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Echoes of the Dead

Chapter 1

The Enterprise slipped out of warp near Clare Four, a minor star named after a minor explorer. The crew in the control room worked with their usual efficiency, getting ready to check in with the archeologists' camp on the planet below. Only Deanna Troi knew that the universe was suddenly screaming.

She suppressed a gasp and glanced over the whole bridge. The minds around her were all calm. And yet she felt as if she was drowning in endless, wordless pain. *Who felt that awful despair?* She had to find out. If she didn't, she couldn't help. And if she couldn't help, there was no way to stop the screams. In her agitation she stood abruptly and strode toward the turbolift. She felt First Officer Riker's worried eyes tracking her, but she couldn't stop for him. They'd loved each other once. They always would love each other, but she couldn't stop even for him.

Suddenly, the Klingon weapons officer, Lieutenant Worf, announced, "Orion ship approaching us at warp seven. Correction, approaching Clare Four. Coming into visual range now."

That stopped her. Maybe they were the source of the pain.

Worf had a way of looking large and sounding fierce even when he was doing nothing but docking the ship, but if there were Orion pirates around, that was different. She herself, mild Deanna, Ship's Counselor, couldn't find it in her to be understanding to those scum.

"On screen," ordered Captain Picard. His eyes widened. "Very sleek. For an Orion ship. Whatever their racket is, it seems to take them to the Federation."

"We're being scanned by the Orion ship," reported the android Lieutenant Commander Data. "They have seen us." He was the one person Troi never felt anything from, and he himself studied feelings because, he said, he had none. And yet, as he reported the pirates' suspicious moves, he continued in a quicker tempo, "Orion ship changing heading to point three three mark one point nine, moving away at warp eight."

"They don't like what they see," said Will Riker, eyes narrowed. "And judging by that ship's looks, I'd guess that warp eight is really pushing their engines."

Troi saw the Captain frown. Usually his feelings were as controlled and disciplined as his face, but this time his hatred of the vicious slavers hit her

like a wall.

The Orions' new course took them deeper into Federation space. The Enterprise would have to pursue, and that would delay bringing emergency medical help to the archeologists. The innocent would suffer because of the guilty. The Captain's frown deepened.

"Pursue that ship at maximum warp," he ordered.

Counselor Troi sat back down. The sudden pain had vanished when the stars turned to rainbow streaks.

The Enterprise caught up with the speeding pirates easily, but the reason they'd slowed down here was obvious. Ahead, and coming up on all sides, was Balogh's Ball Mill. The collision of two stars and their associated systems had left two different disks mixed into a broad swath of rotating, tumbling, crashing rocks. Standing still, it would look like empty space, but moving through it even at one tenth impulse meant plowing through a hailstorm made of rocks. The Orions were leaping through the obstacle course at near-warp.

"Shields on maximum," ordered Riker, "deflectors up."

The forward viewscreen filled with boulders, many bigger than the ship, careening straight toward the bridge before bouncing off at the last minute when they hit the deflectors. Every few minutes the whole ship shuddered from the larger collisions.

Captain Picard stared balefully at the nimble ship ahead of them.

"Look at them. It's like watching a level 10 player of 'Stars and Battles' on the holodeck."

The sensors could barely track the Orion ship as it dodged expertly around and through all the planetesimals, asteroids and speeding boulders.

"I'll have to let Starfleet know this area isn't patrolled well enough," he continued. "Judging by their performance they come here at least once a week to practice." He turned to Worf, "Still no answer to our hails?"

"No, sir."

"Broadcast the following," ordered Picard. Worf pressed a few panels on his board and nodded to the Captain to proceed.

"Unknown Orion ship: you are trespassing in Federation space. If you do not respond immediately, you will be fired upon."

Still there was no response. Instead, they periodically shot at the Enterprise and ducked behind asteroids, forcing the Enterprise deeper and deeper into the Ball Mill to look for them. The shields deflected the hits, but on one occasion the dissipated power was briefly enhanced by a glancing asteroid. The sudden feedback created a momentary glitch in one of the artificial gravity generators. People in the area of the greenhouses and recyclers shot into freefall and then promptly smacked right back down into tables, floors and shelves, closely followed by any liquid or loose debris that had taken the same trajectory. Dr. Beverly Crusher was soon reporting a number of injuries, including several broken bones.

