building. Fortescue turned to watch absentmindedly as the door opened and a single man stepped out. The Admiral's first reaction was to assume he was Human, but on closer inspection Fortescue noticed that there was something curiously deliberate about the pilot's movements. Fortescue had rarely

seen anyone move with such economy before. The stranger wasted no unnecessary effort, and made no purposeless gestures as he sealed the tiny craft and headed into the main building. Idly, the Admiral wondered who, or perhaps what, the pilot was. Vulcan, possibly? Their gestures often seemed restrained to him. He shrugged mentally, and turned back to face the water.

A few minutes later, the Admiral was once more distracted from his contemplation of the bay, this time by the sound of footsteps coming towards him. A calm and polite voice said, "Excuse me, sir. Are you all right?"

Fortescue turned to look at the voice's owner, and found himself staring straight into a face that shone palely in the dimness of the night. Yellow eyes peered, catlike, at him. When the Admiral did not reply immediately, the newcomer said, "The Ensign at reception was concerned about you. He asked me to come and see if you are all right."

"Oh." Admiral Fortescue wondered how long he had been lost in his daydreams. It must have been quite a while if it had concerned the receptionist. He looked at the stranger's uniform pips and nodded his head once, up and down, and said, "Yes. I'm fine, Lieutenant."

"Thank you, sir. I shall inform the Ensign." The lieutenant turned with the same economy of movement that the Admiral had noticed before, and he set off back towards the buildings. Seen this close to, the Admiral thought that there was something almost... *robotic* about the lieutenant's movements. Fortescue was surprised at the word he had chosen.

"Lieutenant," Fortescue called after the retreating back.

The lieutenant stopped, turned back

towards Fortescue, and said, "Sir?"

"It was you piloting that shuttle just now, wasn't it?"

"Yes, sir." The younger man stood completely still, pausing to see if the Admiral wished to say anything more to him.

"It was very neatly done. Very professional."

There was a momentary silence, then, as if the lieutenant suddenly realised that the compliment required some sort of response, he said, "Thank you, sir."

"Don't let me keep you from your duties any longer, Lieutenant...?"

"Lt Data, sir."

"Well, good night, Mr Data."

"Good night, Admiral."

Fortescue stood for a few minutes after Data's departure, then he, too, turned his back on the bay, and headed into the building.

The Admiral was curious. After all his years in Starfleet he was familiar with the majority of the Federation's species, but he hadn't recognised Data's. The Admiral thought that the apparent abnormal pallor of Lt Data's skin might have been a trick of the moonlight. However, the startling yellow eyes had been no illusion. Fortescue, curiosity piqued, wanted to find out more about him.

The Ensign at the reception desk looked bored, which, this deep into the graveyard shift, was hardly surprising. However, as soon as he became aware of the approaching Admiral, he snapped to

attention, and greeted Fortescue with all the respect the elderly man's rank merited.

"At ease, Ensign," the Admiral said, and watched as the Ensign relaxed visibly. "I was just wondering what you could tell me about the young man you sent out to check on me."

"Young man? Oh. You mean the lieutenant?"

Fortescue nodded. "Yes."

"What do you want to know, sir?"

"Where he's from?"

The ensign pursed his lips slightly. "I'm not sure, Admiral. All I know about him is that he's working here until the Enterprise is ready."

"The Enterprise, eh?" Then, more sharply, Fortescue said, "If he's between assignments, why isn't he on leave? That's normal practice, isn't it?"

"I don't know, sir. You'd have to ask him."

Fortescue, though, decided he had asked enough questions for one evening, and shrugged off his remaining curiosity. He was, he noticed, now a little more disposed towards sleep. Any further enquiries he might wish to make about the strange lieutenant would have to wait until morning. Always assuming that his interest lasted that long.

Jean-Luc Picard fastened the front of his tight-fitting uniform and permitted himself a small smile of satisfaction. Picard, sometime archaeologist, was back in San Francisco after three months of shore leave. He looked in the mirror and

saw his Starfleet Captain persona look back. It felt good to see *Captain* Picard again, rather like a homecoming, and, perhaps, in a way, that was what it was. The pleasure of the dig was behind him, and all the hopes and plans for his new command stretched ahead.

The USS Enterprise, the Federation's newest and finest vessel, was his, or would be in six weeks' time. Until then, he resolved, his time would be devoted to sorting out the myriad of administrative tasks that fell to all new commanders. He was determined to be familiar with his ship and crew before the Enterprise left dock. Picard wanted to prepare himself thoroughly. What he did not want was to have to spend the first two weeks of the mission reading specification reports and so miss out on the chance to savour the simple pleasure of being with his new ship.

Picard took one last look at his reflection, then, satisfied, he headed out of the guest quarters he was occupying at Fleet HQ. He walked briskly along the corridor, then jogged down three flights of stairs to the main reception hall.

The receptionist, a young Human ensign, looked up at Picard as he approached, and said, "Good morning, Captain. Admiral Henderson left these for you, along with a message." She handed Picard a large stack of computer chips, each one representing hours of tedious administration. His contented mood dissipated, and he sighed.

"And the message, Ensign?"

"Enjoy', sir." She looked concerned about how he might react to that.

Picard snorted quietly, disgusted at Henderson's odd sense of humour. Then he smiled crookedly. "Thank you, Ensign."

"You're welcome, sir."

Back in his suite, Picard settled down in front of his desk, and put the first chip into the computer terminal. He began to read.

Commodore Hesaar's office was on the first floor of the Starfleet administration block. This early in the morning, sun flooded in through the plate glass window, bathing the entire room with light. Fortescue put down his coffee cup and said, "Thank you. That was excellent. Now, what do you have planned for me today?"

"We thought that you might like a tour of the Enterprise, Admiral. She's almost ready for launch." Hesaar spoke excellent English, but his words hissed softly as was typical of Andorians. His companion, Commodore Alicia Brannigan, was Human.

"That would be most agreeable. Thank you."

"We have a shuttle and a pilot waiting outside."

The three officers made their way down the stairs and out past reception. As they emerged into the sunlight, a man emerged from inside the shuttle and showed them to their seats. To his surprise, Fortescue recognised the polite lieutenant from the night before. But surely, if he had been on duty last night, he should be at home resting now, not preparing to fly to Mars! Fortescue opened his mouth to say something, then closed it again. There must be an explanation: perhaps the lieutenant's species worked a different daily cycle to Humans. It was not unknown.

Once the senior offices were safely

installed, Data ducked into the cockpit and sealed the door behind him. Soon they were off.

"I take it, from your reaction just now," Brannigan observed, "that you've met Data before."

"As a matter of fact, I met him last night. I was wondering why he was working double shifts."

Hesaar chuckled, a sound which, from him, was more of a wheeze. Brannigan merely smiled. "Data's an android, Admiral. He doesn't need rest."

"An android?" That explained the graceful deliberation of the lieutenant's movements. Then Fortescue remembered hearing something years ago about an android being discovered out in space... He did not remember all the details after so long, but he knew that there had been quite a furore about it at the time. Something to do with an entire colony being destroyed. "Omicron Theta?" he asked tentatively.

Hesaar said, "Yes. It decided to devote its existence to Starfleet."

"He's a good officer, Admiral."

Fortescue nodded, and the conversation turned to other matters. Nonetheless, something about the Commodores' comments niggled at the back of the Admiral's mind.

Some hours later, as the shuttle headed back to Earth, tour completed, Admiral Fortescue surprised his companions by excusing himself, and heading towards the cockpit. He opened the door, poked his head through it, and enquired, "May I join you for a while, Lieutenant?"

"Certainly, sir."

Fortescue sat in the co-pilot's seat. He watched Data's profile for a moment or two. Last night, the Admiral had received the impression of an oddly sexless face, rounded and smooth. Seen now, in profile, he decided that he had been in error. The long nose and the set of his eyes gave the android's face character that was largely missing when seen straight on. Fortescue could not imagine how Hesaar could perceive the android as an 'it'.

Data ignored the Admiral's close scrutiny. Fortescue suspected that he was used to people staring at him. Finally, he said, "Tell me, Mr Data, what will your position be on the Enterprise?"

"I am to be assigned as second officer, sir, with a promotion to the rank of lieutenant commander."

"How long have you been in Starfleet?"

"Nineteen years, sir." Data seemed to think some explanation for the apparent discrepancy between his physical appearance and his statement might be in order because he added, "I am a machine, sir. I do not age as a Human would."

"I know. Commodore Brannigan told me that you are an android." He wondered whether his next question was tactless, but he wanted to know the answer. "How come it has taken you so long to achieve the rank of lieutenant commander? Most people, if they don't make it in ten years, well, they never make it."

Data seemed to give the matter some thought. Finally he said, "I believe my failure to integrate with my fellow officers has limited my chances for

promotion."

As his comments had apparently not offended Data, Fortescue decided to proceed with this line of questioning. "Any idea why you've failed to integrate?" he asked. "You don't have to answer my questions if they upset you."

"Upset?" Data tilted his head slightly to one side. "I do not feel upset, sir. In answer to your question, I do not understand Humans, sir. I observe them, but I find I am unable to replicate much of their behaviour."

"Why would you want to? Other aliens in the Fleet aren't expected to. Vulcans, Betazoids... Everyone respects their differences. Their cultures."

Data seemed to absorb the comment. "But, sir," he said, "I do not have a culture."

Fortescue detected meaning in the relentlessly even voice, meaning that the android was not aware of having put there. The Human was sure he'd heard loneliness and isolation, and he wondered at it.

"Data."

"Yes, Admiral?"

"How come you've been on duty since last night?"

"Sir?" asked Data, apparently confused.

"You were on duty when I saw you last night, weren't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you've been on duty today. How come?"

Data's brow actually seemed to pucker into a frown. "I am always on duty, Admiral."

Now it was Fortescue's turn to frown. "Always?"

"Yes, sir. I am an android. I have no need for rest and relaxation."

That was more or less what Brannigan had said earlier, the Admiral realised. "Well then, when do you get to socialise?"

"Socialise?" asked Data, bemused.

"If you don't socialise, how do you expect to integrate into society?"

Data faced forward, frowning. Softly he said, "I do not know, sir."

Admiral Fortescue placed a hand on Data's shoulder as he stood up. Data's startled glance at it was not lost on the Admiral. "Think about it, Mr Data. I'll talk to you again, later."

Back in the main body of the shuttlecraft, Hesaar and Brannigan asked, "How did you get on with Data?" They seemed to find his curiosity amusing, almost as though the presence of the android was a novel entertainment they had planned especially for him. But Fortescue was in no mood for such games, and he felt indignant on the lieutenant's behalf.

"We had a chat. It was most informative," Fortescue said carefully. "Did you know that he has problems integrating with other Starfleet personnel?"

"Of course. It's on his record," said Brannigan.

"There were, as a result, long

discussions about the advisability of promoting it to lieutenant commander. It was finally decided that it should be given the chance." Something in his tone and choice of pronouns told Fortescue that Hesaar did not agree with the decision that had been reached.

"Did you know that he works twenty-four hours a day?"

"Yes. So?"

"Don't you think that these things might be related?"

Hesaar and Brannigan exchanged looks, as if the possibility had never occurred to them before.

Fortescue kept his word, and talked to Data again before they landed. Data answered the questions the Admiral posed about his background and training, and the Admiral came away from the trip with much to think about.

He spent the evening holed up in his quarters where he studied the android's personnel file.

Captain Jean-Luc Picard looked at the file in front of him and frowned. The fact that his new second officer was a lieutenant commander after almost twenty years in Starfleet wasn't, on its own, enough to make the Frenchman pause. No, what was bothering him was the fact that this person - this Data - had received commendations from all his commanding officers yet *still* had failed to be promoted at the speed of an averagely competent officer. Picard rubbed a hand across his face. At this stage, he had only meant this to be a cursory look at the crew lists. However, his curiosity had been aroused, and he decided to investigate further. He called up Data's

personnel file - and sat back in surprise.

why have you come back to haunt me?

Lieutenant Commander Data was an android.

Picard's brow furrowed. Now he remembered. Hadn't there been something about an android being discovered on some out of the way colony? But that had been years ago, and all the excitement had died down. He'd never considered what might have become of it.

Well, now it appeared it was coming to the Enterprise.

Picard keyed up an image of the android. It was hard to tell from the viewscreen, but Picard was left with the impression of a face of indeterminate age. It had startling yellow eyes, pale skin and a large nose. This latter feature was accentuated by underlying thin lips. It was an interesting face, *but*, Picard mused, *hardly handsome*. It was, and Picard was surprised at the word he came up with, an inoffensive face.

He browsed further through the report. There were various technical details: processing speed; strength; memory capacity. There were lists of subjects in which Data was a qualified expert. What the file lacked, however, was anything that might give the reader a clue as to what Data might be like as a person. Most personnel files gave brief details of the subject's interests and hobbies. Data's did not.

Perhaps he doesn't have any hobbies. Picard shook his head slightly. *Mais non! Everyone has hobbies.*

For the moment, Picard's curiosity with respect to the android was assuaged, and he turned his attention to other files and other thoughts. *Beverly*, he thought,

Admiral Fortescue wondered why he cared. Data's problems were surely none of his business. However, what had started out as idle curiosity on his part had rapidly turned into an all-consuming obsession. He wanted to know about the android but, more than that, he wanted to know about other people's reactions to him. Brannigan and Hesaar had neatly pigeon-holed the lad in a way that, to Fortescue at least, appeared prejudiced, and the Admiral was forced to wonder why no-one had picked up on this before. Because it is the general attitude? Or because people turn a blind eye to it?

Fortescue thought back over the conversations he had had with Data. The android was pleasant enough, and seemed to lack any true comprehension that he was being treated badly. Fortescue realised that he very much wanted to help him. He gave the matter some thought, devised a plan of campaign, and put it into effect first thing next morning.

Captain Jean-Luc Picard was still mulling over the Crusher problem as he breakfasted in the commissary. He nibbled on a croissant and sipped his coffee thoughtfully.

"Captain Picard? Would you mind if I joined you?" The unexpected voice jolted the Frenchman from his reverie.

"Admiral Fortescue! It's a pleasure to see you again, sir. It's been a long time since Tactics 101."

"Indeed it has, Picard."

The two men looked at each other

for a few moments, each studying the way the passage of years had marked the other. The most noticeable change in Picard was his almost total loss of hair. Also noteworthy was the hardening of the Frenchman's face, which had settled into an angular set of planes. Only the crinkles that appeared around his eyes as he smiled showed that there was any gentleness or humour in this man.

Fortescue, Picard mused, has not worn well. Rounded ruddy cheeks had caved in, blue eyes now looked watery and grey, and his once thick brown hair hung thinly, limp and yellow.

The Admiral placed a bowl of steaming porridge on the table in front of him and sat down. "I hear they've given you the Enterprise, Picard. Congratulations."

"Thank you, sir."

"I was taken around her yesterday. You've got a beautiful ship there, you know."

"It's an honour to have her, Admiral."

"I bet it is." Several moments passed as Fortescue made inroads into his porridge. Then he said, "I met one of your officers, too. Nice chap."

"Oh?" said Picard. "Which one?"

"Data."

Picard thought back to the crew lists he had looked at the previous evening. "Lieutenant Commander. Second Officer."

"Hmm. Know anything about him, Captain?"

"Only what's in his personnel file."

Fortescue put down his spoon, looked straight at Picard, and said, "That file is more informative in terms of what it doesn't say than what it does."

"Oh?"

"I want to talk to you about that young man, Captain, if you don't mind."

Picard frowned. "Carry on, Admiral."

"I met Data, as I said. I like him. And I think that I could do something to help him. With your help."

"How do you mean?"

Fortescue talked for a long time, and his porridge grew cold.

The next few weeks passed quickly for Jean-Luc Picard. He ploughed a path through the paperwork that came with his new job, he familiarised himself with his new vessel, and, finally, he took official command of the Enterprise. It was a busy time for him, and satisfying.

Amidst all the commotion, though, Picard managed to remember his conversation with Fortescue, and his promise to the Admiral that he would get Data introduced into the Enterprise's society as discreetly as possible. Only three days into the Enterprise's maiden voyage, Picard put their plan into action.

Jean-Luc Picard heard the computer's voice calling him from his sleep and, for a moment, he wondered what the emergency could be. Then he remembered: he had asked for this alarm call. Unhurriedly, he swung his legs off the bed, and drew himself upright. Then

he took a few luxurious moments to stretch the sleep out of his body. Picard padded into the head, and returned minutes later, dressed in his uniform.

"Computer. Time, please."

"It is now 0459 hours." Satisfied, he nodded and headed out of his quarters.

It was ship's night, and the Enterprise's corridors were dimly lit to correspond with the ship's diurnal cycle. At the end of the corridor, sensing his approach, the turbolift opened for Picard. He stepped aboard and said, "Bridge."

Lieutenant Commander Data looked around as he heard the sound of the turbolift doors swish open and stood up as he recognised the newcomer. If Data was surprised by the Captain's nocturnal visit to the Enterprise's bridge, his face gave no hint of it. "Good morning, Captain," said Data in his relentlessly polite voice, moving away from the central command seat as protocol demanded.

Captain Picard looked the android up and down, then, feigning surprise, said, "Mr Data. What are you doing here?"

The question caused the android to blink. "Sir?" he queried, unsure as to the Captain's precise meaning.

"Aren't you off duty? Your duty shift coincided with mine earlier."

"That is correct, sir. However, I am not off duty as -"

"Mr Data. My ready room. Now." The Human's voice was forbidding, and sent shivers up the backs of all those present who understood it.

"Yes, sir." The android wondered

what he had said to cause the Captain to interrupt his explanation. As they moved up the ramp towards the back of the bridge, a young Lieutenant slipped into the command chair, though her curious gaze covertly followed the path of the two senior officers. Her eyes were not the only ones to track their progress: everyone on the bridge watched with interest, wondering what Data had said to merit what was obviously going to be a reprimand.

Behind closed doors, the bridge crew could not see Picard walk over to the food replicator and order a mug of tea. The Captain was uncomfortably aware of the android's odd yellow eyes following his every move. When he turned back to face the Second Officer, Picard looked at the android's rigid posture and felt an unbidden thought flicker across his mind. It looks as if he's taken root there. "Sit down, Mr Data." Picard gestured towards the couch.

Data's head tilted slightly at the invitation. *Almost as if he didn't expect courtesy*, thought Picard.

The Human watched as Data tentatively folded his limbs and sat in the best approximation of a relaxed attitude that he could manage. The android patiently waited for the Captain to speak.

In spite of himself, Picard found the intensity of Data's yellow gaze to be slightly disconcerting, and he cleared his throat to allow himself a couple of moments to collect his thoughts. Finally he said, "Now, Mr Data. How come you are still on duty? Our shift ended twelve hours ago."

"I am always on duty, Captain." Data's affable tone held a hint of bemusement.

"What do you mean, 'always on

duty?"

"I am an android, sir. I have no need for rest as do organic life forms. Therefore, in all my previous posts I have been assigned to work all shifts."

"I see." Something in his attitude suggested to Data that the Captain did not approve. Picard pursed his lips. "On my ship, however, no-one is routinely expected to work more than one shift in three. I expect you to amend the shift rota accordingly."

"Aye, sir." Data made as if to stand up.