Captain Picard scowled. They hadn't done any damage at all to that miserable Orion ship, by the look of it.

"Planetesimal ahead," noted Data. "It will overwhelm the deflectors."

"Standard avoidance," ordered Captain Picard.

In the course of the maneuver, they lost the ship. It reappeared briefly overhead, from the point of view on the bridge. Then it appeared to the left, then overhead again. The infernal Orions were simply dancing around the Enterprise.

"If you can get a good shot at them, take their warp engines out with precision phaser blasts," added the Captain. "They are going to answer for this behavior if I have to tow them all the way back to a Starbase to do it." Lieutenant Worf prepared the weapons at his control panel with grim satisfaction, like every Klingon before a fight. No amount of Starfleet training was going to change that.

Time trickled slowly by in a standoff. The Federation's finest tried to get a clear shot at the small Orion pirate ship, and it, with better success, tried to make sure they didn't.

Suddenly Lieutenant Worf's voice boomed through the bridge,

"Captain! Minor asteroid approaching forward shield. Strong magnetism. It could be a containment field concealing antimatter, sir!"

The Captain was at Data's station in an instant, his eyes scanning information almost as fast as the blur of Data's android fingers could bring it up.

"There'd be lots of magnetized debris, if it was a natural phenom—" the Captain started to say, when Engineer LaForge interrupted,

"Shape of magnetic field and tachyon emissions exclude natural sources, Captain." He ran another series of scans as his hands flew over the control board. "No doubt about it. Gravimetric readings consistent with a large metal containment core. That has to be a bomb. And if it's as big as the gravity indicates, that thing will blow us to kingdom come as soon as it hits the deflectors." The blind Engineer with his vision-replacing band around his eyes could see things invisible to everyone else. If he said the tachyon emissions were all wrong, they were all wrong.

There was brief silence on the bridge.

"That's why those scum have been teasing us to go further in," snapped Riker. "If we shoot at it now, its forward momentum will still carry exploding bombs straight into the shields. How about transporting?"

Picard nodded. It was the only way.

"O'Brien?"

"O'Brien here."

"Lock onto Data's coordinates and beam that asteroid as far away as you can. Maximum dispersion."

"Mass is too great," O'Brien's voice came back almost instantly, "unless you reduce power to shields."

“That would be unwise –”

“Fifteen seconds to impact,” Worf reported.

“It should be possible to transport only the central mass of explosives, sir,” noted Data. The Captain nodded. “I will recalculate the correct volume,” continued Data, as he did it.

A heartbeat later, O’Brien’s voice was on the intercom.

“Done.”

The asteroid collapsed when it lost its core but there was no explosion, only a faint flickering like distant sheet lightning. O’Brien’s dispersion kept the lethal antimatter to the size of its component atoms.

The Orions must have been tracking the asteroid because their tactics changed immediately, even without an explosion to tip them off. They streaked away in the obvious hope that they could outmaneuver the Enterprise on this obstacle course. But Picard ordered all power to forward deflectors. The Enterprise tossed aside asteroids like beach balls. In moments Worf was shooting at the pirates, neatly severing their antimatter pods as ordered. The Orion ship spun crazily, a shot intended for the Enterprise went wild –

“Another bomb-asteroid!” Worf thundered in warning. But it was too late.

The Orions hit one of their own antimatter decoys. The explosions made shrapnel out of their now unshielded ship. Even the Enterprise deflectors barely withstood the blasts.

Captain Picard nodded with finality, but looked dissatisfied.

“Now we’ll never know why they were heading to a near-empty Federation planet at maximum warp. And I wonder how many of these boulders they’ve booby-trapped.” With a slight shake of his head he turned away from the viewscreen where the flecks of debris from the Orion ship were already invisible in the roiling chaos of much older destruction.

“Take us out of here and back to Clare Four, Ensign. Let’s get those medical supplies where they’re going.”

The planet came within sensor range. Slowly the ochre, water-starved world they were to visit rotated on the viewscreen. Deanna Troi fidgeted. She wished the display were smaller, less oppressive. She walked over to Chief Engineer LaForge’s station so she could turn her back on the image by making a pretense of studying his readouts.

The Enterprise dropped out of warp. A thousand wailing voices started to flay Deanna’s heart again. Why did this feeling permeate the ship every time they approached the planet? Was there someone on the ship who’d had a terrible experience here? Troi moved to an unoccupied bridge station and called up personnel records, but she knew she was only doing it to distract herself.

Captain Picard watched the planet loom ever larger on the viewscreen, then his quiet voice came through the silence on the bridge, “Standard orbit, Ensign.”

Deanna gasped for breath and clutched at the railing next to her as the pain overwhelmed her empathic abilities. The high, desperate cry did not change, but its terrible horror entered deeper and deeper into her soul. She drew on all of her training to absorb the tidal wave and regain control. Within a few moments, still holding the railing, she recovered sufficiently to hear Will Riker saying,

“Deanna, are you all right?”

That brought all eyes on the bridge to her. With an even sterner effort she managed a slight smile and shake of her head.

“Not exactly. I think I’ll go to my cabin for a while. I should be all right once I’ve had a moment to think.”

Then she added, more to herself than anyone else, “It can’t be on the ship.”

Murders had been committed on the ship, yet she’d never felt anything like this. Whatever it was, it couldn’t be on the ship. But then where? An energy form in space? Some telepath with unheard-of power on the planet below? If so, the telepath was in dire need of assistance. Her cabin doors swished open and she collapsed into an armchair.

Chapter 2

Deanna hadn't moved since throwing herself down on a chair. Her knees were drawn up, her arms clasped tightly around her legs and her head bowed on her knees. Her black, curly hair cascaded over her back and arms in disordered waves. She felt like one big knot of tension, completely unlike herself. With every ounce of her will she repeated the exercises that shielded her empathy from overload. Slowly, the pain became a dull, slow beat, as if she'd fallen into the very heart of the agony.

She tried to force herself to think about something else, anything else. They had come here to help the archeologists, but ironically it appeared that she was going to be the first casualty.

The archeologists were suffering from some inexplicable disease, so they needed an actual doctor not just a drug. But the more the pain pounded at her, the more Troi wondered whether even Beverly Crusher would find the cause. The scientists were studying the traces of a long-vanished civilization, and who knew what energies they could have disturbed in this God-forsaken place. The awful screams would kill people, she was sure, even people who didn't hear them. Although, according to the archeologists, they were suffering from nothing worse than flu. Except that it was incurable.

One of the patients had recovered on his own after a few days, but none of the regular drugs worked.

She reminded herself not to jump to conclusions. It was probably just one your standard inexplicable interstellar diseases. Every once in a rare while, some germ managed to leap to a strange species, and the archaeologists' field work certainly got them far out of their dome and exposed to anything that might be out there. There was a fairly common grazing-type animal living on the planet's thorny scrub, a sort of oversized rabbit with small ears. And there was a much rarer flying predator. Or maybe it was something they'd picked up from the other settlement, the prospectors living about half an hour's flight to the north. They could have brought something in from another planet entirely. It wasn't as if this planet had an intersystem customs and quarantine office. Maybe –

The door chime sounded.

"Come in," she said in a low voice muffled by her knees. She looked up when the door hissed open.

Will Riker stood there, hesitantly, but still with that broad-shouldered air he always had of being ready for anything.

“Just thought I’d check how you were —.”

He never finished the sentence. Deanna saw him, a picture of solidity and comfort and protection, and flew to him. She clasped him to her and buried her face in his chest. He stroked her hair while murmuring questions about what was wrong, but it was a long time before she replied. There was such comfort in being able to surround herself with his wonderfully blind and painfree mind and to rest from that terrible pounding on her soul. She was very glad, just then, that they’d had a relationship long ago which allowed her to hold him now.

Finally she heaved a deep, shuddering sigh and led him to a couch beneath the windows showing stars. They sat, she pulling one of his arms around her shoulder as if trying to envelop herself in him.