"Not *now*, Mr Data. It can wait until you're due back on duty."

"Aye, sir." Data sank back into his seat. His face wore the perplexed expression with which the Captain was destined to become so familiar.

"You have a problem, Commander?"

"Inquiry: what should I do with my off-duty time?"

"I don't know. It's your free time. Find yourself a hobby."

Data seemed to give this a moment's thought, then said, "May I be dismissed?"

"Certainly, Mr Data."

After the Lieutenant Commander had left, Picard finished his tea. Then, satisfied with the way the meeting had gone, he stood up and made his own way out of the ready room. He glanced across the bridge on his way through and satisfied himself that Data had, as intended, left it in the hands of someone else.

Admiral Fortescue, Picard mused, would have been proud of me. The first step in socialising the android was to free him of his unreasonable - and unfair - commitments as unobtrusively as possible. Now, if he could just find someone to nursemaid the android through the next few months... He would have to mention it to the ship's Counselor.

Ship's Counselor Deanna Troi was preoccupied. Images of her Imzadi, a man she had thought she would never see again, intruded into her consciousness. She tried to control them, but they rose unbidden, unwanted and confusing. For the thousandth time she thought, *it was over a long time ago. I'm over the pain, the hurt. Perhaps something positive will come out of our reunion, but, if not... What will be, will be. Thinking about the future will not change it.* Tired of being alone, with only her thoughts for company, Deanna Troi left her quarters, and decided to explore the ship.

It was a new vessel, and Deanna Troi still felt a little lost aboard her. This did not bother her unduly: she knew that feelings of disorientation were a perfectly normal part of settling in somewhere new and, more importantly, that they would diminish with time. The quicker she made friends, the quicker that time would come.

With the thought of seeking out some company uppermost in her mind, the Counselor headed in the direction of the nearest turbo-lift. As she made her way along the corridor she noticed a slender figure coming in the opposite direction. Troi recognised the Enterprise's Second Officer.

"Good evening, Data."

"Good evening, Counselor." He drew to a stop next to her as if expecting her to say something more. She wondered what it might be.

Then, suddenly remembering the conversation that she had had with the Captain earlier that afternoon, Deanna realised that Data was probably not well versed in the art of making polite conversation. "Would you care to come for a drink with me?" Deanna asked abruptly, surprising herself by the way the question had appeared fully formed and without any conscious thought on her part. Data blinked his yellow eyes, slightly taken aback by the question. "You do drink, don't you, Data?"

"I am capable of that function, Counselor."

"Then, would you care to come for a drink?"

"Inquiry: with what purpose in mind?"

Deanna's smile broadened. Could Data really be so naive that he didn't know about drinking as a social activity? Then she decided that, yes, perhaps he could be. After all, wasn't that just the sort of thing that the Captain had been talking about earlier? She said, "No purpose other than to get to know you better."

Data's yellow eyes blinked again, and he asked, "Why would you wish to know me better?"

"Why not?" It was a flippant remark, but Data answered it seriously.

"People do not usually choose to seek out my company unless they are interested in cybernetics."

Deanna placed a hand gently on

Data's arm. Unused to being touched, he stared at the woman's hand, a gesture that was not lost on the Counselor. "We will be serving together for a long time, Data. I'd like to get to know you better. Not as a machine, but as a person."

"In that case, Counselor, I would like to have a drink with you." And the corners of his lips tilted upwards in a tentative attempt at a smile.

Standing together in the turbolift Deanna realised that even off duty she was back at work. Mentally she shrugged. *After all, I did tell Captain Picard that I would help. And, if nothing else, having a drink with Data will keep my mind off Will.*

Picard, and, indeed, the rest of his crew, soon found themselves overtaken by events. The encounter with the mysterious entity known as Q, events at Farpoint Station, and the incorporation of new crew members into the Enterprise's nascent community took up much of Picard's attention over the next couple of weeks. As a result, he did not have time to wonder how Data was getting on, and whether or not the android had managed to find himself a hobby.

Gradually, however, rumours started to reach him. Data had been seen on the holodeck. Data had tried to whistle, or Data had climbed trees, or... If the rumours were true, Data's behavioural patterns were not quite what Picard would have expected from a machine with a huge intellect. However, if the stories that Data was experimenting with activities that would make him seem more Human had any basis in fact, well, the Captain could hardly object. He chose to keep his ears open, but he did not interfere again.

Lt Geordi La Forge had a headache. It drummed across his forehead and sliced through his temples. It was an old familiar pain, and one which he accepted as an essential part of his life, the price he had to pay for his sight. There were times though, like now, when he felt desperate to free himself from the strain and hurt he felt.

La Forge keyed in the commands for his chosen holodeck scenario, then waited for the 'deck's doors to part. Finally they slid open, and the polite voice of the Enterprise's computer said, "Enter when ready."

The navigator had chosen a summer's day on Earth. He walked along a mountain path for a few hundred metres, acclimatising himself to the fantasy he had chosen, then he headed off at right angles, making for a little cluster of trees and the mottled shade they offered. He sat down, breathed in the scented air of the countryside, and reached up to the sides of his face. He carefully removed the VISOR, placed it next to him where he could find it again easily, and then he lay back.

For a while he just rested there, enjoying the sensations as the tension drained from his head and body. Then, gradually, he began to take stock of his surroundings. Sometimes, in his efforts to interpret the crazy images the VISOR provided him with, he found himself forgetting to heed his other senses. Moments like this allowed him to redress the balance.

His finger tips caressed the blades of grass beneath his hands. He savoured the gentle breeze which stroked his face. He listened to the whisper of the tree branches as the air caught at the leaves, the sound of birdsong, the chirring of crickets. He experienced his environment in a way he did not have time to during

the normal routine of ship-board life.

A relaxed, lazy grin settled on his face.

Footsteps. He heard footsteps.

It was his own fault, he supposed. In his hurry to get in here he had forgotten to put a privacy lock on the holodeck and so the programme was fair game for anyone else wishing to use it.

The footsteps came nearer. Geordi turned his head towards them. From the sound of it, they were coming along the footpath above. There was a pause, then the footfalls became muffled as the other person chose to follow Geordi's earlier route, and struck off across the grass.

Geordi La Forge listened intently, ruefully thinking that his relaxation was about to be curtailed. Politeness would demand that he replaced the VISOR: he knew that most Humans found the blank greyness of his eyes to be disconcerting. Perhaps, though, it was mere coincidence that the newcomer was heading this way. Perhaps -

It was no coincidence. The footfalls stopped a few feet short of La Forge, and a curious voice said, "What are you doing, Lieutenant?" La Forge scrambled for the VISOR, but just as he reached for it, the newcomer said, "You do not need to move on my account. If I am disturbing you, I will leave."

It took Geordi a few moments to identify the voice's owner. He was still too unfamiliar with most of the crew to recognise them automatically. However, the precise but affable intonation of the android Second Officer was rather more distinctive than most. Geordi said, "No, Commander. You're not disturbing me. I was just going to put my VISOR back on. Most people feel ill-at-ease about..."

Geordi waved a vague hand towards his face.

"Your face appears to be within the parameters of normality to me, Lieutenant." There was a pause as the speaker seemed to consider his words. "That is apart from -"

"My eyes. Yeah." Geordi sighed. He moved for the VISOR once more, but again his gesture was interrupted by the android's voice.

"Inquiry: you have taken the VISOR off for a reason?"

"Yes. I was... I had a headache." La Forge shrugged one shoulder.

"Do you require medical attention?" Geordi wondered whether he imagined it, or was there really a note of concern in that even voice?

"No, no. It's a side effect of wearing the VISOR. That's all. It just helps to take it off once in a while."

La Forge imagined the android to be frowning as he said his next few words, puzzled. "Then why are you putting it on again?"

"I thought you would be more comfortable if I did so."

"I do not feel discomfort, Lieutenant." There was an strangely tremulous note in that sentence. Perhaps he was imagining things, but La Forge was pretty certain that he detected both confusion and sorrow in the android's tone. Was that possible?

Curiosity had caught the lieutenant by now, and any irritation he had felt at being disturbed fled. "Uh, Commander? Would you like to sit down?"

There was a soft rustle of fabric as Data seated himself at Geordi's side.

"Commander," La Forge suddenly asked, "why are you here?"

Data clearly did not understand Geordi's question because he said, "Here?"

"On the holodeck. I wouldn't have thought -" He broke off abruptly. *Wouldn't have thought, what? That he could be interested in recreational pursuits? Why shouldn't he be? Aren't my attitudes just a little presumptuous?*

"I am currently off duty. I was walking past the holodecks, and I happened to see that this one was in use. I was curious."

"Oh." A thought crossed Geordi's mind. "What do you normally do when you are off duty?"

This time Geordi was certain that he heard a hint of uncertainty in Data's voice. "I am not sure," said the android. "Captain Picard is the first commanding officer to routinely allocate me time away from my duties."

"What? Data, that's terrible!" In his indignation, Geordi failed to notice that his addressing a senior officer in such a familiar way was less than respectful. "You mean that everywhere else you've served, you've always been on duty?"

"Yes."

"But that's inhuman!"

"I am not Human. I am an android. I have no need for rest and recreation."

"Perhaps not a physical need, no. But..." He shrugged, appalled. *What was I thinking just now, about my assumptions being*

presumptuous? Seems like I'm not the only one. "How long have you been in Starfleet, anyway?"

"Nineteen years."

"Nineteen *years!*?" Nineteen years without being scheduled off duty?! La Forge couldn't even begin to imagine it. What was even worse, though, was that Data didn't seem to think that anything was wrong with this. Geordi felt indignant on his companion's behalf. "So, uh, Commander. Have you any idea what you're going to do with your spare time, now that you've got some?"

"I am not sure. I have been trying to learn to whistle."

Geordi stifled a laugh. That particular story had spread around the ship like wildfire. "Do you have a hobby?"

"I do not think so."

"Do you have any friends that you could spend time with?"

Data thought about this for a moment. He had often observed Human friendships. They seemed to involve spending inordinate amounts of time talking about nothing much and drinking endless cups of coffee. Alternatively, friends seemed to get involved in various types of recreational pursuits that seemed beyond his comprehension. He thought about the drink he had shared with Deanna Troi. Even he had been able to see that conversation had been stilted, and he had drunk very little. Surely that did not count.

"I do not believe I have any friends, Lieutenant."

Geordi stared into his personal blizzard of nothing, horrified. *Everyone*

should have friends, he thought. *And, dammit, I like this guy!* "Oh, yes, you do!"

The navigator could not see it, of course, but Data's brow furrowed as he said, "Who?"

"Me." Geordi couldn't see whether or not Data smiled, either, but he didn't need to.

"Counselor," said Picard thoughtfully, several days later as they talked in his ready room. "Did you say anything to La Forge about Data?"

"No, Captain." Troi's voice rose, making her answer into a request for more information.

"They've been spending a lot of time together. That's all."

Now that Picard mentioned it, Troi realised that they had. It was an unusual pairing, not simply because of the fact that one was an android and the other Human, but also because of the discrepancies in rank. Troi frowned slightly, then said, "Do you think it's a problem, sir?"

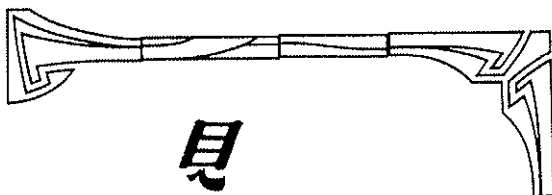
"No. No. Quite the contrary, Counselor."

After Troi left, Picard stared out of the window for some time. The Captain's angular face was softened by a slight smile. *No. Any friendship between Data and La Forge can only do good. And if they came by it without any prompting from outside, well, that's all the better.* Then, more cynically, Picard mused, *Data is a nuisance at times, and if La Forge saves me the trouble of personally having to nursemaid him through his time with us, I'll be very grateful.*

Picard harumphed slightly, and

turned away from the stars. He spoke to the computer and ordered, "Tea. Earl Grey. Hot." Then he picked up a leather

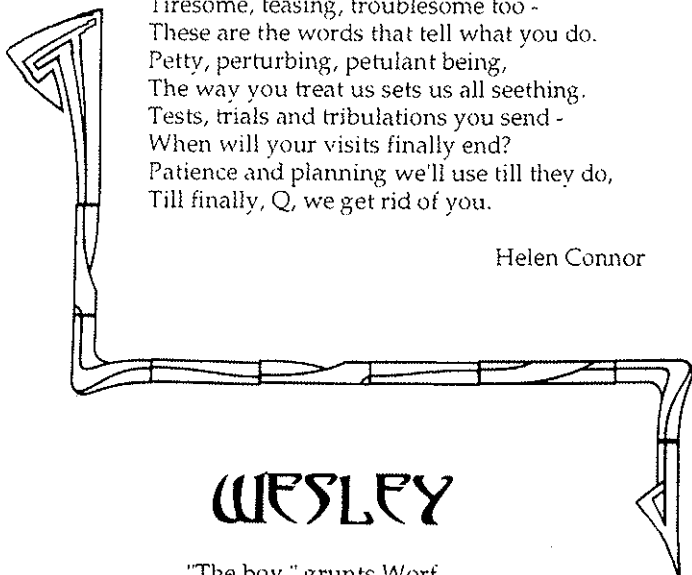
bound book, and made his way to the couch, grateful that his navigator had given him one thing less to worry about.



Q

Questioning, querying, quarrelsome Q.
Oh! how these words tell me of you.
Placid, peaceful and perfect you ain't;
You can't be described as pleasant or quaint.
Tiresome, teasing, troublesome too -
These are the words that tell what you do.
Petty, perturbing, petulant being,
The way you treat us sets us all seething.
Tests, trials and tribulations you send -
When will your visits finally end?
Patience and planning we'll use till they do,
Till finally, Q, we get rid of you.

Helen Connor

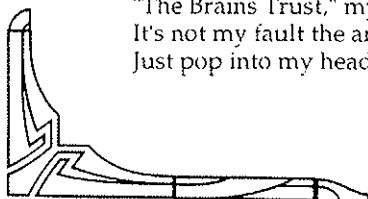


WESLEY

"The boy," grunts Worf.
"The boy," says Picard.
"The boy," echoes Riker -
Those words will drive me mad.

"Young Wesley," say the adults.
"The Brains Trust," my peers have said.
It's not my fault the answers
Just pop into my head!

Helen Connor



SAFFRON

by

J Schmidt

Saffron stood there waiting for her father to join her, though she didn't really want him to. She knew that he was only trying to look after her interests, but she didn't need him to; after all, she was a Starfleet officer.

Saffron smiled at her father when he finally joined her.

"I know what you are feeling," her father said.

"Don't do it this time," Saffron pleaded. Every time that she was due to transfer to a new ship her father insisted on meeting her new Captain; not only that but he also tried to marry her off. Usually she was able to stop him before things went too far, but she knew in her heart that it was only a matter of time before she wouldn't be able to any more; then she would be in really big trouble. *Still*, she thought to herself, *this meeting does have its advantages*. She was going to see an old friend from her Academy days.

She wondered just how much Keiko had changed - after all, it had been a long time since she had last heard from her, not that it was entirely Keiko's fault that the friendship had ended. She too had been lax in keeping in touch. *Perhaps*, she thought, *I'll be able to renew that friendship once I'm on board the Enterprise*.

Saffron was starting to have serious doubts about her move to the Enterprise and the promotion that it brought with it. She knew that she was very young to have got such a position and the responsibility scared her.

Her father looked at her. He knew

that she was having doubts - she always did. He shook his head slowly. He knew that she could do it, but if he said anything it would only serve to make her feel even more doubtful. No, he would have to let someone else tell her that she could do the job; then she would believe it.

Keiko was starting to feel very annoyed at Miles' reaction to her going down with the Captain. He had already tried to persuade her otherwise. She had eventually managed to explain why she had to go, but he still hadn't liked it.

Keiko smiled as she remembered the time when Saffron had invited her home during the Academy recess. She had accepted eagerly; it was the chance of a lifetime. Very few people ever got to go to Tetrias.

Tetrias was one of those worlds which was within the Federation but tended to keep to themselves. They shared their scientific discoveries with the Federation but very few of them ever left their home world for long. Saffron, however, was an exception to the rule; she loved being part of Starfleet and everything that went with that.

Keiko smiled at Miles as he handled the transporter controls. She could tell that he was still angry at her decision from the way that he wasn't looking at her.

Saffron started to shuffle her feet.

The sooner they arrived, the sooner she could leave.

"Stop doing that!" her father said sharply.

Saffron tried to collect her thoughts.

"Captain Picard!" her father said, walking towards one of two now-materialising figures.

Saffron forgot how she should behave and ran towards where Keiko now stood. When she reached her, she hugged her. "It's so good to see you again! Come on, I'll show you around!" Saffron said excitedly. Keiko looked at her; it seemed as if Saffron had hardly aged at all since the last time she had seen her.

"Business first," her father reminded her.

"Of course," she replied somewhat reluctantly.

"If you will follow me, Captain?" Saffron's father said.

Saffron dragged her feet as she walked beside Keiko. She would have preferred to miss the business part of the meeting and she had already thought of what she wanted to show Keiko. "I hate this," she said.

"What?" Keiko asked.

"The questions he's going to ask," Saffron said.

"He still does it?" Keiko said in surprise.

Saffron just nodded. She felt so embarrassed by her father's actions and it wasn't going to make a very good impression on her new Captain.

"Don't worry," Keiko said, trying to reassure her.

When they finally entered Saffron's father's office, Keiko tried not to giggle. The walls were covered in pictures of Saffron at various ages. Keiko looked across at Saffron, who had gone a very deep shade of red.

"Please sit down, Captain."

"This is - " Picard started.

"Keiko, my child. It's good that you've come again," Saffron's father said.

"Papa Joe, I am pleased to be back," Keiko said. Picard looked at her.

"It's all right, Captain. Most of my daughter's friends call me that," Papa Joe said. "I just wanted to meet the man under whom my daughter will be serving," he added.

"It was a slightly unusual request to make," Picard commented.

"I also wanted to explain a few things about Saffron. She is special, even as a Tetrian."

Picard looked at him; he knew that Tetrans were rumoured to have empathic abilities, but nothing, so far, had ever been proved.

"Father, I can explain perfectly well myself what I am capable of," Saffron said.

"Go ahead, then," her father said.

"I have certain empathic powers... plus a few little extras," Saffron said.

"Starfleet does know," Papa Joe said.

"These skills aren't mentioned in your record," Picard said.

"Vulcan privacy laws," Saffron replied. "I tended to get a lot of dishonest offers when people suspected something."

Picard looked at her. *So the rumours are true.* He just hoped that her skills wouldn't cause any friction on his ship. He had, of course, read her record, which was very impressive for someone so young.

"If that is all?" Picard said, looking at Papa Joe.

"Not quite. I would like to talk to Keiko alone for a few minutes," he said.

Saffron's heart sank. Her father was bound to try to pressure Keiko into something. Knowing Keiko, though, she would realise what he was up to and say no.

Picard and Saffron left the office.

Keiko sat there listening to Papa Joe asking her to keep an eye on Saffron. "I know that I worry too much about her, but she is my only daughter," he admitted.

"She is going to be perfectly all right," Keiko said, trying to reassure him. She could remember him being the same when she had visited before. His reaction had made her feel like part of the family; it had also made her feel slightly guilty at the way that her family had treated Saffron on her visits. He had spoiled both of them; anything that they wanted, they could have.

"Take this," Papa Joe went on, handing Keiko a disc.

"What is it?"

"Just a little something I thought might be useful for the future." He loved giving Saffron's friends gifts, but only if he thought that they deserved them. He hated people trying to use their friendship with Saffron for their own gain.

"That's all for now," Papa Joe said. Keiko felt relieved; she had been expecting him to ask her to find a suitable man for Saffron. *Maybe, she thought, Saffron was worrying unduly about Papa Joe's plans.*

Saffron stood outside the office trying to engage in small talk with her new Captain. She knew what sort of man he was just by reading his surface emotions; she could have gone a lot deeper if she had wanted to, but that wouldn't have been polite. She had a set of principles which she applied to her skills and she tried very hard not to break them.

Occasionally a situation came up that meant that she had to bend them a little, but it was always a difficult thing for her to do. This had caused her a few problems in the past with her former Captains not always understanding the way that she felt. Saffron got the distinct impression that Picard would understand; after all, he was a man of principles himself.

Saffron watched as the door to the office opened. Keiko was smiling; *That's definitely a good sign,* Saffron told herself.

"Captain, you and your senior officers are invited to a party that I am hosting this evening," Papa Joe said.

"We would be delighted to attend," Picard replied.

"Well?" Saffron whispered to Keiko.

"No mention," Keiko said softly. Saffron breathed a sigh of relief - then she realised that her father was only delaying it until the party.

"Lieutenant, if you are ready?" Picard said.

"Sir," Saffron replied. It would have been a lot easier if she could just remain on the surface instead of beaming up only to beam down later for the party! Still, that was the way that her Captain had arranged things and who was she to say otherwise? *It will, she decided, give me the chance to talk to Keiko where father can't listen in!*

Saffron looked round the Enterprise's transporter room. The transporter operator was not looking happy. He waited until Picard had left the room before speaking.

"How did it go?"

"Miles, this is Saffron," Keiko said.

"My father kept us," Saffron explained. "He had a little talk with Keiko."

"Really," Miles said, looking at Saffron.

"He gave me a present," Keiko said, showing Miles the disc that Papa Joe had given her.

"What is it?" he asked.

"A piece of land," Saffron replied.

Keiko looked at her. "What piece of land?"

"The Valley of Peace," Saffron said. It had been her idea in the first place.

"I can't accept it!" Keiko exclaimed. "It's too much!"

"He'll be upset if you return it. Just look after it," Saffron said. If her father had one other fault besides being over-protective, it was his generosity. He had never learned that you could be too generous, that it tended to embarrass the recipient of the gift.

"I'll think about it," Keiko said. She didn't want to upset Papa Joe, but she couldn't really accept such a valuable gift either. Maybe she would find a solution in time for the party.

She left the transporter room with Saffron.

Miles O'Brien watched them go. What she said had intrigued him. Keiko had told him that she and Saffron had done things together at the Academy. He could never have imagined his Keiko doing anything like it; he hadn't really believed her until she had shown him the poster she had kept.

THE SENSATIONAL SAFFRON, the poster had said. As Miles read it, he became aware that Keiko had gone very quiet.

"Why didn't you tell me about this?" he'd asked.

"It was a long time ago. It was fun at the time," Keiko had finally said, then she had refused to say any more about it.

As Saffron and Keiko walked down the corridor they realised they were having difficulty finding anything to say to each other.

"I presume that was your husband?" Saffron finally said.

"Miles can be difficult at times," Keiko admitted.

"You're both coming to the party, aren't you? I'm inviting you," Saffron said.

"We'll have to see," Keiko replied. Then - "Do you still do the act?"

"I never found a partner as good as you," Saffron said. The act had got to a stage where she had started to find it boring, so she had stopped doing it. "I might revive it, though - that is, if you are interested?"

"Of course I am!" Keiko replied. She had enjoyed being part of Saffron's act.

"Are you doing anything right now?"

"No - why?" Keiko asked.

"Maybe we could practice a few of the old tricks for the party tonight," Saffron suggested.

"That's a wonderful idea! It would give the Captain a chance to see just what you are capable of."

"I know - it's easier to show him than to explain," Saffron agreed.

"What tricks were you thinking of doing?" Keiko asked.

"The mind reading, the levitation and the disappearing act," Saffron said. Those were the ones she felt most confident of. With time and practice she could do the other parts of the act, but there was no point in attempting to do something she was rusty at - it could be dangerous to Keiko.

"We're going to need costumes and props," Keiko said.

"They're in my room. I kept them - just in case," Saffron told her. She didn't really need the props, they just added a bit of flash.

"We can practice in your quarters. There should be enough room," Keiko suggested.

"We don't tell anyone. Not even your Miles," Saffron said.

"Agreed!" Keiko replied.

Together they went to Saffron's quarters. Within an hour it was as if they had never stopped doing the act together.

"We're about as ready as we can be," Saffron said.

"If you're sure," Keiko replied, but she knew that Saffron was right. They had reached a stage where everything was going just right.

"I'll see you later, then," Keiko said as she left.

"Okay!" Saffron agreed.

She sat on her bed after the door closed. She felt tired from the concentrated practising; she would have to recover before the party if she wasn't going to be a complete flop. As she sat there, Saffron wondered how her father and his guests would react to the impromptu act. He knew that she liked to use her skills to entertain people, but she'd told him that she'd given up doing that a long time ago - which at the time had been true. Strangely, he had believed her, which wasn't like him at all.

Saffron finally gave in to her body's need for rest. getting changed.

It was the door chimes that eventually woke her. Sleepily, Saffron got off her bed and called, "Come."

"You're not ready yet!" Keiko said in surprise.

"Give me five minutes," Saffron said. She straightened her uniform and did her hair. There was no point in changing, as she would soon be getting into her costume.

Once she was straightened up, Saffron left her quarters and walked with Miles and Keiko to the transporter room.

As soon as they had beamed down, Saffron and Keiko slipped off as unobtrusively as possible. Quickly they ran to Saffron's room, where she changed.

"How are we going to move the props?" Keiko asked, looking at them. She had forgotten how unwieldy they were.

"We don't really need them," Saffron said.

"Then what are we going to use?"

"We'll sort something out," Saffron replied. They wouldn't need much, and the lack of props *would* make it look less like a set-up.

"We could get the audience to choose?" Keiko suggested; she was thinking along the same lines as Saffron now.

"Ready," Saffron said as she finished

They left Saffron's room, keeping to the back corridors which Saffron hoped would be deserted. They were lucky; the corridors were empty. It took them some time to reach the hall where the party was being held; Now they only had the problem of getting everyone's attention.

Saffron found the light switches and flashed the lights on and off several times. She could hear her father apologise for the inconvenience. A moment later she walked into the hall, Keiko at her heels.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Saffron announced loudly. People turned to see what was happening. "Tonight you are going to witness feats of magic you just won't believe."

Slowly, she and Keiko walked to the front of the hall. People stepped to one side to let them through. Once they were at the front, they turned to face the waiting audience.

"My assistant will walk amongst you freely. She will stand by someone totally at random. I shall attempt to tell you who she is standing beside whilst wearing this blindfold," Saffron said.

Keiko tied the blindfold round Saffron's eyes. Saffron then turned so that her back was to the audience.

Keiko walked amongst the guests and stopped next to Dr Beverly Crusher. "Ready," she said, nervous despite herself.

"You are standing next to Dr Beverly Crusher of the USS Enterprise," Saffron said confidently. A round of applause rang out in the hall.

"Choose someone else, please, Keiko," Saffron said. Keiko obeyed, this time picking someone she didn't know.

Saffron said who it was. They repeated this several times, and each time Saffron was correct.

"Now for the next part of the entertainment. I will need a willing victim - er, volunteer."

No-one stopped forward, so Keiko moved forward and selected Data. She led him to the front of the hall. Saffron looked at him and tried not to giggle.

"There's nothing to worry about," she said reassuringly. "Just lie down anywhere you want." Data looked at her then did as she asked. Saffron concentrated, then slowly Data started to rise into the air. He rose higher and higher until he was above Saffron's head. Then she started to move him around the hall over people's heads. Finally she lowered him to the floor again.

Data got to his feet. "Intriguing," he said.

The applause was even louder than before. Saffron took a deep bow. "And now for our grand finale. I will make my assistant Keiko disappear in front of your very eyes."

Keiko walked towards Saffron, who, meanwhile, had managed to get hold of a large tablecloth. When Keiko reached Saffron, she stood ready; Saffron covered her with the tablecloth.

"Three. Two. One. Gone!" Saffron said. She dropped the tablecloth to the floor. There were gasps of amazement as Saffron picked the cloth up and shook it.

"One. Two. Three. Back to me!" Saffron said, holding the cloth up. When she dropped it, Keiko stepped forward.

"Good night," Saffron said. She and Keiko bowed. A huge round of applause

rang out in the hall.

Papa Joe stepped forward and hugged her. "Wonderful!" he said. He had never seen her act before, and had to admit (to himself) that he was surprised by the level of her skills.

Miles walked over to Keiko and smiled. "How did she do that?" he asked.

"Trade secret," Keiko replied. She had promised not to reveal Saffron's secret, and she intended to keep her promise. "You could always ask Saffron, but..."

Other members of the Enterprise party joined Saffron and Papa Joe.

"It's not in your record that you're a magician," Picard said.

"I'm not," Saffron replied. Picard just looked at her.

"But how...?" Crusher asked.

"Just a few of my skills. Consider it a demonstration," Saffron said. She was starting to feel hunger; when she used her skills a lot, she got either very tired or very hungry. "If you'll excuse me, I'll go get something to eat."

She made her way to the buffet table, picked up a plate and started to pile food onto it. People stared as she did so. When the plate was full Saffron left the table, looked round and found herself a seat. She started to stuff the food in her mouth and swallowed it without really chewing it properly. Soon she had finished the food on her plate; she went back and got some more. This time she ate it more slowly and carefully. She felt a lot better by the time she had finished. She thought about going for a third plateful, but decided that some of the guests would think that she was just

being greedy.

Saffron sat there looking around the hall. She didn't really know many of the guests. Still, it was more her father's party than hers. She would have preferred to have just boarded the Enterprise with as little fuss as possible. Except for when she did her act, Saffron preferred to melt into the background when she was allowed to - not that that happened very often. She thought about some of the things that her former captains had got her to do with her skills, but she had never disobeyed an order yet.

"Excuse me," a voice behind her said. Saffron turned to look at its owner.

"Hello again," she said.

"I am Lieutenant Commander Data," he introduced himself.

"I know," Saffron said.

"Your act is most intriguing. I do not understand how you made Keiko disappear," Data said.

"It's just a trick. I'll explain it later for you if you want," Saffron promised. She looked round just to make sure her father wasn't watching.

"You are looking for someone," Data said.

"Not really. It's my father - if he sees me talking to a man, he comes over and asks about their prospects."

"Prospects?" Data enquired.

"Their job, salary..." Saffron explained.

"For what purpose?" Data asked.

"To find out if they are suitable

candidates for marriage," Saffron told him. She would have preferred to drop the subject completely.

"To whom?" Data asked.

"Me."

"Saffron! There you are!" Papa Joe said loudly. He looked at Data.

"This is Lieutenant Commander Data," Saffron said.

"Sir," Data said.

"Just talking, were you?" Papa Joe asked.

"Father!" Saffron said sharply.

"Tell me about yourself, Lieutenant Commander," Papa Joe said. Saffron groaned.

"I am the second officer aboard the Enterprise," Data replied.

"Good chances for promotion, then," Papa Joe said. He looked at Data - just the sort of man that he would like Saffron to become involved with. For some reason his face was familiar...

"One day I may be given my own command; until then I am fortunate to serve under Captain Picard," Data said.

"Tell me, what do you think of Saffron?" Papa Joe asked.

"Her Starfleet record shows that she will be valuable to the Enterprise," Data replied.

"I meant personally," Papa Joe said.

"I do not know her well enough to make such a judgement," Data replied.

"I am sure that you will get to know Saffron very well," Papa Joe said, winking at Data. Data stood looking after Papa Joe as he walked away.

"Told you so!" Saffron said.

"You were correct about your father's intentions," Data said.

"He just wants to see me settled. All my brothers have families," Saffron replied.

"You are unhappy about your father's plans for you?"

"He has his faults... but I still love him," Saffron said. She thought about the things that her father had done to embarrass her, but he had let her do a lot more things than her brothers.

"Would you like to dance?" Data asked.

"Thank you, that would be nice," Saffron said. She blushed slightly.

Data led her onto the dance floor. She became aware that people were watching her and Data, especially her father, but she wasn't going to let that spoil her enjoyment. She had several dances with Data.

"Could we sit down for a while?" she asked. Her feet were starting to hurt.

"Of course," Data replied.

They found seats and sat down to talk. Saffron found that she liked Data because he was so straightforward and honest with her.

The fact that she had certain special skills only meant that he was more interested in her because of his curiosity. A lot of the men that she had been with in

the past had lost interest once they realised that she didn't use any kind of gadgets in her act; it seemed to frighten them. That was the other reason why she had given up the act - it had become too difficult to explain that she couldn't tell how the tricks worked.

"About your skills. You may need to be tested further," Data said.

"I know."

"I would be pleased to assist you. The more that you learn about your skills and their limits the more you will be an asset to the ship," Data said.

"You're nice," Saffron said.

"I have been told," Data admitted. Saffron blushed.

"I'll have to go and collect my things. I'll see you later," she said.

"Yes," Data replied.

As Saffron walked through the hall she thought about the time that he had had, and she felt a little sad at the thought of leaving her father again. She knew that she could always come home when she wanted to, but it would mean her giving up Starfleet and she didn't know if she was ready to do that yet.

When Saffron reached her room she looked around. There were just a few small personal items that she still had to pack, but they wouldn't take long. Her bags were lying on her bed; she had tried to take only the basics with her. Unfortunately her basics probably took up more room than other people's luxuries. She just had to take her small statue with her, as well as some of her plants. Most of what she was taking

would have seemed rather foolish to someone else, but it was very important to her.

As she packed the last of her belongings Saffron looked around just to make sure that she hadn't forgotten anything that she might need later on. She checked through her bags just to make sure, then she realised what was missing.

Her book.

She tipped the contents of her bags onto her bed just in case she had wrapped it in something and had forgotten about doing so. It wasn't there. She could remember seeing it on the side when she left to meet her father earlier in the day, but she couldn't remember seeing it when she had returned to get changed for her act.

Somebody had obviously taken it whilst she was out of her room, but why? It was totally useless to anyone but herself.

"Come I come in?" her father asked. Saffron looked at him. He had her book in his hands. "I was just looking at it. Very interesting," Papa Joe said.

"Can I have it back?" Saffron asked.

"Of course. I've looked at it before," Papa Joe said.

Saffron looked at him. She didn't seem to have any right to privacy left at all. "Why?" she asked.

"I know about your dreams. Sometimes they come true," he said.

"I hate the bad ones," Saffron said.

"You can't help it."

"That doesn't make it any easier, though," Saffron complained. Often she had lain awake for nights after having a really bad dream. She tried to work out what it meant.

"One dream keeps happening," Papa Joe said. Saffron nodded. It was an old dream she'd been having on and off for years, but lately it had been nearly every night.

"Maybe it's coming true," her father said. Saffron looked at him. Perhaps he was right. She had thought about it since she had first seen Data. "I only really came to say goodbye," he added.

"Don't worry. I'm always careful." It was, she knew, pointless telling him not to worry; he always would. Still, she had admitted to herself that the universe was a very big and dangerous place to be in, but that was what had made joining Starfleet so exciting.

Saffron quickly repacked her bags. This time she held on to her book. She had liked to keep its contents private, but now that she knew her father had looked through it, it seemed to have lost some of its specialness.

Together, she and her father walked out of the room and down the corridor. Saffron carried her own bags as she wanted to keep a close eye on them. Finally they reached the hall. Most of her father's guests had already left - she hadn't realised how late it was. *No doubt, she thought, I'll be on duty first thing in the morning.*

"Miles will give you a hand with those," Keiko said.

"It's all right," Saffron replied. She wanted to manage on her own.

"Now remember - take care. Eat regularly and don't forget to write," Papa Joe said.

"I always write, and I never eat regularly!" Saffron said, hugging her father.

"If you're ready, Lieutenant?" Picard said.

She joined Picard and the others from the Enterprise.

Once on board the Enterprise Saffron went to her quarters. She started to unpack, then checked to see when she was due to go on duty. She was pleased to see that it wasn't until later the next day; that would give her time to get sorted out and settled in. She wondered if she should look around before she went to bed, or wait until the morning; finally she decided to explore before going to bed. That would give her the morning to refresh her memory.

Saffron straightened herself up and left her quarters. She had heard so much about the facilities on board the Enterprise, especially the recreational ones; and when she had first learned about her promotion and transfer to the Enterprise, she had read everything about this ship that she could get hold of - as she always had done. She believed in being well prepared for her postings.

She walked down the corridor and got into the first turbolift she reached. "Deck Ten," she said. The turbolift set off. She knew exactly where she was going and what she was going to do once she got there.

The turbolift stopped; Saffron got out and continued to walk down the corridor. She soon came to a set of doors

bearing the sign 'Ten Forward'. She went in and looked around. It was a lot bigger than she had expected, and the view of her home world was breathtaking. She'd seen Tetrias from space before, but this time it seemed even more spectacular than ever before.

She went up to the bar and got herself a drink and a plate of pasta; she was still feeling hungry despite what she had eaten earlier at the party. She looked around for a suitable place to sit. When she found one, she started to eat. Occasionally she looked round to see who was coming in. She closed her eyes so that she could think about her likely duties the next day.

From behind the bar, Guinan watched Saffron and smiled to herself. She knew that she would get to know this woman well - in time.

Data entered Ten Forward. He had finished his duties after returning from the party; and he looked forward to his visits to Ten Forward as they provided him with a great deal of insight into Human behaviour.

Saffron, instead of thinking about her duties, fell asleep.

Data got a drink and walked over to Saffron. He still hadn't worked out how she made Keiko disappear, and she had said she would explain it to him.

Saffron was having a wonderful dream - the one she had been having a lot recently.

"Excuse me," Data said, looking down at her.

In her dream she could hear his voice as if he stood next to her.

"Are you all right?" Data asked as

he gently touched her shoulder.

Saffron woke with a start. "Who?... What?" she said in surprise. Then she saw Data. "Hello again, Lieutenant Commander." She tried to compose herself.

"Please call me Data," he said.

"I must have been more tired than I thought I was," Saffron said. "Er - please sit down." She sat up and rubbed her eyes.

"You should have said 'more tired'," Data corrected her.

"Whatever. So what do you want?" Saffron asked.

"You said you would explain how you made Keiko disappear," Data reminded her.

"If I tell you, you don't tell anyone - not even the Captain," Saffron told him.

"I promise."

"It was an optical illusion. I just made everyone think that she had gone." Saffron said the first thing that came into her head.

"So in reality she was still standing there?" Data said.

"That's right. I can make objects seem to appear from thin air." Saffron hoped that he would be satisfied with her explanation.

"What other skills do you possess?" Data asked.