“I don’t know what it is, Will,” she began slowly. “I’ve never felt anything like it. There was a dreadful pain that started when we were approaching the planet. When we entered orbit, it was even worse. I’ve been trying to get it under control ever since.”

Will raised his eyebrows.

“That’s it? Just pain? You don’t know what it is?”

She shook her head.

“I’ve never felt anything like it,” she repeated. “It’s totally inarticulate. As if somebody was in so much pain they’d lost all higher brain functions. But you can’t be a powerful telepath without higher brain functions, and this one may be as powerful as Tin Man, if it can reach right across a solar system like that!” She drew his arm even closer around her and interlaced her fingers with his hand. It was so much easier to think about it with her hard-won shielding aided by his complete obliviousness.

“You said something when you left the bridge about it ‘not being on the ship,’” recalled Riker. “What makes you say that?”

“It seems to be the same everywhere. I can’t localize it at all. And I don’t want to try anymore,” she added quickly.

Will looked at her, eyebrows quirked up a bit.

“Deanna,” he said gently, “no offense, but if it’s the same everywhere maybe that’s because it’s something wrong with you and not something out there at all.”

She looked at him in surprise.

“It certainly feels external, but you’re right. I should have thought of that.”

“You were otherwise occupied,” suggested Will. “Come on, let’s get you to Doctor Crusher and see what she has to say.” He kept his arm around her, since she kept her fingers locked in his.

Troi paid no attention to crewmembers’ glances as the two of them walked toward sickbay in this unofficial fashion. Her energy was going toward shielding her empathy, and furtive glances were the least of her worries. But,

attuned to Will as she was, she did notice that he was looking at the floor, the walls, the ceiling, and everywhere except at the people they met in the hallways.

Beverly Crusher gave Troi a thorough checkup, especially concentrating on brain scans, but there wasn't so much as an inkling of an abnormality.

"You couldn't be healthier," announced the doctor as she folded her arms.

"Maybe we should check the medical databanks," suggested Troi tentatively, "in case there's some special Betazoid condition that manifests only through empathic disturbance?"

They spent about a quarter of an hour searching for every possible lead in the databank—halfway through Data even came down to help—but no recorded disease had a symptom of tremendous empathic pain and no other symptoms at all.

"Well," said Riker slowly, "if Deanna's really feeling something, I think the Captain and the away team should be informed."

Beverly Crusher nodded.

A short while later the senior officers were gathered in the ready room, waiting for the Captain. First Officer Riker, Dr. Crusher, and Chief Engineer LaForge were bantering with Lieutenant Commander Data, who was once again, with full android earnestness, seeking clarification on a point of humor. Chief of Security Lieutenant Worf did not join in the joking. Klingons did not joke on the job.

The Captain entered in his quick, decisive way, apologizing for keeping them.

"Director T'pel called from the camp to find out when we were coming down, so it took a little while to explain that we would be delayed." He sat down, pulled his shirt straight, and his glance took in his assembled officers around the table.

"So, Number One, you called this meeting. What brings us here?"

First Officer Riker briefly explained what Counselor Troi had told him.

"I suggest," he concluded, "that we scan the space around the ship for any possible pure energy lifeform that might be causing this. We should also scan the planet more carefully before beaming down. If Counselor Troi feels up to it, I think she should accompany the Doctor, me and Worf down to the surface. After all, whatever entity it is that she feels may also be connected with this mysterious disease outbreak."

"You felt this in orbit?" the Captain asked incredulously.

"Feel," corrected Deanna. "I feel it continually. And I felt it long before we reached orbit as well."

"Could it influence or control our minds?" rumbled Worf.

Troi thought for a moment, probing her feelings, then slowly shook her head.

"I have no sense of a desire to control, or for that matter to do anything definite. The voice is completely inarticulate. It is simply a pure, total,

pervading cry of despair.”

“We need to scan that planet very carefully,” said Crusher. “If there’s someone down there who feels like that, they obviously need help, and soon.”