"I can read thought and levitate things."

"And you may have other abilities

of which you are not as yet aware," Data commented.

Saffron started to play with the food on her plate. "Yes," she lied. She didn't really think that the dreams counted as a 'skill'; after all, she could never be really sure of what they meant or when they might happen.

"I have prepared a list of tests that we could attempt," Data said.

Saffron looked at him. She wasn't in any fit state to do anything other than go back to her quarters and sleep. "When do you want to start doing these tests?"

"If you are free now, we could start them immediately," Data said eagerly.

"I'm... not free at the moment," Saffron told him.

"You are waiting for someone. I will leave," Data said, getting up.

"No, I'm not waiting for someone." Saffron decided on the truth. "I'm just tired. I don't work so well when I'm tired; I get sloppy and make mistakes," she explained.

"I should have realised," Data said.

"It's not your fault. Tell you what, we'll start the tests before I go on duty tomorrow." Hopefully by then she would have had enough sleep to get her strength back.

"That will be satisfactory," Data agreed.

"If you'll excuse me, Data. Good night," Saffron said as she left the table. She left Ten Forward hardly able to keep her eyes open. She kept pinching her arm to stop herself from falling asleep in the turbolift. Once she reached her quarters

she just lay on her back and went straight to sleep.

Data sat in Ten Forward thinking about the conversation he had just had with Saffron. He was curious about just what she was capable of. He would, of course, keep a complete record of the tests and their outcome to show the Captain.

Guinan walked over to him. She sat beside him. "Your friend gone?"

"She needed to rest," Data replied.

"She is a very special person," Guinan said. She got up again and left, leaving Data somewhat puzzled by her remark.

Saffron started to dream. He was alone now; she could almost feel his pain. She saw herself walking towards him. Then a wall appeared in front of her, stopping her from reaching him. She hit out at the wall time and time again. Slowly, piece by piece, the wall started to crumble. When there was a hole barely big enough for her to crawl through, she looked through it. He still stood there, the pain even worse. She squeezed through the hole. She was just about to touch him -

Something woke her up. Instinctively she grabbed her book and pen; quickly she wrote down her dream, as she always did. Then she heard the noise that had wakened her, repeating. Saffron yawned and called, "Come!"

It was Keiko. "Sorry - did I wake you?" she asked. Saffron just nodded. "I was wondering if you'd like to have breakfast with me in Ten Forward," Keiko

went on.

"Let me get changed," Saffron said sleepily.

Keiko looked round. Most of Saffron's things still needed to be unpacked.

Saffron went into the bathroom and had a quick shower; then she went back into the main cabin, opened one of her bags and found something to wear.

Keiko looked at her and shook her head. Saffron had never had any dress sense; she had always just worn the first thing that came to hand.

"You're not really going to wear *that*, are you?" Keiko asked.

"Of course I am," Saffron said. There was absolutely nothing wrong with the way that she dressed off duty; she just preferred to wear things that didn't restrict her movements.

"If you're sure..." Keiko said doubtfully.

"I'm ready," Saffron said, pulling on an old battered pair of boots that had seen better days.

Saffron let Keiko leave her quarters first before she picked up her book. She quickly caught up with Keiko as she walked down the corridor. "How's Miles this morning?"

"Fine," Keiko said. "You had a good time last night."

"Yes, I did. He's nice, isn't he?" Saffron said.

Keiko looked at her. "Who, Data?"

"He's organised some tests for me,"

Saffron said as they got into the turbolift.

"Ten Forward," Keiko said. "You'll like it."

"I was there last night," Saffron said, omitting the fact that she had spoken to Data the previous night.

As they walked into Ten Forward Saffron looked around, feeling slightly embarrassed as she remembered that she had fallen asleep there the night before.

Keiko felt extremely self-conscious walking into Ten Forward with Saffron dressed the way she was. She felt as if everyone was staring at her and tried to push it to the back of her mind. *It's only my imagination*, she told herself.

"What do you want?" Keiko asked.

"Just coffee," Saffron replied. She never ate breakfast if she could help it, though her father was always going on about it. It was just that she never felt hungry when she had just wakened.

Saffron found a table while Keiko collected their food. She sat looking round at what was going on.

"Looking for someone?" Keiko asked, putting Saffron's coffee in front of her.

"No," Saffron lied as she cast a quick glance over to the door.

"He should be in later," Keiko said. She noticed that Saffron was blushing; she could remember being that way when she had first met Miles.

Saffron drank her coffee slowly, then picked up her book and opened it.

"What is that?" Keiko asked.

"The book of dreams," Saffron said. *That's not a lie*, she told herself. *Just bending the truth a little.*

"Can I have a look?" asked Keiko.

Saffron thought about it for a moment. It couldn't really do any harm, she decided; it wasn't very likely that Keiko could understand any of it. "It's pretty complicated," she said as she handed the book over.

Keiko flipped through the book, recognising the writing as Saffron's, and gave it back. "What's it for?"

"Nothing, really. You could call it a diary. A lot of us have them."

"Of dreams," Keiko said.

"You've got it in one. I'd rather you didn't mention this book to anyone," Saffron added.

"Book? What book?" Keiko said.

"Thanks," Saffron said. She knew she could trust Keiko.

Keiko watched Saffron for a moment. *Strange*, she thought. Some of the parts that she had flipped through seemed familiar...

Saffron put the book down and finished her coffee.

"What sort of tests are you and Data to be doing?" Keiko asked, changing the subject.

"I'm not sure. I - er - I told him that the disappearing act was an optical illusion."

"You lied to him!" said Keiko in surprise.

"I'm entitled to some secrets," Saffron muttered.

"He won't like it when he finds out," Keiko warned.

"Well, he won't find out from me!" Saffron said sharply.

Keiko shook her head. She had forgotten how stubborn Saffron could be. Still, Data could probably give her a run for her money. But she certainly didn't want to be around when Saffron lost her temper!

"Do you want another coffee?" Keiko asked.

"I'll get them." Saffron got up.

While she was gone, Keiko reached over and picked up the book again. She couldn't help herself; curiosity had got the better of her. She glanced behind her to make sure Saffron wasn't coming back just yet. As she opened the book she felt slightly guilty about it.

Looking at the first page, she saw a familiar shape. Under it were the words "Fleet Wolf Destroyed". Keiko looked at the date at the top of the page. It was, she realised, before they had even encountered the Borg for the first time! She turned the page, dreading what else she might find.

"Keiko!"

Keiko dropped the book. "Saffron. I'm sorry - really I am."

"How much did you read?"

"Only the first page," Keiko said, wishing she had never asked to see the book in the first place.

"Forget you ever saw it. It will only

cause you a great deal of trouble and pain," Saffron said. She knew that she had scared Keiko - she could sense the fear.

"I didn't mean to," Keiko said miserably.

"Just drink your coffee," Saffron said, lightly now.

Sensing herself forgiven, Keiko relaxed. Then - "He's here," she said, looking towards the door.

Saffron had to force herself not to look. "Is he coming over?" she asked, too casually. She didn't want to seem too eager.

"Yes," Keiko replied. She wondered why Saffron was trying to act so casually when it was obvious that she was interested in Data.

Data walked over and joined them. "Keiko," he said. "Lt Fountaine."

"Call me Saffron," she said. "Please."

"If you are free I would like to start the tests," Data said.

Saffron finished her coffee quickly, lifted her book and got up to leave. "I'll see you later, Keiko."

"Enjoy yourself!" Keiko said. Saffron blushed.

"You have gone red," Data said.

"I'm just warm!" Saffron replied hastily.

Keiko watched as Saffron and Data left Ten Forward.

As they walked down the corridor Saffron wondered what Keiko might do about what she had seen in the diary. *If she does say anything, it's my word against hers; it'll be a close thing which of us is believed,* she thought. "Where are we going?"

"Main engineering," Data replied.

"Why?"

"Because the tests can be monitored there," Data explained.

"I'd better change first," Saffron said. She didn't really like the idea of meeting her fellow engineers dressed as casually as she was.

"It is not necessary," Data said. "It would only waste time."

When they reached main engineering, Saffron felt nervous as she looked at the group of people standing waiting. "Who are all these people?"

"This is the team that I have assembled for the tests."

"Team? You didn't say anything about a team!" Saffron said.

"Perhaps I should have made it clearer," Data said.

"You're damn right you should have made it clearer!" Saffron raised the level of her voice.

"The first test is already set up," Data began calmly.

"Apologise first!" Saffron said, aware that everyone was looking at her.

"I made a mistake," Data said.

Saffron looked at him. He wasn't going to give more than that in front of

everyone, so it would be wisest to back down and accept the comment as an apology. "What do you want me to do?"

Data led her over to the waiting group and explained to all of them what she was going to do.

Boring! thought Saffron. She'd done similar tests before. *Why don't they give me something more interesting than blocks of various metals to work with?*

She kept lifting the blocks until she got absolutely fed up of doing it, then she decided that she might as well have some fun.

"Put me down!" somebody shouted from across engineering.

"Lieutenant, will you please lower Lt Barclay to the floor," Data asked. Saffron started to laugh. "Now," he said, more firmly.

Somewhat reluctantly she did as he had asked. Barclay had gone pale.

"You should not have done that," Data said, looking at her.

"Blocks don't move like people do," Saffron said.

"We are attempting to see if anything blocks your skill," Data explained.

"Nothing has so far. Is that it for now?" she asked.

"Why?"

"Because I need something to eat and I have to get changed before I go on duty," she told him.

"You still have plenty of time to do both," Data said.

Saffron frowned. She didn't really want to do any more tests, but she couldn't let everyone down.

"We shall continue the tests," Data said.

"Try to make them more interesting," Saffron suggested. If she was ever on an away team she was more likely to lift equipment and people than blocks!

"The tests have to be repetitive to ensure accurate results," Data said.

Saffron kept lifting blocks, and she even juggled them - which got her a faint round of applause. That made her feel slightly better about doing the tests.

"We have enough information for now," Data finally said.

"Good. Now can I go and get something to eat?" Saffron asked.

"We will need you for more tests later," Data replied.

Saffron left main engineering and went to her quarters where she changed. She sat on the edge of her bed thinking; she knew that she would be on duty soon. During the tests she had already met some of the people she would be working with, but that didn't make her feel any less nervous.

Finally Saffron got off her bed, checked her appearance and left her quarters.

As she walked back to main engineering Saffron could feel her stomach turning over, and the closer she got to engineering the worse she felt. She

had been fine before, because she had been off duty; now she was going to be working.

When she got there, they were still clearing up after the tests. She gave them a hand by moving all the blocks at once and stacking them in order of density. "Saved the antigravs," she said casually.

She felt as if she was going to be sick. *Just nerves*, she told herself.

"This is Lt Saffron Fountaine, who has just joined us." Geordi La Forge introduced her officially.

"Hi," Saffron said. She could feel herself shaking.

She felt a lot better once the briefing was over and she was busy checking things. Her nervousness seemed to fade away. *It's not going so badly*, she told herself. They were nice people and they seemed to accept what she was. She had had difficulties in the past with people not understanding what she was and what she was capable of.

Saffron looked around. There was something wrong - she could sense it. She looked up at the catwalks above the antimatter chamber. *Accident!* flashed into her mind. She watched as someone tried reaching too far over the safety rail. As he started to fall Saffron caught him and slowly lowered him to the floor. She then went over to see if he was all right.

"I was falling!" he said, somewhat confused by what had just happened.

"Are you hurt?" Saffron asked.

"Just a bit shaken," he replied. He still couldn't understand how, one minute, he could be falling and the next,

be gently floating down.

Saffron gave him a faint smile then returned to what she had been doing. She was starting to feel hungry again - he hadn't been very light! She knew that she couldn't just sneak off for something to eat without telling someone, she would just have to wait until it was time for her break.

She soon realised that she couldn't wait that long. She was starting to have trouble concentrating on her work. Now she was faced to make a difficult decision; either eat or make a mistake. It would be easier to explain about her needing to eat a lot after strenuous physical activity than trying to explain some very simple mistake she might make.

Saffron looked around just to make sure that there wasn't anyone she could ask for permission before she went to the nearest replicator just outside main engineering. When she got there she saw Data standing talking to Geordi La Forge. She spun round to go back to engineering.

"Fountain!" Geordi said.

"I was going to ask," she said.

"Nice piece of work back there."

"Thank you, sir," she said. "I only came for a coffee."

"Fine. Just drink it out here," Geordi said.

"I will." Saffron turned and walked up to the replicator.

"Hungry?" Data asked. He had read what information he could find about Tetrians. He had found a distinct lack of recent information; however, he *had* discovered that they needed to replenish

their energy reserves often.

"I've had one meal since last night," she admitted.

Data looked at her; he knew that that was not good for her. "You should eat regularly," he said.

"Don't remind me," Saffron said.

"You will make yourself ill!" Data accused.

"All right. I'll have something to eat," Saffron said. She ordered a sandwich which she ate quickly, then got herself another one. Soon she had eaten four. "There - satisfied?" she asked.

"Quite," he replied.

"Well, I have work to do now," she said. *He's concerned, she thought, because if I get ill it'll upset his testing schedule - that's the only reason.*

She couldn't wait for her shift to finish. She was looking forward to a shower and some sleep. She was starting to ache in places that hadn't for a very long time. Just as she was about to leave she saw Data.

Not now, she thought.

"Saffron," Data said.

She looked at him. "Yes?"

"We have more tests to do."

"Now?" she asked despondently. "Are they interesting?"

"I have attempted to make them so," Data replied.

"All right. I'm warning you, though, I'm tired," Saffron said.

"Perhaps we should delay, then," Data said.

"As long as they don't take long," she said. She followed Data out of engineering, wondering where they were going.

"We are going to test your empathic skills," Data said.

Finally they came to a stop in the corridor. "Now what?" Saffron asked.

"I want you to contact Counselor Troi on the bridge," Data said.

"What for?" Saffron asked.

"This is designed to judge the distance over which you can communicate," Data told her.

"I suppose it's no use telling you that I can communicate with my father and he's a lot further away."

"You will tell me the password I have given to Counselor Troi," Data said.

"Yar," Saffron said.

"You are correct."

"It wasn't much of a test," Saffron said. She was starting to wonder if the tests were such a good idea after all. After all, they already had the results of the tests she had done at the Academy.

"I have also given Lt Worf a password," Data said.

"Kurn. I can read most races," she told him casually.

"Even Romulans?" Data asked.

"I've read Vulcans and they're not all that different," Saffron said.

"We shall test your other abilities later. I am due to meet Geordi," Data said. Saffron watched as he walked down the corridor. Now she could go and have her shower!

When she got to her quarters she was just about to open the door when she saw Keiko walking towards her. "Wait!" Keiko called. Saffron decided to wait if only to find out what Keiko wanted. "How did it go?"

"Not bad. Listen, I'm tired - can we talk later?" Saffron said.

Keiko looked at her, noticing that she did indeed look tired. "All right," she said, but she had the distinct impression that Saffron was really trying to avoid her, even if she was really as tired as she looked.

Saffron went into her quarters and had a shower; then she lay down and read her dream book. As she read it she could understand why Keiko had been tempted to read it after she had said that she would forget about the book. Saffron turned to the back of it and started to write. Occasionally she would flip to a page to check something.

When she had finished she sat up and looked at the list that she had written down. There were two columns - one for 'happened' and one for 'pending'. The columns were evenly split in the number of things that they had in them. The 'happened' column had more bad things than good in it. This worried Saffron, especially when she re-read the 'pending' column.

Saffron closed the book, and tried to get some sleep.

Soon she woke up, screaming. It

was one of the worst nightmares that she had ever had. She got out of bed and dressed quickly, then left her quarters; she knew she wasn't going to get any more sleep just yet. She wandered down the corridor hoping that the nightmare would fade. Every so often she stopped and closed her eyes, and the image sprang into her mind.

When she reached the next turbolift she got into it. "Deck Ten." She wanted to be somewhere with other people

When the turbolift stopped Saffron got out and walked to Ten Forward. It was busy; she looked around. She had half made up her mind to leave again when she saw something outside. It was there for a fraction of a second then it was gone. Saffron walked over to the window and looked out.

I must have imagined it, she told herself; after the nightmare she had had it wasn't all that surprising - but the more Saffron looked out the more worried she got. The Enterprise was no longer orbiting her home planet yet she could still hear her father.

Saffron took one last look out, then she saw the bright light that had first caught her attention. She looked round to see if anyone else had seen it. They were all carrying on as normal. When she turned back to see if the light was still there, it was.

It wasn't normal for her to see things when she was awake! She'd never done it before.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" a soft voice behind her said.

"The light?" Saffron said cautiously.

"I know," Guinan replied.

"You can see it?" Saffron said in surprise.

"You have dreams," Guinan said.

Saffron looked at her. Could Keiko have told her about the book? "Who told you?" she asked defensively.

"No-one," Guinan replied.

"I had a nightmare. They're coming back," Saffron said.

"They always do," Guinan answered. She knew how Saffron felt.

"I saw them destroy a world," Saffron whispered.

"They do that," Guinan said.

"What do I do?" Saffron asked.

"What you feel is right," Guinan replied.

"And if I'm wrong?" Even whispered, it was a wail of anguish. Guinan just walked away.

Saffron stood there for a few minutes before moving away from the window. She knew what she had to do. She left Ten Forward and went straight to her quarters.

"Computer; I want to send a message to Tetrias. Address the Palace. Message is - Evacuate." Saffron cut off the computer link. She had done the only thing she could; now it was up to her father whether he believed her or not.

Saffron sat waiting for his reply. He was having doubts - she could tell that, but nothing else. *Hurry!* she kept saying to herself, not that he could hear her. Her heart sank when she finally realised that he wasn't going to believe her and act on

her message. She sat with tears running down her face. There was nothing else that she could do now but wait, and hope that she had made a terrible mistake.

She finally stood, picked up her book of dreams, walked to the door and threw it into the corridor, vowing never to write down any of her dreams again.

She shut and locked her door. Then she found her small statue and put it on her table. She knelt before it and started to chant. The words flowed from her lips - she had learned the chants as a child but she had never really used them before. She was desperate enough to try anything now.

Guinan left Ten Forward - unusual, because she rarely left the place when it was busy. Her talk with Saffron had unsettled her.

Once, a long time previously, she had been to Tetrias. She had enjoyed her stay there. Some of her people had even settled there, and she could have stayed too, but she had got restless. She had recognised what Saffron was capable of when she first walked into Ten Forward.

Guinan stood outside Saffron's door and pressed the door chime. Saffron heard it but kept on chanting. Guinan pressed the chime again. Saffron tried to block it out. Finally she couldn't concentrate any more because of the chime; she got up and unlocked the door.

"Come."

Guinan looked around the room, her eyes finally coming to rest on the small statue. She recognised it.

"Tears," she said as she looked at Saffron.

"He didn't believe me," Saffron said. "I tried." Tears started to run down her face again.

"I know," Guinan said softly. She knew she was the only one who could help Saffron come to terms with what was about to happen.

"I'm afraid," Saffron said. She didn't know what to do any more. Her whole world was about to be destroyed.

"Your book?" asked Guinan.

"I threw it away."

"There are more blank pages than filled ones," Guinan said.

Saffron looked at her. "I'm so tired. But I'll dream," she said.

"Not tonight," Guinan replied reassuringly. She got Saffron to lie on the bed. "Sleep," she said softly. Saffron tried to keep her eyes open but she couldn't. Guinan stood watching until she was sure Saffron was fast asleep. Before leaving she took Saffron's book from inside her robes and placed it on the table next to the statue.

Saffron lay there asleep, and this time she didn't dream.

Guinan returned to Ten Forward. She knew that Saffron would be all right for the time being, but *her* work wasn't going to be over for some time. She had helped others in the past and she would do so again in the future. It would happen soon, she could feel it coming. This time they wouldn't get the Enterprise.

Guinan stood there watching people carrying on with their lives totally

unaware of what was going to happen; they only had one life and then that was it.

Keiko went into Ten Forward hoping that Saffron would be there. She was disappointed to find that her friend wasn't there. She still felt guilty about looking in Saffron's book. *Maybe Saffron is still doing some tests*, she thought.

She changed her mind when Data walked in. "Have you seen Saffron?" she asked.

"I left her earlier. She said that she was going to her quarters," Data replied.

"I tried her quarters. I saw her earlier, but there was no reply when I went back," Keiko said.

"Perhaps she is somewhere else," Data suggested.

Keiko was worried. Saffron had changed a lot since the Academy. She knew that people did change, but surely not as much as Saffron had! It was as if she was carrying around a huge weight. Saffron used to laugh a lot; she had fun; but not now.

"You are concerned about Saffron?" Data asked.

"Something's wrong with her. I don't know what."

"Perhaps we should try her quarters again?" Data said.

Guinan walked over to them. "She is sleeping." Data and Keiko looked at her. "She needs to sleep," Guinan said.

"I may have arranged her tests too close together," said Data.

"And it takes time to settle in," Keiko added.

Guinan just smiled at them. *At least Saffron has friends who care about her.*

Saffron woke and stretched. She couldn't remember the last time she had slept so well. She got out of bed, feeling fully rested.

She looked at the statue and the book that lay next to it, not even wondering how it got there. They didn't mean that much to her now, but she got the feeling that some how they would be very important, if only for providing a reminder of the past.

Slowly she sorted through her bags, putting things away. She wished that she had brought more with her; if only she'd known. There were so many things that she wanted to say to her father; now she would never be able to.

Saffron looked at the pictures she had brought with her. She put them next to the statue. She couldn't bear to look at them for long - it hurt too much.

She decided to leave her quarters. She needed to talk to Guinan again. There was a great sense of foreboding hanging over her, and she wanted it to be over with as soon as possible. Then she would know for certain.

Data and Keiko were somewhat relieved to see Saffron walk into Ten Forward. However, Saffron walked straight past them to where Guinan stood. "Thank you," she said.

"I listened," Guinan replied.

"If we told the Captain?" Saffron suggested. There had to be something else that she could do!

"He'd listen, but it would be too late."

"That soon?" Saffron asked. Guinan just gave her a faint nod. "I'll be safe, won't I?"

"From them, but not from the pain," Guinan said. She knew that the pain would be the hardest thing for Saffron to bear.

"I'm going to feel it all, aren't I?" Saffron said.

"Yes," Guinan replied. There was no point in lying to her. If she did, Saffron would never trust her again.

"The others have to know, to be ready for it," Saffron said. "They're on Vulcan."

"They won't feel it as much. I'll help you," Guinan said, remembering how someone had helped her through the same pain.

"I'd better talk to Keiko. I upset her earlier," Saffron said. She walked over to where Data and Keiko still stood. "About the book. I shouldn't have lost my temper like that."

"I shouldn't have read it. Friends?" Keiko replied.

"I was tired. If you want to read the book you can," Saffron said.

"Would you like a drink?" Data asked.

"Anything," Saffron said. She tried smiling, to hide the pain that she was already feeling inside.

"Let's sit down," Keiko suggested. Saffron followed her to an empty table where they sat.

"You and Miles will have to have dinner with me soon," Saffron said.

"You're not going to cook it, are you?" Keiko asked.

"Replicated only," Saffron promised.

"You're the only person I know who can burn a salad," Keiko went on.

"That wasn't my fault!" Saffron had never been any good at preparing meals - something always went wrong.

Data came over with their drinks and sat down next to Saffron. "We shall delay doing more tests until you have settled in," he told her.

"That's a good idea. I tried doing too much," Saffron admitted.

"Guinan said you were asleep," Keiko said.

"I've never slept so well," Saffron replied.

"You should not skip meals either," Data told her.

"I never feel hungry until it's too late," Saffron said. "I promise to try and eat at least one good meal a day."

"So when are we having this meal with you?" Keiko asked.

"Tomorrow evening. Would you like to come, Data?" Saffron asked.

"I will see if my duties permit me to attend," Data replied.

"Good. It's going to be plain and

simple food, like we normally have." Saffron was already planning the menu in her mind. It helped her to concentrate on something other than the bad thing. That was what she called it now - there was no other way for her to describe it.

Saffron finished her fruit juice. Her father was getting really worried, she knew; she wished she wasn't so close to him.

"Something wrong?" Keiko asked.

"I was just thinking what we're going to have tomorrow," Saffron said hastily.

"I've sent a message thanking your father for his gift," Keiko said.

Saffron had to suppress a bitter laugh. Soon there wouldn't be any of Tetrias left, never mind the Valley of Peace. "What did he say?" she asked.

"I haven't had a reply yet."

"Let me know when you have," Saffron said, knowing that the chances of Keiko's ever getting a reply were nil. She rose. "I'm due on duty again soon. I'll have to go." She made her excuses, for she wanted time to sort herself out before going on duty.

As soon as she had left Ten Forward the smile left Saffron's face. She went straight to main engineering and stood by the replicator. She closed her eyes; she could feel her father's presence. She knew that he wouldn't be able to feel hers as he wasn't as strong an empath as she was.

He was frantically giving orders - she could hear them so clearly! They had picked up a ship on the planetary sensor array. Repeated requests for identification; no reply. Her father

ordering the defences up... then a priority one distress signal being sent. The horrific and sudden realisation of who the ship belonged to. Saffron felt it all. Then the despair and hopelessness as the defences started to crumble.

Tears started to run down Saffron's face. It had started and there was no way that she could stop it. Now she could hear her brothers' voices, their screams for help - but the sound got all mixed up in her head.

Saffron clung to the wall for support. There were more and more voices joining in, more than she'd ever heard before, and this was only the beginning! People... so many people, and all of them afraid. Saffron fought for breath as the sensations swept over her.

"Are you all right?" a disjointed voice asked. Saffron ignored it, forcing herself to focus on her family. She had to know what was happening to them! As she saw them falling, she slowly opened her mouth and started to scream.

"Priority one message coming in from Tetrias," Worf reported.

"On screen," Picard ordered.

"Defences gone. Borg!" Then the message was cut off.

In Ten Forward, Guinan walked over to the window and looked out. She too had felt it start. Soon it would all be over; that was when the pain would really start to hurt.

In engineering a medical team arrived to look after the still-screaming Saffron.

She continued screaming even after they had tried to sedate her.

"One minute she was just standing there," someone said, "and she was crying the next!"

"I've never seen anything like this," Crusher commented. "She should be out cold."

Saffron lay on the antigrav stretcher, eyes closed, still screaming. She couldn't stop.

In her mind she could see *everything*. They were everywhere now. Fighting. Tears. Everything so confused. Her father was gone now; the rest of her family running... *No good running, nowhere to -*

She was still screaming when they carried her into sickbay.

Crusher looked at Saffron lying there; she had never seen anyone in such a state before. She had to stop the screaming soon - the noise was starting to get to her.

"She will stop when it's over," a voice said from behind Crusher.

"Guinan!" Crusher said in surprise.

"Nothing will stop it until then," Guinan said.

"I could try a stronger sedative..."

"She has to go through it to survive," Guinan said. Then she left sickbay.

As Crusher watched, the screaming started to ease off. *Finally!* Crusher thought. *She's been screaming for hours!*

When Saffron finally stopped

screaming she just lay there, oblivious of everything that was going on around her.

Picard ordered a course set for Tetrias although he knew that once the Borg attacked a planet there was little hope of anyone surviving; but he had his duty as a Starfleet officer to do.

Data had returned to the bridge after leaving Keiko sitting in Ten Forward waiting for Miles. When at last he did, he said, "I don't want your friend going anywhere near Molly."

"Why?" Keiko asked.

"She started screaming in engineering. There was no reason."

"Saffron wouldn't do that. There had to be a reason. She doesn't scare easily," Keiko replied.

"They tried to sedate her, but she just kept on screaming," he said.

"Where is she?" Keiko asked.

"They took her to sickbay. Where do you think you're going?" he asked as Keiko got up.

"I'm going to find out how she is," Keiko told him. She walked away as Miles tried protesting. *Why didn't I realise that Saffron was hiding something? I knew there was something wrong, I just didn't like to ask. I wish now that I had!*

When Keiko entered sickbay she could see Saffron just lying there. She walked over to her. "Saff," she said softly. There was no reply.

"She hasn't moved since she

stopped screaming," Crusher said.

"What happened?" Keiko asked.

"The Borg attacked Tetrias," Crusher replied.

Papa Joe! Keiko thought. She looked down at Saffron. She was so pale!

"She can hear you. It's as if she's turned her mind off," Crusher continued.

"How long will she stay like this?" Keiko asked.

"Until she's ready to come out of it," Crusher replied. Time was the only thing that could help Saffron to heal.

Saffron kept seeing the Borg attack in her mind. It was all her fault! She should have tried harder to get her father to believe her! The pain kept coming. As she lay there, all she wanted to do was die. At least then the pain would be gone.

Guinan looked out of the window of Ten Forward as the Enterprise sped back towards Tetrias. Saffron had suffered the first of her pain; she would survive once the anger and injustice hit her.

In sickbay Saffron was starting to think through what had happened and discovered that the pain was turning into anger. The Enterprise was almost at Tetrias when she opened her eyes. She tried to get off the bed but her legs gave way under her.

"Where do you think you are going?" Crusher asked.

"To my quarters," Saffron said.

"You're going to get back onto that bed and stay there!" Crusher told her. Why was it that her patients always thought that they knew what was best for them?

Saffron thought about it, then decided that she wasn't in any state to go anywhere. "It's only until I can stay upright!" Saffron said, glaring at Crusher.

"You'll leave when I say you can!" Crusher replied.

Saffron sat on her bed, reluctant, waiting for what she didn't know. When she thought the coast was clear she got off the bed and walked out of sickbay. She couldn't just sit there doing nothing any more. She knew that there would be trouble once they discovered she was gone; still, the only way that they were going to keep her in sickbay was by force, and even then she would try to escape.

She found herself in main engineering. She started to check panels. She had only been here a few minutes when someone came over to her.

"You should not be here," Data said.

She looked at him. "I'm fine," she lied.

"Dr Crusher is most anxious that you return to sickbay," he said.

"I'm going," Saffron said. *But I don't have to go straight there,* she thought.

"I will accompany you," Data said.

Saffron looked at him and frowned. "Can I get something from my quarters?" she asked.

"Only if you are not too long," he said. He did not want Dr Crusher to be annoyed with him.

Saffron and Data walked to her quarters. Data followed her in. "What is it you wish to get?" he asked.

"Just my book," Saffron said. She walked over to her table and picked her book up.

"If that is all you want, we should be going," Data said.

"It's only so that I gave something to read," Saffron told him. When they left her quarters she locked the door.

"That was not necessary," Data said.

Saffron didn't reply, she just carried on walking down the corridor.

When they reached sickbay Saffron could sense the anger that Crusher was, with difficulty, controlling. "Are you going to stay this time or do I have to have a security officer posted outside?" Crusher asked with deceptive quiet.

"I don't want to stay here - but I will for the time being," Saffron said.

"Doctor, I am needed on the bridge. We shall soon be in orbit around Tetrias," Data said.

Saffron looked at him. When they reached Tetrias she wanted to go down to see for herself what was left.

Guinan had decided to pay Saffron a visit. She found Saffron looking at her book.

Saffron was thinking about her father and the fact that he had read it. It

hadn't done him any good at all. How could he have been so stupid?

"You're still with us," Guinan said.

"For now," Saffron replied.

"You're planning to go down," Guinan commented.

"I've thought about it," Saffron admitted.

"You have to," Guinan said.

Saffron looked at her. "How?" She knew that neither the Captain nor Dr Crusher was likely to let her go on an away team. Not here.

"You know the way. Use it," Guinan said.

Saffron looked at her and smiled. Why was it that Guinan seemed to know everything about her? She was still thinking about it when she noticed that Guinan had gone. Saffron was sure that she hadn't seen her leave, but she must have done because as far as she knew there was nobody else who could do her disappearing trick.

Guinan looked out of the window in Ten Forward. She could see the huge rifts that now scarred Tetrias. She had seen them many times before, but each time seemed like the first.

Picard ordered an away team, led by Riker, down.

They were met by the sight of almost total devastation. As they walked through the now-ruined capital they came across bodies, some half buried in

rubble, some just lying where they had been cut down.

Saffron closed her book, knowing that they had already sent an away team down without even asking her for information that might be useful to them. She got off the bed, trying to make it look as if she was only stretching her legs. After checking that no-one was watching her, Saffron disappeared.

She looked up at what had once been her family home. Considering the destruction that surrounded it, it was almost in one piece. Saffron started to pick her way through the rubble, hoping to find something that she could save.

The away team continued to make its way through the capital. There were no signs of life at all; the silence was haunting. Riker shook his head slowly. There was nothing that they could do at all.

In sickbay, Crusher discovered that Saffron had vanished. She immediately contacted Picard, who in turn contacted the away team; he had a very strong feeling that Saffron had somehow managed to get down to Tetrias.

"We'll contact you if we find her," Riker said.

"She may have gone to her family home. It is in that direction, sir," Data said, pointing.

Saffron went into what had been the great hall. Half the ceiling had collapsed. She looked up into the sky. *How can it all be so peaceful now?* she thought. As she looked around the great hall she found several plates that by some kind of miracle had remained undamaged. Saffron picked them up carefully, then looked around for something to carry them in. Eventually she found a somewhat battered tablecloth. She wrapped the plates in it, then left the great hall.

Just as she was deciding whether it would be safe to go upstairs she heard footsteps and voices coming towards her. Saffron grabbed her bundle and hid.

"Lt Fountaine!" Riker shouted. "She's got to be here somewhere," he added.

Saffron stayed where she was. If she came out into the open they would only try to send her back to the ship, and she wasn't ready to go back just yet.

"Data, check upstairs," Riker ordered.

Saffron watched as Data started to go upstairs, waited until the rest of the away team had moved on, then made her way out of her hiding place. Normally she would have thought herself to where she wanted to go, but she couldn't be sure where the upstairs floor was safe. Leaving her bundle in her hiding place, she made her way upstairs as quietly as she could.

The first room that she went into had been her father's. She could only get part-way into the room because of the damage done to it. She stretched, and managed to open some drawers. She had trouble getting some of the bigger items out of them, but with some struggling she managed. She looked at the things she

had retrieved; they were gifts she had bought him a long time previously.

"Saffron!" Data shouted as he walked along the corridor. He knew that she was probably hiding somewhere close, although he hadn't worked out how she had managed to get down to Tetrias in the first place.

Saffron heard Data calling, and felt guilty for not replying. She made her way to the second room along the corridor but couldn't even get in to it. This was turning out to be a hopeless task.

Data went into a room and looked around. He felt uncomfortable at being there without asking permission, even though there was no-one he could ask. As he looked around the room, one thing caught his eye. It was a large painting of solitary figure surrounded by a wall.

"Like it?" Saffron asked.

"We have been looking for you," Data told her.

"I know," Saffron said.

"Then why did you not answer us?" he asked.

"You'd only have made me go back to the Enterprise," Saffron explained.

"That is correct," Data admitted.

Saffron started to open various drawers. She took clothes, books and a lot of other things and dumped them on the bed.

"You should not be doing that," Data objected.

"Why not?" Saffron asked, piling even more things onto the bed.

"It is stealing."

"This is my room," Saffron said. She wrapped up the things in a blanket. Data watched as she attempted to lift the bundle. "I'll have to leave some of this," she muttered.

"There is no need. I will carry it for you," Data said.

"I'll get the painting, then," Saffron said.

Data picked up the bundle as Saffron carefully took the picture down from the wall. She could remember the hours late into the night that she had worked on it in secret. There had been times when she had become so frustrated with it that she had almost given up on it, but then she'd got the effect she wanted and set about it again with renewed enthusiasm.

"Are they angry with me?" Saffron asked, but that she was really bothered what they thought any more.

"Yes," Data replied.

"Have they looked in the vaults yet?" she asked, apparently inconsequentially.

Data looked at her. "Vaults?"

"They're not on the general plans," Saffron admitted. The vaults were the next place she had intended to search.

"We must go. Commander Riker will start looking for me soon," Data commented.

"You can't get into the vaults without me," Saffron said.

Data paused at the non sequitur, then said, "I will tell Commander Riker."

Saffron felt secure in the knowledge that they wouldn't even be able to *find* the vaults without her help, never mind get into them.

"Data!" Riker called. Then he looked up the stairs and saw Data with Saffron beside him. "You have a lot of explaining to do, Lieutenant," he went on.

"I came for my belongings," Saffron said. "What is left of them."

Riker looked at her, knowing that in her place he might be tempted to do the same. "How did you get here?"

"I thought myself here," she said.

Riker looked at her disbelievingly, then said gently, "We haven't found anyone alive."

"Lt Fountaine suggested we try the vaults," Data said.

"What vaults?" Riker asked.

"They contain every document that has ever been written on Tetrias," Saffron explained. "At least our history will not be lost."

"Where are they?" Riker asked.

"Under the great hall," Saffron said. The actual location had been a closely-guarded secret known only to certain members of the family.

"The hall is blocked. How are we going to get down to them?" Riker asked.

"Get where?" Saffron asked, a touch of mischief in her voice despite her

personal tragedy. Riker looked around him. They were no longer in the entrance to the great hall. "This way," she continued.

They were still trying to come to terms with the sudden shift in position as she led them to a huge door. There was no lock, no handle; there seemed to be no way to open it. "Golden man!" Saffron said loudly. Slowly the door started to open. "I have my own code," she told them.

Riker looked at Data, then at the picture Saffron was holding.

When the door opened wide enough for them to go in, they did so. Saffron looked around; it had been years since she had last been in the vaults. She and her brothers used to play hide and seek in them, much to her father's annoyance; no doubt her nieces and nephews had done the same. "They go on for miles," she said, answering Riker's unspoken question.

"Could someone have been down here during the attack?" Data asked.

"It's possible. It's been used as a family shelter before now," Saffron said, sudden hope in her voice. Why hadn't she thought of that?

"Can you sense anyone?" Riker asked.

"There *is* someone down here! Several... They're crying!" Saffron looked around. "This way!" She started to run in the direction from which she had felt life. The away team ran after her.

As she got closer Saffron slowed her pace to a walk. She didn't want to scare whoever it was more than she had to. "Hello?" she called. The crying got louder. She walked forward. Turning a

corner she saw a small group of babies lying there.

"Lieutenant!" Riker called from behind her.