They all adjourned to the science station on the bridge where Data and Geordi LaForge began the series of scans. The space within the solar system, all the way out to the furthest planet, showed no electromagnetic anomalies, no weird emissions, no disturbances in the exotic energies operating in subspace that somehow might have been able to affect Counselor Troi. Everything was as normal as a London park on a sunny Saturday afternoon.

A close search of the slowly turning planet below them did yield one bit of data.

“The pain,” Troi suddenly said. “It’s less.”

Everyone looked at her quickly, and kept looking, as if she were an unusual sensor liable to show interesting results any minute.

“It’s still fading, but only very little at a time,” she continued. Then she breathed in suddenly. “No, there it goes again. It’s getting back to what it was.”

“A noteworthy confluence of circumstances,” stated Data. “When Counselor Troi reported the least pain we were passing through the antipodes to the Federation settlements.”

“Curious,” mused Captain Picard. “But we’ve hardly narrowed it down. Three quarters of the planet is still full of this weird emanation.”

They re-scanned the Federation camps at the apparent center of the problem very carefully, but nothing unusual showed up anywhere. The archeologists’ camp had life signs of just the right number of people, distributed among exactly the species the log said they should expect: ten humans, four Vulcans, an Andorian, and three Benzites. The prospectors’ camp showed fifteen humans, also as expected, and another ten out on field work within a few hundred kilometers. The whole rest of the planet, even though they searched with everything they had, seemed to contain nothing but the occasional solitary or social animal forms and the sparse plant cover.

Deanna kept her suspicions about disturbed spirits to herself. Even on the Enterprise, all it would take to start people imagining things was a few wild guesses by one dysfunctional empath.

“Well,” said Captain Picard, bringing the investigation to a close, “everyone stay sharp down there and see what you can find out. I’ll let the Director know you’re on your way.” With the perfection of long practice, the four members of the away team headed in unison toward the turbolift and the transporter.

Chapter 3

The four Starfleet officers beamed down to a central area in the main dome of the camp. The large room and the hallways leading away all had a frowsty, scholarly inattention to the minor details of life, like being able to walk out of there without tripping over something. Bundles of crated or wrapped specimens waited for accessioning in every corner. Sinks were deep in beakers containing obviously experimental solutions for cleaning off objects soaking murkily inside them. Computers were jury-rigged to a variety of obscure and specialized devices with a wilderness of cables. In a concession to convenience, the cables were taped to walls, floors or ceilings – except where the tape had come off and the cables formed thickets of loops like the web of a nightmare spider.

Two Vulcans stepped out of a facing room. In the brief Vulcan way, the Director immediately introduced herself,

“T’pel,” and then indicating her companion, “Doctor Stak. He is our authority on the middle Vedolian period, but since he has had considerable medical training he doubles as our doctor when necessary.”

The four from the Enterprise then introduced themselves, interrupted only by the glittering beamdown of the medical cargo. Doctor Stak thumbed his communicator to summon assistance, resulting in the appearance of two humans and a Benzite with antigrav carriers. The whole group moved toward the improvised hospital.

One of the two humans steering a cargo carrier was a young man, barely in his twenties. If his hopelessly obvious goggling was any indication, he’d been instantly smitten with Deanna Troi. She spoke to him with the same kindness she gave everyone who was in difficulty. He became even more smitten. Before they had walked the hundred yards or so to the “hospital,” he was in such a state of emotional complication that Deanna found the first laugh bubbling up within her since they had entered this terrible solar system. Politely and completely, she suppressed it.

Of the two patients in the hospital, the woman who had been sick the longest seemed to be in very serious condition. Her face was puffed up, her eyes bleary, and she had an air of irritable exhaustion in every movement she made. She started trying to sit when the visitors entered, but fell back, looking annoyed at the effort it cost her. The man sat, but panted from the

exertion. Dr. Crusher walked up between their beds with a calm smile, exuding confidence. She took their hands, one each, in hers.

"We'll find out what's bothering you, and we'll fix it," she stated. There wasn't the slightest doubt about the outcome. It would be found. And fixed. The man managed a weak smile, but the woman just tossed restlessly.