"Over here, Commander!" Saffron shouted. This only made the babies cry louder. She put her painting down carefully and picked one up gingerly.

When the away team came round the corner, they could only stare.

"How do you stop them crying?" Saffron asked.

"They may be hungry," Data said.

Riker looked at him. "We have to get them back to the ship," he said.

"It's wet - and it smells!" Saffron said.

"Then it will need changed," Data told her.

"I don't know how! I'm the sort of aunt parents hate. I buy toys, take them out for the day, then when they feel sick, send them home!" Saffron admitted.

"We can sort it out when we get back to the ship," Riker said. Each of the away team picked up a baby.

"You want me to get us back to the ship?" Saffron said.

"If you could, Lieutenant," Riker agreed. Saffron put them on the bridge.

"Number One!" Picard exclaimed.

"I'll explain later, sir! We have to get these babies to sickbay," Riker said.

"Carry on, Number One," Picard said. He watched with some relief as the

away team entered the turbolift. He didn't like children - especially when they were screaming.

When they reached sickbay Saffron was relieved to see Crusher. "It's wet," she said, handing the baby she was holding to the Doctor.

"They are also hungry," Data said, "and probably thirsty."

"How do you know so much?" Saffron asked.

"I have studied Keiko looking after Molly," Data explained.

"You can change it, then," Saffron said, relieved.

Data looked at her. "I will do so if it is required." The baby he was holding was quiet - the only one that was.

"This I have to watch!" Saffron commented. She watched as Data started to change the baby he was holding, surprised to see that he did it quickly and well.

"It is easy once you have started," Data said.

"I'm an engineer - not a mother!" Saffron said indignantly.

"You were supposed to stay in sickbay, not go wandering off!" Crusher told Saffron sternly.

"If it had not been for Lt Fountaine, we would never have found these children," Data said in Saffron's defence.

"We'll discuss this later," Crusher said quietly.

"What do you want me to do with this child?" Data asked.

"You said it needed feeding - so feed it," Crusher said. One of her staff handed him a bottle.

"Commander, I will remain here as long as I can help," Data said.

"I'll inform the Captain," Riker said, smiling at the sight of Data feeding a baby.

Saffron sat on an empty bed. She looked at the activity. Maybe she had been too hasty - *after all, how bad can it be?* she thought.

"If you're not going to help - " Crusher began.

"I'll help," Saffron said, giving in, "but only because I feel sorry for them." She got up.

Crusher handed her one of the babies. Saffron laid it down on the bed she had been sitting on.

The baby started to cry.

"You'll be clean and dry soon," Saffron said. As soon as she started to change it, she realised that it was a lot harder than Data had made it look. It smelt even worse than before, but she wasn't about to give up just yet. Eventually, after a lot of struggling, she managed to change the baby, though not as neatly as Data. *Now it has to get easier,* she told herself. She picked up a bottle that someone had got ready then picked up the baby.

"You should support the head more," Data told her.

"They're kind of cute, aren't they?" Saffron said. It was a lot easier feeding it.

"You are doing well," Data commented.

"You'd make a good father," Saffron said.

"Thank you," Data replied.

Riker returned to the bridge, to report what had happened on Tetrias.

"It seems we underestimated Lt Fountaine's skills," Picard said. *So the rumours of what Tetrians could do have been only partially true. It's a great shame that now we'll never find out just what, as a race, they were capable of.*

Saffron looked at the baby she was holding. It was starting to go to sleep. *About time!* she thought.

Data was about to put his baby down when he saw that Guinan had entered sickbay.

"So you're back," she said to Saffron.

"We found these," Saffron said.

"What's going to happen to them?" Guinan asked.

"The others on Vulcan might take them," Saffron said.

"And if they don't?" Guinan asked.

Saffron looked at her. She hadn't thought about the future at all. "I don't know," she finally admitted.

"So they could end up anywhere," Guinan said.

Saffron thought about what Guinan

had said. There wasn't any way to guarantee that they would have the sort of upbringing that they would have received on Tetrias. She knew what Guinan was saying - but there was no way that she could look after them!

"What do you expect me to do?" she asked.

"Your best," Guinan replied.

Saffron looked at her. "I'll try," she said and smiled at Guinan.

Saffron looked at the babies she and Data were holding. She felt guilty about what might happen to them. She had her career to think about, and they would be better off with people who could give them the kind of love and attention that they needed. A tear started to run down her face.

"You are upset," Data said.

Saffron handed him the baby she had been holding, then turned her back on him. "Of course I'm upset. Do you know how many of my people are left now?" Her voice broke slightly.

"No," Data said as he juggled the two babies into a secure position.

"Ten. Five adults and these five babies. We can't even start again. There aren't enough of us."

Data put the babies down and went over to Saffron. What she had said was true; he could not change the facts of the situation.

"Two, maybe three generations, then inbreeding sets in and we're gone for good. The Borg have destroyed us," Saffron said bluntly. "And nobody will

miss us."

"You have friends who would miss you if you were gone," Data said.

"Who? Keiko? She has Miles and Molly. She can't understand how it feels," Saffron said dully. "Everything has gone. I've no home, no family..."

"I had no home and no family," Data said. "Now I have both."

Saffron looked at him. "There's always been somewhere to go back to," she said.

"You are confused. It is understandable," Data said.

Saffron spun round, wanting to hit him. *It's not his fault!* she told herself, but it didn't help. "I'm so lonely," she whispered. Data wrapped an arm around her shoulders in an attempt to comfort her. "It hurts so much! I just want it to stop," she sobbed. She put her head on Data's shoulder, unable to stop the tears.

Data was not quite sure what he should do next. "You should rest," he said finally.

"I'm going to have dreams - terrible dreams!" Saffron said. She couldn't face having any more dreams. The dreams had caused her so much pain in the first place she wished that she'd never had any at all.

"I will help you," Data said.

"Will you?" Saffron was somewhat surprised by Data's offer.

"Tell me what you want me to do."

"Watch me when I sleep. If I start to shake, wake me up," Saffron said. If Data woke her in time she wouldn't be able to

dream.

"Is that all you require me to do?" Data asked.

"Yes," Saffron replied. She felt, not tired, but weary. Everything had happened so fast that she hadn't had time to sort her emotions out. Her head had started to ache; she had done too much and she hadn't had anything to eat in hours. She found it hard to try to suppress a yawn. "But I can't sleep here."

"I will see if Dr Crusher will permit you to return to your quarters," Data said. He removed his arm from her shoulders and went to find Crusher. A few minutes later he returned. Dr Crusher had been cautious about releasing Saffron; it had only been Data's assurance that he would remain with her that had persuaded her.

"We can go now," Data said. Saffron followed him out of sickbay. By the time they reached her quarters she was having trouble keeping awake. After unlocking her quarters, she went inside, lay on her bed and closed her eyes.

Data sat in a chair opposite where she was now sleeping. He looked round. The painting that she had taken from her room on Tetrias was now hanging on a wall. The other things were arranged around the room. It was no wonder that she was so tired; she had used her skills too much, which could be dangerous. Data didn't want to see her injure herself.

He had now had time to judge what sort of person Saffron was. In his opinion she was a caring person, even if she didn't admit it to herself. She was also willing to do anything to please those around her. He now knew what Guinan had meant when she said that Saffron had dreams.

Saffron lay there sleeping, knowing that Data was watching her. So far she hadn't started to dream. She let her mind wander, as she often did when she was sleeping. It was easier to see what other people were thinking when she didn't have to bother about her body.

Saffron soon got bored with letting her mind just wander. Maybe if she concentrated her thoughts she might be able to find out how the others were coping? It was no good - she just couldn't reach them. They were either too far away or in shock. She would have to wait until she was closer to them.

Data watched as Saffron started to waken. She hadn't been asleep for long.

"I got bored," she said, sitting up.

"You have only been asleep for two hours," Data said, wondering how anyone could be bored when they were asleep.

"I'm hungry," Saffron continued as she got off the bed. "Do you want anything?" she asked as she walked across to the replicator.

"No, thank you," Data replied.

Once Saffron had got her order from the replicator she went and sat on her bed. "What am I going to do?" she asked.

"About what?" Data said.

"The babies. I can't look after all of them."

"No-one is asking you to," Data replied.

"Not directly. My family has never turned a child away. That's why my

father was called Papa Joe. Everyone was his child," Saffron explained.

Data looked at her. She was in a very difficult situation. "Perhaps you could look after one child," he suggested.

"I don't know anything about looking after a child! I don't even take good care of myself," Saffron admitted.

"You are capable of doing it, and you would have help," Data said.

"They'd never let me," Saffron objected.

"You are placing obstacles in your path where there are none," Data told her.

"I'm not a very responsible person," Saffron said. Data looked at her; he couldn't understand why she was being so negative. "Tell me how I could do it!" Saffron went on.

"You apply to the Federation resettlement officer for this sector. If you are found to be suitable, you will be allowed to adopt one of the children," he explained.

Saffron looked at him. It didn't sound so difficult and she wouldn't be losing anything by giving it a try. "Put me in touch with the resettlement officer," she said.

"Your friends will support you," Data said.

"I'd prefer if you kept this quiet for the time being," Saffron told him. She didn't want anyone to get involved in case she didn't pass the inspection.

"If that is what you want," Data replied.

Saffron sat looking at Data. He was

being so nice to her! She decided that he must be that way with most people. He gave off a sense of naivety which was unusual for an adult - Saffron had only found it in children before. "You can go now if you want," she said.

"I told Dr Crusher that I would stay with you," Data said.

Saffron thought of how she could change the subject. "Do you like my painting?" she asked.

"It is most interesting," Data said.

"I don't normally paint. I'm not very good at it."

Data got up and took a closer look at the painting. "Is it based on someone you know?" he asked.

"I didn't know him then. I saw him in a dream," Saffron said, blushing slightly.

"You have met him since?" Data asked.

"Yes. You can have the painting if you want."

"I cannot take it. It means a great deal to you," Data said.

"I'd like you to leave now," Saffron said, her mood rapidly changing.

"I said that I would remain with you," Data reminded her.

"I'm fine now. I don't need looked after," Saffron said, her voice rising.

"I promised," Data pointed out.

"I want to be on my own now." Saffron got off the bed, walked over to the door and opened it. Data moved towards

it slowly and took a final look at Saffron before leaving. He felt guilty about it, but Saffron had asked him to leave and she did seem to be recovering.

Once Data had gone, Saffron moved away from the door and it closed. She activated the lock. Then she picked up her book and tore several pages from it. She started to write. Once she had finished, she folded the letters and on the blank sides she wrote names. She placed them next to her statue, then knelt in front of it and started to chant. When she finished chanting she opened the back of the statue and took out the knife that was inside it.

Slowly and deliberately she drew the knife across her wrists. As the blood started to flow she rose and headed for her bed. She never made it.

Data was just about to get into a turbolift when he realised that he should have insisted on staying with Saffron despite her telling him to leave. He turned quickly and headed back to Saffron's quarters.

When he reached it he found the door locked; he pressed the door chime several times before realising that Saffron wasn't asleep. Quickly he used his skills to unlock her door.

When it opened he saw Saffron lying on the floor in a pool of blood. He tapped his communicator. "Medical emergency, Lt Fountaine's quarters," he said. He knelt by Saffron's still body and felt for a pulse. It was very faint. He could not understand why she had done it. He tried to stop the flow of blood until the medical team arrived. When they did, she was still alive.

"Why?" Crusher asked as she

started to treat Saffron. She looked at Data. "You said you'd keep an eye on her!" she snapped angrily as Saffron was put on an antigrav stretcher.

"I am sorry. She told me to go," Data said. He knew that he had failed to keep his word and he regretted it.

Data stood there as the medical team took Saffron to sickbay. He looked around her quarters and saw the folded letters. He walked over and picked up the one with his name on it. As he read he started to understand why Saffron had tried to kill herself. He slowly ripped all the notes up, then put them in the recycling unit and left her quarters.

In sickbay, Saffron lay knowing that she was still alive when she didn't want to be. She wondered who had found her. She couldn't even die without making a mess of it! Everything was so mixed up...

Crusher looked at Saffron. They had nearly lost her. They would have done if Data had not gone back - yet she couldn't help thinking that if Data had stayed, Saffron would not have cut her wrists. *No, she told herself. It's not Data's fault. Saffron would have tried it later.*

"You've lost a lot of blood," Crusher said. Saffron just looked up at her. "You're going to live."

"No," Saffron muttered.

"You don't care, do you?" Crusher asked.

"I can't, any more. I cared and they died! You didn't feel that," Saffron said. She felt so empty.

"No, I didn't. But we nearly lost the Captain to the Borg, and that hurt

deeply," Crusher told her. Saffron looked at her. She had heard about that; it couldn't have been easy for them. "I'm recommending that you take extensive medical leave," Crusher went on.

"What's that mean?" Saffron asked.

"That you're not going to return to duty until you have fully recovered mentally," Crusher told her.

"How long will it take?" Saffron asked.

"That depends on you. I suggest that you leave the Enterprise for the time being," Crusher added before walking away.

Saffron lay there thinking about

what Crusher had said. She realised now that she had been very selfish; there were other people relying on her and they were totally helpless. She did need a fresh start, somewhere where they could help her. Wherever she went, there would have to be other empaths to help the children develop properly.

Saffron hugged Keiko, then Data, goodbye just before she got onto the transporter pad. She had been through such a difficult time since her arrival on the Enterprise! But now she and the children were going to start again on Betazed.

Keiko watched as Saffron dematerialised in front of her. At least now she knew that Saffron would be happy.

WARNING

Ugly bags of mostly water, you exist only to kill.
 Bringing death and destruction is your greatest thrill.
 Ugly bags of mostly water, you desecrate our land,
 Plunder, changing, interfering in our water and our sand.
 Ugly bags of mostly water, your evil we shall fight.
 We shall send you from our planet despite your power and your might.
 Ugly bags of mostly water, why do you plunder and destroy?
 Take our world and destroy it, then discard your broken toy?
 Ugly bags of mostly water, all life's precious, can't you see?
 All should be allowed to live, you must go and let us be.
 Ugly bags of mostly water, you did not know that we exist.
 Go! Grow in peace and knowledge ere you come to see us next.

Margaret Connor

IN THE CAPTAIN'S SHOES

by

Pen Cramphorn

The sound of a red alert cuts through my sleep like a hot knife through butter.

Damn it! Can't they *ever* manage without me? How's a chap supposed to get any sleep around here? I mean, I *need* my sleep if I'm to keep up with my hectic schedule and still manage to look good. I suppose I'd better get up to the bridge and see what's going on this time.

I can feel the hairs on the back of my neck rising at the sound of the klaxon, but walking the corridors of this ship - *my* ship - comforts me as always. I like the subtle way in which the colours and design complement my style.

Oh. The red alert seems to be over. Typical. And here I am, awake and ready for anything. Oh, well, since I *am* awake, I think I'll do an unannounced tour of the ship. I'll drop into engineering first. There's something about being in this powerhouse, the very heart of my ship, that really gets to me. Just seeing those engines pulsing with life, carrying us onward, ever onward, though all that black stuff out there - Oh, please excuse me! I'm afraid I sometimes get carried away by the wonder of it all.

They seem to be pretty busy down here at the moment. I don't want to get underfoot, so I nod at a few of my people - I find they like the personal touch - and find myself a quiet little corner, out of the way, where I can sit down and watch.

There's Geordi La Forge, my Chief Engineer. He's a genius with those engines. He's got us out of trouble more

times than I care to remember. It's a pleasure to watch him work.

My, it's warm in here. Makes a chap sleepy; or perhaps I'm getting old! Although I have to say I was favourably impressed when I caught sight of my reflection a moment ago. I cut a pretty trim figure. It's just hot, that's all. I think I'll get just a little more comfortable.....

What's that burning smell? Good Lord, the place is full of smoke - lights flashing, bells ringing - I must have nodded off! I hope no-one noticed! I wonder if I can do anything? Yes - a wire seems to have come loose right here where I was sleeping - er, sitting. Good thing I was here! I'll just nudge it into place - then I'll jolly well leave them to clear up the mess! Bad enough I had to bail them out, without doing the donkey work for them - after all, I have my dignity to think of - not to mention my reputation.

Phew! That was just a whisker too close for my liking - if I hadn't been on my toes, who knows what might have happened to the ship? I have to confess to feeling somewhat shaky; I think I'll pop into sickbay and see Beverly - soothe my nerves. She's so cool and efficient - while at the same time possessing that grace and beauty - she is certainly one fine CMO. I think I can tell, from the way she looks at me, that she thinks much the same about me...

Ah! Perhaps sickbay was a mistake. Beverly hasn't really got any time right now - she's in the middle of an operation. Everyone round here looks a little

fraught. I wonder if I can do anything -

No, really, Beverly, I don't think there's any need to shout at me like that! This is *my* ship, even if you are CMO! All right, all right, I'm leaving!

I suppose she's a bit het up - involved in delicate surgical procedures and whatnot. I wasn't very sensitive, really. Incidentally, what strange equipment these medics use! As I was making a tactical retreat, I heard Beverly talking about hares on some instruments! I'd always thought hares were sort of long eared rabbits! Oh well, you live and learn.

At last, the bridge. This is it. My special place. Will is in charge right now, so I'll just watch. I slipped in behind Worf, so no-one noticed me. Just between us, Worf scares me a little. Well, no, maybe 'scares' isn't the word - but he's certainly not to be sneezed at. (Although, come to think of it, he did sneeze at *me* the other day.)

Will hasn't seen me, and he's busy, so I won't disturb him. I like Will. I consider him the best First Officer in the fleet - though I'd never tell him so! He has been known to pat me on the back occasionally, in a man to man kind of way - it shows I can be one of the lads, too - but he never loses sight of the fact that I'm in charge. I also like the way he takes care of my ship when I'm not around.

Well, I think I'll relax in my chair for ten minutes, and keep an eye on them all. They're all very busy, too busy to have noticed me, so I'll get myself comfortable. I always forget quite how comfortable this chair is.....

A burst of laughter awakens me. Oh, no! I must have dozed off again! Deanna and Will are bending over me;

Deanna looks concerned, but I suspect Will is amused.

"What on earth are *you* doing here?" Deanna asks me. "And what would Captain Picard say if he saw you in his chair?"

His chair? *His* chair? Whose ship is this anyway?! But I like Jean-Luc, so if he wants to think of this chair as his, I suppose he can; as the Captain of my ship, he is here more often than I am.

Deanna smiles at me. "We'd better get you home!" she says.

Well, you know, I am rather tired and hungry - it's a tough job running a starship.

I allow Deanna to help me back to my quarters. On the way we meet Data - I'm glad, I've missed him. I can sense that he's been rather anxious about me, but he looks pleased to see me. I tell him that I've fixed the engines and assisted in a life-saving operation, not to mention overseeing the bridge crew, and he takes me from Deanna and strokes me and tells me I am a pretty cat and a good cat. Not exactly an appropriate response, but I like it very much. He takes me back to my quarters (I kindly let him share with me - he likes it, and one has to take responsibility for one's people) and he gives me a bowl of Feline Supplement 25; delicious - I polish it off in no time at all, then I stretch and yawn and settle down on my bed for my main nap of the day.....

A thought has just struck me. Deanna wondered what Jean-Luc would say if he saw me in *that* chair. I wonder what he'll say when he sees what I kindly left in his shoes. Oh, what a coincidence - I think I can hear him in the corridor - he seems to be upset about something.

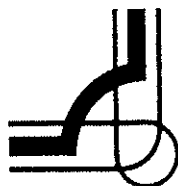
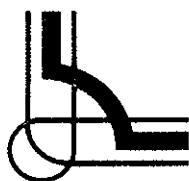
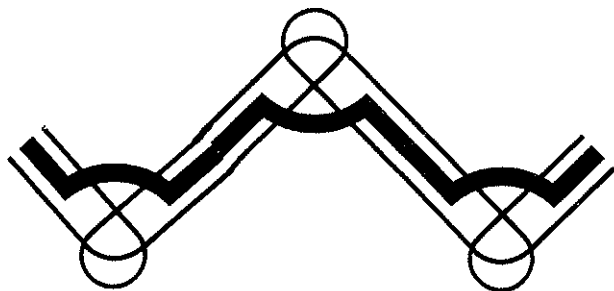
Ah, well, I'm sure it's not my

business.....

- and quoted Shakespeare -

.....And so the intrepid feline slept, as
his Enterprise sped silently on through the black
stuff, and his crew worked and relaxed, loved
and hated, laughed and cried -

- 'OUT, DAMNED SPOT!' (Macbeth
Act V Scene i)



THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

by

Jacque Groom

"Counselor Troi? The shuttlecraft has just docked at Bay 23. If you would follow me -"

Deanna Troi smiled at the young Ensign, and picked up her bag. It had been a long journey from the conference, further complicated by technical problems on the Ulysses. She'd missed her rendezvous with the Enterprise at Starbase 253, and had endured a long, boring passage to Starbase 19 before a shuttle could be sent to fetch her. Still, at last she was going home. *Home!* She suppressed a yawn as the Ensign opened the door for her.

The shuttle's pilot was bent over the console, facing away from her. An unmistakable back. Her fatigue forgotten, she put her bag down and walked over to meet him. "Lt Worf!" she said in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

Worf looked up. "There were -" he paused a moment - "problems with one of my security officers. I had to escort him off the Enterprise." The tall Klingon looked away.

Deanna sat down. She knew how personally Worf took any problems with his team. "Not Lawson?" she asked softly, remembering the difficulties he'd been having with the burly, quarrelsome man. A brilliant marksman, efficient when he wanted to be, but with a terrible temper!

Worf nodded briefly. "He picked a fight while on leave on Starbase 253. The damage he caused was - considerable. By

the time the officials found out what had happened, the Enterprise was outside transporter range. He is now returning there for trial."

"And what about Lillith?" Deanna pictured the security officer's bright, petite wife.

"She was offered the possibility of accompanying her husband, but she refused."

"Oh." She'd have work to do when she got back, picking up the pieces of the Lawson's marriage. "What else has happened since I left?"

Worf leant back in his chair. "I undertook a full security sweep of the ship, which was largely successful. And I believe Commander La Forge experienced some problems with the warp engines, which had to be taken off line for two hours for emergency maintenance."

Deanna smiled, and shook her head. "I meant the people, Worf, not the machinery. How is Alexander?"

Worf grunted. The Counselor raised her eyebrows, obviously waiting for the rest of the story, but just then the viewscreen sprang into life. "Shuttlecraft Orion? You are clear for departure." And then, almost before Deanna knew what was happening, the immense docking bay doors opened, and they were surrounded once more by the beauty of the stars.

"Alexander?"

Worf looked faintly puzzled.
"Counselor?"

"You were telling me about Alexander."

The tall Klingon stretched out, making the shuttlecraft chair look much too small for him. "He has been spending too much time with Lt Barclay," he said, his voice indicating a faint sense of disgust.

"The Holodeck again?" Troi asked, remembering their disastrous recreation of the Ancient West.

Worf gave a brief nod. "I do not know what nonsense he has created this time, but I am sure it will end in problems for me, as always."

"Come on, Worf. Didn't you enjoy being Sheriff?"

"I did not enjoy being shot. I do not think Alexander should use the Holodeck so much."

"But you use it for your workouts!" Deanna protested.

"That is - different," Worf said in a tone that allowed no arguments. "He should find other ways of amusing himself," he finished lamely.

"But when he does, he usually gets into trouble," Deanna protested. "Like when he got stuck in the turbolift. Or let out the neo-pigeons in the school biology lab. Then you told him to find another way of keeping out of trouble."

Worf's reply sounded vaguely like a growl. Deanna smiled, and got up to get herself a drink. As she was settling down to review her notes on the conference, Worf looked up from the console. "He sent you a note," he said.

"Who? Alexander?"

Worf nodded. "On the computer. I - promised - I would give it to you." He settled deeper into his chair, and concentrated on the panel in front of him.

Smiling quietly to herself, Deanna took a sip of her hot chocolate, and called up the message from Worf's son. His smiling face soon came up on the screen.

"Hi, Counselor Troi!" he said. "Father said he'd be meeting you at Starbase 19, so I thought I'd tell you all about the new program Lt Barclay has been helping me with. But," the boy continued, looking from left to right, "I'd prefer Father not to know anything about it yet, because I've got parts planned for him, and I don't want him to get the wrong idea before it's all set up."

Deanna paused the message, and glanced at Worf. He was deeply immersed in something or other, and looked as if nothing less than a full-scale attack would get through to him. "All clear, Alexander," she whispered. "Computer, resume playback."

"Lt Barclay suggested I look at some old earth fairy tales," Alexander continued. "I didn't like the idea to start with, but then he pointed out that many of them were really horror stories and - " he gave a manic grin - "that sounded much more interesting. Anyway, we've programmed in a couple, altering a few things to make them more interesting. Please, *please* say you'll try them, Counselor - it won't be half as much fun without you. The first one I thought of was..." A smile widening on her face, Counselor Troi took another sip of hot chocolate, sat back and listened.

"Virillian Starship Vredia hailing

Federation Shuttlecraft. This is an emergency."

The message shattered the peace of the little craft. Worf was instantly ready for action. "This is the Federation Shuttlecraft Orion. Please state your emergency."

The answering voice was faint and crackly. "We are experiencing problems with life support. We require assistance. Are you able to help?"

Worf examined the scanners, a puzzled look on his stern face. "I'm getting strange readings. Three life forms, and low oxygen level, but there does not appear to be any equipment failure." He shook his head. "Vredia? Is your transporter functional?"

Deanna was staring into space, her black eyes fixed on some distant point. "I'm picking up something. But - it's not the fear you would expect. More like - anxiety. They are hiding something."

"I thought so," Worf muttered.

"Orion? This is Vredia. Our transporter is partially functional. Please stand by for transport."

"Vredia - repeat!" Worf got to his feet. "They can't come on board unasked!" he growled, taking out his phaser. Deanna got up to stand by his side, as the air shimmered and solidified in front of them.

And then it all went blank.

"Commander? The Shuttlecraft Orion is approaching." Ensign Frederiks was new to the bridge, and sounded decidedly nervous at interrupting the bearded First Officer of the Enterprise.

"Well?" Riker barely looked up from the data padd he was examining.

"I've tried hailing Lt Worf, but there is no response. And..."

"And what?" Riker was on his feet now, staring out through the viewscreen.

"There is only one life-form aboard. I thought the lieutenant was supposed to bring back Counselor Troi."

"He was," Riker said, striding to the console where Worf usually stood. "Enterprise to Shuttlecraft Orion. Come in, Orion."

No response. "Riker to Engineering. Geordi? We are getting no response from the Orion. Can you bring it in?"

"Can do," Geordi's cheerful voice rang out. "Any idea what's wrong?"

"None," Riker said curtly. "Just bring it in to Shuttlebay 2 as quickly as you can."

Pacing round the bridge, Riker was glad to see Data had slipped into his usual position at Ops. "Anything, Data?" he asked.

Data turned, his golden eyes wide open. "There does not appear to be any problem with any of the shuttlecraft systems, but I am only reading one life sign on board and that is clearly Klingon."

Riker turned his back on the android, momentarily at a loss. Deanna? Why hadn't they heard anything? For a moment he wished he'd fostered that intense closeness they used to have - *Imzadi? What happened out there?* He closed his eyes for a moment and reached out - but there was nothing there. He spun back round. "I'm going down to Shuttlebay 2. You have the bridge, Mr

Data."

The forest was dark and damp. The trees seemed to close around her, their dripping branches blocking her way, their shadows inky black in the strange, silvery twilight. She moved cautiously, stopping to listen after every step, nervously aware of her vulnerability. There were things out there. Horrible things, lurking in the shadows, waiting with gloating certainty for the mistake she was sure to make sooner or later.

Something grabbed her from behind. Stifling a scream, she turned, to find her long dress caught on a twig. She tugged at the flimsy material until it gave way with a rip.

The rain was falling harder. A low grumble of thunder was followed by a brilliant flash of lightening which tore the sky apart, illuminating the eerie shapes of the looming trees above her.

There was nowhere to shelter. Nowhere to go. Tears were running down her cheeks, already damp with the rain. Brushing her bedraggled hair out of her eyes, she ran headlong through the darkness. And then, suddenly, she caught her toe on a fallen log, and the ground came up to meet her.

"Well?" Riker stood in the Orion's door, waiting impatiently for Beverly Crusher to finish examining the Head of Security. "Is he all right?"

Beverly looked up, shaking her head. "I'm not sure, Will. He's alive, and that's about all I can say." She touched her combadge. "Two to transport to Sickbay."

"But what about Deanna?"

The doctor shrugged. "She's not

here, Riker. That's all I know for sure. I've got Freya doing a DNA sweep, just to make sure."

"Geordi? Found anything?"

La Forge scratched his head. "No damage, nothing of significance in the logs. It's a mystery."

"Data? Have you got in touch with Starbase 19 yet?"

"Affirmative, Commander. Counselor Troi was scheduled to leave on the Orion with Lt Worf." He paused for a moment. "However, I do not have a very high regard for the level of security on the Starbase. They seemed to be in disarray when I contacted them."

Riker sighed. "Have they tried contacting her?"

"Apparently they are having problems with station communications."

"So we still don't know if she actually left on the shuttle," Riker said. "Deanna, where are you?" he murmured, partly to himself.

"The scanners can pick up no trace of her," Data continued. "Perhaps Lt Worf will be able to give us a better idea."

"Perhaps." He hesitated a moment. "I think perhaps we should inform the Captain."

"Aye, sir," Data replied. Riker strode back inside the shuttlecraft. "Found something?" he asked the security officer who was going over the inside.

But the young woman just shook her head. "Not much. There are signs of a struggle, here." She pointed to some scuff marks on a console. "And I found this down the side of the seat."

Riker took the object. "She was here," he said in a flat voice, looking at the small, shiny mirror. Deanna's. He'd given it to her as a birthday present, a few years previously.

Gathered round the long table in the observation lounge, the members of the Enterprise bridge crew were all too conscious of the empty seats. Dr Crusher glanced furtively at the place where Deanna usually sat, then looked away. As the Captain came in, she stood.

"Well, Doctor, what can you tell us?" Picard asked as he sat. His face was grim.

Beverly tapped a few keys, and a swirling picture appeared on the screen. "Lt Worf is still unconscious," she said in her calm voice. "On further examination, I found particularly high levels of serinium in his brain." She pointed at the screen. "I knew I had heard of the condition before; there was a talk at the last Starfleet Medical Conference I went to. They were talking about some of the new anaesthetic weapons developed by the Virillians."

"The Virillians?" Geordi looked up from his padd. "Aren't they the one who are always applying for Federation help in matters which would break the Prime Directive?"

"There has been a civil war on their planet, Rhodius IV, for 34 years," Data supplied. "During that period, both the peoples of Rhodius, the Virillians and the Confederation of Lyosia, have achieved space travel, and have made contact with many other races. But their only interest is in bringing in outside forces to achieve the total destruction of their enemies."

"And no-one's been tempted?" Riker

asked. "Not even the Ferengi? Or the Romulans?"

"The planet is not particularly attractive," Data continued. "Neither its location nor its natural resources make it a prime target for other races."

"They have developed quite a range of powerful anaesthetics, designed to knock out their opponents," Beverly continued. "They offered their technology to the Federation, in another of their attempts to gain entry. Starfleet Medical was charged with assessing it, but expressed some very serious concerns, especially about possible side effects."

"What sort of side effects?" Picard asked.

"Initially, some memory loss, usually of the period just before the drug's administration; but prolonged usage, they thought, could bring severe mental problems, including confusion, withdrawal and some other conditions."

"What about Worf?" Riker scratched at his beard.

"From the concentrations of the drug I found, I would say there will be some memory loss, but the effects should be minimal."

"And can you bring him round?"

Beverly nodded. "There is an antidote. I have sent to Starfleet Medical for the details. Even without it, Worf should be conscious in a couple of hours. But -"

"But what?" Picard prompted.

"I can't help worrying that this drug might have been used on Deanna. That whoever has her might carry on using it.

I'd hate to think of what the consequences might be."

It was still raining. Bedraggled and miserable, she nearly walked straight into the fence. Gasping for breath, she held on to it; the only sign of civilisation she had seen for hours. And then, as another flash of lightning lit the sky, she saw the house.

More like a castle. It was huge, towering above her, with turrets and towers outlined against the dark sky. The windows were shuttered; some of them hung loose, banging in the wind. There was a door - large, heavy and forbidding. It was slightly ajar.

Inside it would be dry. No matter how ramshackle, she would be sheltered from the wind and the driving rain. She followed the railings until she reached the heavy gate. With a man, it creaked open just wide enough for her to squeeze through. Gathering up her skirts, she slipped through the gap, and headed for the house.

"Worf? Can you hear me?" Beverly leant over the narrow bed, and applied the stimulator once more to the Klingon's forehead.

The Security Officer groaned. Hazily, he opened his eyes. Gingerly, he moved his head. Then, with a jerk, he sat up. "Dr Crusher," he said gruffly. "What happened?"

Beverly sighed. "I was hoping you'd be able to tell us," she said, taking a hypospray and administering it. "You were on the Orion. Do you remember what happened?"

Worf closed his eyes, and lifted a hand to his head. "No," he said gruffly.

"Nothing at all? What is the last thing you can think of?"

"Starbase 19," Worf said slowly. "Counselor Troi had just come on board -" He stared up at the Doctor. "Counselor Troi? Where is she?"

Beverly sat down by Worf's side. "That's the trouble. We don't know."

"So is it the Virillians we're dealing with?" Riker, his face dark with anger, leaned over the table. "What do we do next?"

"Not necessarily, sir," Commander Data interrupted. "We know they were trying to sell this technology. Anyone outside the Federation could have purchased it."

"You're right," Riker agreed with a sigh. "So what now?"

Picard looked up. "Data, La Forge - I want you to take the databanks from the Orion and take them to pieces. There must be some clue as to what happened, and I want you to find it."

The officers got up, and with a nod left the room.

Will Riker stretched out his long legs, and scratched his chin. "I don't like this," he said unnecessarily. "I don't like it at all."

"Hello? Is anyone there?" She poked her head round the door, and peered into the gloom. There was no answer. Tentatively she pushed the door, and looked in. The floor was thick with dust, but compared to the ferocious weather outside it looked dry and inviting.

She went in.

No-one could have been there for years. Cobwebs hung from the ceiling, brushing against her as she walked through the hall. As lightning split the sky, she could make out the dark shape of a sweeping staircase rising up in front of her. There was a flutter somewhere above her. Bats? Or birds nesting? She took a deep breath, and walked up the stairs. Doors surrounded her, all alike. Large, solid doors, hung with cobwebs, heavy with neglect. She chose the nearest one, pushed it open, and found what she had been searching for. Wearily, she climbed onto the high, old-fashioned bed, and lay down on the moth-eaten quilt. Oblivious of the storm raging outside, and of the footsteps of the mice, she fell into a deep, deep sleep.

Data looked up from the computer terminal. "Captain? We have found something."

Picard strode over to where the android sat. "Well?" he asked.

Geordi La Forge, leaning over his shoulder, stabbed at the screen. "That's it," he said. "See? It's just a remnant, but it shows where the memory was altered. Whoever attacked the shuttle used a very clever virus. It re-wrote the entire section of memory dealing with the attack, replacing it with correct but totally fictitious entries. If you examine it, you can see how the new section was made up of tiny fragments of previous log entries. That's what makes it practically undetectable. But somehow they forgot to remove it totally."

"Perhaps they were in a hurry," Picard mused, staring at the viewscreen. "Can you work out who put it there?"

"Better than that," Geordi said with a smile. "From that fragment, we could reconstruct the whole virus. And by

removing it, we were able to recover some of the previous memory. Just fragments, but enough - listen."

"This is... Virillian Starship Vredia..."

"It was the Virillians," Picard said softly.

Data nodded. "It appears they falsely claimed to have suffered life-support failure, and beamed to the Orion."

"But why only take Deanna? Why not Worf too?"

"Perhaps they did not want to cause problems with the Klingon Empire," Picard said, turning to face the main bridge. "Ensign Towers? Set a course for the Rhodius system, Warp 6. I will be in my ready room," he said to Geordi and Data, adding, with a frown, "I think it's time I notified Starfleet of the situation."

"We have a slight problem."

The main officers of the Enterprise were once more assembled in the Observation Lounge. Lieutenant Worf, looking slightly pale and rather uncomfortable, had re-joined them. Somehow it made the Counselor's absence even more noticeable.

Picard glanced round the table before continuing. It was the sort of announcement he hated making, but it had to be done. Taking a deep breath, he stood. "But first, the good news. We have news of Counselor Troi."

Faces broke into relieved smiles, and suddenly they were all talking at once - but gradually the officers noticed Picard's solemn face. "Where is she?"

Riker asked, conscious of a heavy feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"The Federation has received an ultimatum, I suppose you could call it, from the High Council of Virillia. In it, they informed Starfleet that a high-ranking Starfleet officer was being held by them, and that they would only release her in return for significant help in their struggle against their enemies." He turned away from the rest, as if unable to face them. "It gave a week's grace, after which time the Counselor would be - " he paused for a moment - "terminated."

Silence. Stunned silence around the oval table. Geordi was the first to break it. "We're going after her, right?" he demanded, banging his fist on the table.

The others nodded, murmuring agreement. Only Worf sat impassively, his handsome face immobile, unreadable.

Slowly, so slowly, Picard shook his head. "My hands have been tied," he said. "Starfleet informs me that I am - " he paused a moment - "'too close to this matter'. They will deal with it, they say, and will let us know the outcome in due course."

"And you're going to leave it at that?" Will almost shouted, getting to his feet. "This is Deanna we're talking about, in case you'd forgotten."

"I have not forgotten, Number One," Picard said, sounding very weary. "I argued that point with Admiral Blunt until I was blue in the face. But it appears this falls under some serious negotiations which have been taking place."

"Who cares about negotiations!" Will muttered. "There must be something we can do. We can at least go there, try and locate her, help her."

"All of which I suggested, believe me. Eventually I was warned that if we interfere, they will come down heavily against us. All our careers could be forfeit."

An eerie silence fell over the table. Each appeared absorbed in their own thoughts, their own worries. Even Data seemed less resilient than usual.

"The only concession I won," Picard concluded, "was that the Enterprise is to remain in this sector, ready to intervene if, and *only* if, Starfleet authorises it. As long as nothing else comes up requiring our attention."

With a grunt, Worf got up, tipping his chair over as he did so. Barely acknowledging the others, he left the room. The doors closed silently behind him, but they were all left with the impression that if he could have slammed the door, he would have done - and felt a lot better for it.

She slept a long time. When at last she opened her eyes, the sun was shining in at the windows - through such of the window as those feeble rays could penetrate, at least, for every bit of the room was filthy through years of neglect. But at least she was dry. Carefully, she got down from the high bed and crossed to the large bay window. Picking up the edge of her skirt, she wiped a hole large enough to see through.

And caught her breath.

For the garden was a sea of roses.

Roses of every colour, of every size. Sheltered by a huge hawthorn hedge, safe from the storm, their beauty was so unexpected that she became aware of tears trickling down her cheeks. Brushing them away, she turned and left the room, drawn by the beauty below, determined to find her way to that enchanted

garden.

She was not even aware of the dark eyes which followed her every move.

"Father! You're back!" Alexander ran into the quarters he shared with Worf, and gave him a beaming smile. "I'm so glad."

"Why?" Worf asked, giving his son a hug. "Are you not well looked after when I am away?"

"Y-yes," Alexander said, sitting down on the floor. "But it's not as interesting. Especially when Counselor Troi is away as well. But now you're both back we can have some fun." With a grin he picked up a data padd from the table, and wandered off towards his room.

Worf watched him go. Then, with a deep breath, he called him back. "Alexander, there is something I must tell you -"

It was a while before he realised something was wrong. Exercising in his room, trying to remove some of the frustrations of the previous day, he gradually became aware of the silence around him. "Alexander?" he called. No answer. He looked into the boy's room. It looked tidy. Too tidy. A quick glance told him that certain items - items precious to the child - were missing.

Simultaneously worried and angry, Worf ran out of the quarters. "Computer? Locate Alexander Rozhenko," he yelled. "Quick!"

Alexander was in Shuttlebay 2. He knew the area well; or thought he did. His teacher had congratulated him on the

project he'd done on Federation Shuttlecraft. And his father had taken him on a wonderful trip once, even letting him take the controls for a moment. He could manage to fly one, he knew it! It was just a case of getting the computer to do the right things - wasn't it?

Worf waited impatiently for the turbo-lift. As it came, his combadge beeped. "Lieutenant Worf?" an unidentified voice asked. "We have a security breach in Shuttlebay 2. Should I -"

"I am already dealing with it," Worf growled, leaving the ensign in the Security office more sure than ever that his superior officer was psychic.

The fragrance was overwhelming. She breathed in the heady scent, and sank to her knees in the soft, damp grass. The lawn, surprisingly neat considering the state of the rest of the property, was sprinkled with rose petals. The sun was shining down on her. She felt warm and happy for the first time in... She tried to remember how long she'd been lost in the woods, or what she had been doing before, but thinking made her head hurt. The roses. Think about the roses. She lay her head down on a perfumed pillow of snowy white petals, and closed her eyes.

And did not notice the tall figure leaning over her, a strangely wistful look on his face.

"Alexander Rozhenko! Get down here!"

The boy looked very small, framed in the doorway of the shuttlecraft. But his face was set; his eyes stony. With sudden clarity, Worf recognised the look on his son's face. It was one he had seen himself

in the mirror on numerous occasions. Half determined, half angry, and all Klingon. His anger abated slightly. He'd never thought bringing up a child could be so - taxing. He took a deep breath, and tried to think of the many pointers Deanna had given him for dealing with his sometimes awkward son. *Take him seriously, was one.*

"You were planning to leave the Enterprise?" he asked the boy, sitting down on the steps. Alexander nodded. "Could you tell me why?" Worf asked, his voice silky with the strain of keeping calm.

"Because it's not fair!" Alexander blurted out, collapsing to the floor beside his father. "I thought Klingons were supposed to have honour. They don't let friends down like that."

Deanna. It had to be Deanna he was talking about. "What do you mean?" he asked.

Alexander looked up, his eyes bright with tears and full of anger. "You say we're Klingons, and honour is the most important thing there is, but you're going to let them keep Counselor Troi, and do nothing about it? I don't call that being honourable. I call that being a coward." And, giving up all attempts to hide his tears, he buried his face in his father's broad shoulder, and sobbed his heart out.

Worf watched the boy sleep. So peaceful; the sleep of innocence. No tossing or turning or reliving the day's events. Alexander slept.

The Security Chief tried to do the same, but with less success. His son's words kept coming back to him, ringing in his ears, spinning round his mind. I

thought Klingons were supposed to have honour!

Worf got up, slipped into his exercise suit, and began his usual routine. Exercises to clear the mind. To prepare oneself.

They don't let friends down like that...

Worf spun round. He could have sworn that Alexander was standing behind him. But the boy still slept. Cursing under his breath, he took the vicious-looking weapon down from the wall, and began another set of moves.

It's not fair - it's not fair - Alexander's words ran on and on.

Worf slammed down the weapon, and began pacing the room. It was not fair! *The Enterprise looks after its own.* He could remember the Captain saying that on many occasions. Like during that unfortunate incident at the Starfleet Academy... Someone should be looking out for Counselor Troi.

And he was the officer in charge of Security.

And what was more, the Counselor had been taken from under his very nose. It was practically an obligation, that he should go after her. And it was hardly the first time he'd gone against direct orders from Starfleet.

It was a matter of honour. A duty. His duty.

And besides, Deanna was his friend.

Wasn't she?

She woke, refreshed. The sun was high in the sky. It was time to leave. She had to go... somewhere. Thinking made her head hurt; but

she had to leave this place. Standing amongst the roses, she smiled up at the strangely majestic dilapidation behind her. A faint breeze wafted the scent from the multitude of blossoms over her once more. Suddenly she decided to pick a bunch. It would be a nice surprise for... who? Who was it who waited for her? She shook her head, as if to clear it, but the fuzziness remained. Perhaps later...

Flicking her long, dark hair behind her, she bent and picked a blossom.

Somewhere, not far away, a terrible scream rent the peace of the garden asunder.

And a shiver ran down her spine.

The message he left was short and to the point. "I have gone to find Counselor Troi," Commander Riker read from the log entry. "It is my duty. Please see that Alexander is cared for. My sudden departure should not reflect unduly on the other crew-members; their orders were to ignore me."

He looked up at the Captain. "What do we do now? Go after him?"

Picard shook his head. "What's done is done." He sat down, and took a sip of his tea. "Off the record, I feel better knowing someone is doing something to help the Counselor."

Riker nodded. "Only I feel it should have been me."

In silence, lost in their own thoughts, they sat.

The terrible noise seemed to come from all around. She picked up her trailing skirts, and ran. But which way should she go? Suddenly the garden, which had been so peaceful and full

of beauty, seemed menacing and unfriendly. The box hedges loomed over her, blocking her passage. The roses seemed full of thorns; the pathways uneven and slippery. As best she could, she ran. Until she reached an old garden wall. And then, almost imperceptibly, the ivy which covered it reached out a tendril and wrapped itself round her ankle.

Rose petals falling like rain from the blossom she had picked, she fell to the ground...

...Right at the feet of a tall, dark figure. A figure hidden, in spite of the sunshine, by a thick, black cape.

"You have no right to be here." The voice was loud and harsh. "You are a thief, an intruder."

Gradually, she opened her eyes, and looked upwards. The stranger was shadowed by the sun, and all she could make out was a dark outline of a tall, strong man. "I'm sorry," she said in a small voice. "I did not mean to trespass..."

"I let you shelter in my house, sleep in my bed, walk through my gardens," the stranger continued in his cold voice. "And this is how you repay me, by destroying my flowers."

"It was only one rose," she said, struggling to get to her feet so as to see her accuser more clearly.

"Just one rose," he roared. "One rose! You have no idea what that one rose represents." With a growl, he raised one large hand, and, for a moment, she thought he would hit her. She reached up to stop him. He jumped backwards, and the cowl covering his face fell away.

She stared up into the dark, scowling eyes, the wild hair, the strange, alien face. Suppressing the scream she felt rising inside her, she took a deep breath. "I'm sorry I picked the rose," she said slowly. "Please, let me go now. I won't bother you again."

"No!" He grabbed her wrist, his bony fingers digging deep into her flesh. "You will not go."

"But I must," she protested, trying to free herself.

"You will never leave here again," he said in an emotionless voice. "Never."

Worf leant back in the pilot's seat, and thought of what he had done. Abandoned the Enterprise without leave, tricked both security and ops into believing he was running routine shuttlecraft tests; and now he was heading straight for the planet Rhodius IV, in direct contravention of Starfleet orders. All of which would possibly lead to serious reprimand, even court martial. So why was he doing it?

Was it just Alexander's words? Or something deeper?

He checked the navigational displays. Not long now.

The room he had put her in was large and airy; the curtains and bedding seemed somewhat less moth-eaten than most. The window, however, was barred, and the door firmly locked. She was a prisoner.

She sat on the bed and tried to relax. Most of all, she thought of him. Her jailer. Part of her mind told her she should be afraid of him, of his strange, outlandish looks. A beast, he had said as he put her in the room. She should be afraid of the beast.

Yet she wasn't. There was something familiar, almost comforting, about him. With his long, dark hair and the strange ridges on his forehead, he did not seem beastly, just different. She was not scared. She could not be scared of

someone with such large, dark, sorrowful eyes. She almost wanted to comfort him.

A small, strange smile settled on her lips. Closing her eyes, she lay down once more. She tried to think; to remember who she was, where she was going. It was as if a curtain had been drawn across her mind, a curtain she did not want to lift too quickly. Thinking hurt. As she fell asleep, part of her mind wondered why she was so tired all the time.

"Federation Shuttlecraft, announce yourself."

The pilot was no longer a Starfleet officer, but an impressive, almost intimidating, figure in Klingon clothing. Worf, a snarl on his face, responded to the hail. "This is no longer a Federation Craft," he said, his voice full of loathing. "I am Roag, son of Taum. I represent the family of Duras, rightful heir to lead the Klingon High Command."

"Welcome, Roag." The disembodied voice was replaced by a grey-haired figure dressed in a blue uniform. "This is Commander Tring of the Virillian Federation. How can we help you?"

Worf gave a slight nod. "Word has reached us of some new drugs you have developed."

Tring looked surprised. "I did not think such things interested Klingons. They are hardly an - er - honourable means of warfare."

"Desperate times mean desperate measures," Worf snarled. "Do we have something to discuss?"

"Certainly. You will be directed to a suitable bay."

Worf nodded, and turned off the

visual display. He frowned; he did not like the subterfuge he was obliged to use, but he could not think of an alternative.

"You tease me, woman," he said, pushing her away. And striding out of the room he shut the door behind him; but he did not lock it.

She sat back down, smiling gently.

When she woke, he was standing by the window, silhouetted against the sunset. Tall and muscular, there was something almost intimidating in the perfect immobility in which he stood there. She sat up in bed.

"Why do you keep me here?" she asked.

He turned, a scowl turning his dark eyes hard. "You took my flowers," he said.

But she shook her head. "That's not the real reason, is it?"

He turned away with a growl.

"Why do you live here like this?" she probed again, not quite knowing why she asked, nor yet how she knew what questions to ask.

He spun back round. "Look at me! Don't you see what is before you? I'm a beast! A freak! A thing to be hidden away behind castle walls, not fit to be shown to decent people. That's why I lurk here, amongst my roses, the only things of beauty that do not shun my company." He turned to face the wall, his shoulders bowed with pain.

She slipped out from the covers, and stood by his side. "You're wrong," she said in a calm voice. "So wrong."

He did not move. "How can you say that?" he said in a bitter voice.

"You are handsome and noble and strong. One of a proud warrior race. Never call yourself a beast." She did not know where the words came from, but she knew them to be true, and her voice rang true.

Although the shadows in his eyes lightened slightly, he could not trust her words.

"You realise, of course, that there are other parties interested in our new... products," Commander Tring said, as he escorted Worf to the scientific establishment where negotiations could begin.

"We have sufficient funds," Worf said bluntly. He was taken into a white, sterile-looking environment, where Virillians dressed in white gowns bustled around, and from there to a narrow room with viewscreens and an imposing table. And there they sat and talked at him, informing him on the many properties of their invention.

Worf had never been so bored in his life. It would have been easier to launch a full attack on the entire planet than to sit feigning interest in their diabolical drugs.

"Enough!" he said eventually. "Enough talk. I want to see results."

The Virillians looked at each other. "What aspect particularly interests you, Roag, son of Taum?"

This was where he must be careful. "Long-term anaesthesia," he said tersely.

The chief negotiator smiled, his thin lips rising faintly at the corners. "Certainly. We have one subject who has been successfully maintained in stasis after just one application." They walked down the corridor together, Worf glancing from side to side, memorising everything, mentally noting the security measures. Preparing. Hoping.

A justified hope.

For there, on a bed closely resembling those in the Enterprise's Sickbay, lay Deanna Troi. Her face was even paler than ever; her luxurious dark hair spilling over the white sheets. But Worf had to be careful. They must not suspect.

So he listened, emotionless, while they showed him monitors and printouts, and let him examine the patient. And then they picked up a sharp needle and lifted her arm...

"Ow!" She could not help crying out, as the thorn pricked her finger. Suddenly he was by her side.

Sucking the wound, she smiled up at him. "I wasn't picking them!" she said, reassuring him. "Just trying to do some weeding. They are so choked up with these creepers."

He looked at her, his sad eyes full of something new - something almost akin to friendship. He knelt by her side, and held back the stems as she freed the roots from the weeds. Working side by side, they stayed there until the sun went down.

"Well? Are you interested?"

The committee of Virillians stood in front of him, expectant, accusing, waiting. Worf stood his ground; his face at its most impassive, he stared back. "I am interested," he said, emphasising the 'I'. "As to whether we are interested, I cannot as yet say. I must contact my leaders." He glanced at each of the committee members. "I will need privacy."

They were keen to make a sale. He could tell by their eager conferring, by a

certain tension, almost desperation, in their manner. The leader nodded. "We will give you access to facilities," he said.

"In private."

Once more they glanced at each other. "Yes."

For the first time, Worf smiled.

They sat side by side in front of a roaring fire. They had gathered twigs and dry grass from the garden and had made a magnificent blaze in the huge fireplace. Her feet curled up under her, she glanced at her companion. She could see the light of the fire reflected in his eyes. He looked sad and pensive. She felt so totally at ease with him; it was almost as if she knew him better than he knew himself. It was not right that he kept himself isolated in this woe-begotten castle. I've got to make you see your own beauty, she thought to herself.

They passed Deanna's room on their way to the communications lab. Worf could not help glancing in. A blonde-haired nurse was leaning over her, a needle at the ready. "I'll get you out of here," Worf promised her silently.

The communications setup was basic, but perfectly adequate for his needs. His trained eyes swept the room for surveillance equipment, but found none. He flipped a switch. "This is Lt Worf calling the Federation Starship Enterprise," he said in a low voice. "Enterprise, come in please."

She was lying on her bed when the door opened slowly. He loomed over her, but the look on his face no longer scared her. "You are beautiful," he said. "How can you stand to be

with me?"

She reached up to touch his face. "You must not say things like that. You are beautiful too."

He smiled.

The alarm was easy to set off. Mentally deriding the Virillian security, he hid until he saw the door of Deanna's room open, and a stream of people come out. Then he went in. Crossing to her bed, he quickly unhooked the various instruments. Slipping his strong arms under her, he picked her up.

She wrapped her slender arms round his strong neck, lifted her face, and kissed him on the lips.

"Counselor Troi! Please!" Worf tried to detach Deanna's arms from round his neck, but she was gripping him tightly.

For just a moment, her large eyes flickered open. "You're not a beast," she said faintly. Then, hugging him more tightly, she kissed him once more.

Worf felt himself blushing. And then, just when he least wanted it, he felt the familiar shimmering feeling as the transporter took him away.

"How is she?" Riker stood in the Sickbay doorway.

Beverly peered up from the display she was examining. "She'll be fine," she said with a smile. "Don't worry."

"And her mind? You said it could have detrimental effects on her memory..."

The doctor sighed. "I can't be certain. But all the tests have come back clear."

"Then why hasn't she wakened?"

"Patience, Will. It takes time to wear off. Why don't you go back to the holodeck - to Ten Forward - anywhere."

Riker sat down by Deanna's bed, and took her hand. "I'll wait," he said.

Picard turned off the viewscreen with a faint sigh. He'd rarely had to talk so fast, nor tell Starfleet so many half-truths. It had been difficult to persuade Admiral Blunt that a sequence of happy coincidences had resulted in their intercepting the very same Klingon rebel who had kidnapped Counselor Troi from her captors. Explaining that Klingon's subsequent disappearance had been even more awkward. It was time to talk to his Chief of Security.

Worf, back in uniform, stood in Captain Picard's office, his shoulders straight, his face immobile. He had just received a reprimand like he had never received before. However, he felt only relief that he was not to be more severely punished.

"Dismissed," Captain Picard said eventually.

Worf turned to leave. As he reached the door, the Captain called him back.

"Mr Worf," he said, his voice lacking the harsh bite it had had earlier in the interview. Worf turned. "Thank you," Picard said. "Without your action, Counselor Troi could have remained with

the Virillians too long. Dr Crusher says the drug's effect has been arrested in time, and the Counselor should soon regain consciousness."

Worf nodded, turned, and left.

She opened her eyes. The large, canopied bed had gone; the bright, sterile room that had replaced it seemed vaguely familiar. But *he* was missing.

She sat up. "Where is he?" she asked.

Beverly was instantly at her side. "Deanna? Are you all right?"

She stared around her. Her eyes narrowed. "Beverly?" she asked, hazily. "What happened?"

Will Riker took her hand. "You're all right, Deanna. The shuttlecraft - do you remember the shuttlecraft?"

She turned away. "Where is he? Where's my beast?"

Riker glanced up at Beverly, his eyes full of worry. The doctor, equally worried, reached for her hypospray. "What beast?" Riker probed gently.

"The one I rescued. The one who rescued me. When I was the Beauty, in the castle..." She broke off as the door opened and a tall figure stood there. Stumbling to her feet, despite the attempts of her two friends to hold her back, she ran to his arms. "You're here,"

she said with a sigh. "I was so scared."

Worf picked her up his strong arms, and laid her down on the bed. "I think she needs to rest," he said. Quickly, almost brusquely, he turned to leave.

Riker stood up. "Wait, Worf! What happened out there?"

But Worf was gone.

"What do you remember, Deanna?" Beverly asked as she sat with her friend, a couple of days later.

Deanna shrugged. "Not much. I was in the shuttle with Worf, he'd just given me a message from Alexander. I was reading it when there was a distress signal - and that's it. Just some strange, disjointed memories." She took another sip of the hot chocolate.

"Counselor Troi?" Alexander Rozhenko came up to her table. "I'm glad you're back."

Deanna smiled. "So am I, Alexander."

"Will you be able to come and play in the Holodeck again? I sent you a message about it - Lieutenant Barclay helped me set it up."

She smiled, and pulled up a chair for him. "Tell me all about it, Alexander."

"Well, " he said enthusiastically. "It's all about Beauty and the Beast..."