"Dr. Clarence Jones," the Director introduced the older man, and "Dr. Tamara Kenshin," indicating the more junior woman. Anticipating Beverly Crusher's next question, she pointed to the young man and said, "Mr. Bartin Higgon is the one person so far who has recovered on his own."

"I'll need to examine the two current patients quite carefully. Since Mr. Higgon has already recovered there probably won't be any useful symptoms, so a tricorder reading and a blood sample should be sufficient." She started with the reading while she spoke. "Then as soon as I'm done you can go on the tour of facilities with the landing party, while I examine the other patients and the medical records of the group here."

Only a blind man could have ignored Troi's effect on the young fellow, and she could feel Beverly think, "Just what the doctor ordered. Some amusement to take Deanna's mind off things."

Mr. Higgon ("Call me Bart") stood quietly enough for the tricorder and blood sample, yet there was something about him that unmistakably said "puppy." He spoke a bit too quickly and a bit too breathlessly, he smiled a bit too much, and he was a bit too pleased with everything. He giggled sometimes without any immediately discernible reason except perhaps nerves. Goofy, Deanna found herself thinking. Quite goofy. Although emanating nothing but friendliness.

The two patients puzzled her more. If she had to summarize the woman's feelings they would have been: *Go away. Leave me alone. You can't give me what I need.* But when Counselor Troi asked her whether there was anything she could bring her, the patient just shook her head listlessly and said, "No," while she thought, *Go to hell.* It was a very unusual attitude for a patient to take. The man wasn't quite so bad-tempered, but he too had a closed, uncommunicative feeling about him. Normally, patients were only too ready to bend their doctor's ears with theories about their illness.

Dr. Crusher was asking Bart meanwhile whether he had noticed anything about either the onset, progress or remission of his disease which he thought might be relevant. No, he said, he didn't think he had. He just came down with it one day and it just disappeared and now he felt fine. Beverly raised an eyebrow to Deanna at this glib reply, but Deanna just shook her head slightly. It seemed to be the truth, although she couldn't be sure it was the whole truth, given all the shielding she had to maintain.

Riker, Troi and Worf accompanied Bart Higgon and Dr. Mordthun, a Benzite and one of the three longest in residence at the camp, to a computer installation where Dr. Mordthun would show them how the camp worked. Lieutenant Worf would then be able to assess the likelihood of an external

carrier slipping unnoticed into the camp.

One glance at the way Worf glared at all the open doors showed what he thought of the “security” arrangements and the scientists’ delusions about them. Riker had offered to collect soil, water and air samples for analysis once they began touring the dome and its surroundings.

A lanky, black woman in coveralls with a bag full of tools slung over her shoulder raced past them on her way out of the dome, unerringly picking her way through the cables and crates without any obvious help from her conscious mind. She gave the newcomers a big smile as she sped past.

“Want any samples from the Epsilon dig?” she called back.

“Any soil samples you can spare would be much appreciated,” Commander Riker called after her, as she disappeared through the outer door with a wave. “Whew,” he said with a slight grin, “is she always that slow?”

“That,” said Dr. Mordthun gravely, “is the slowest I have ever seen the esteemed Nkoma move. I hope she is well.” Benzites were not known to laugh, but there was the ghost of a smile on his face. The landing party noticed that he too, though moving more sedately, seemed to avoid the hallway booby traps as if they weren’t there.

Counselor Troi, to make conversation with the tongue-tied young man sticking assiduously to her side, said,

“What is your specialty that brings you here?” She was too polite to say, “You seem awfully young for this job.”

“Oh, gee, I’m – I’m here on a three-year predoctoral fellowship to work with Dr. Mordthun on pottery trends through the, um, the Clinnian, Vedolian and Armarian periods so that shards can be reliably used in dating other specimens in the same stratum. I’m the only predoc here. I was incredibly lucky to get the fellowship though of course I spend most of the time cleaning specimens, entering the accessions and doing general grunt work. But I get out to our digs at least once a week and Dr. Mordthun is co-authoring a paper with me.” Luckily, Bart stopped for a breath at this point.

“It must require great dedication to leave all your friends behind and devote yourself to keeping up with colleagues who are so diligent and absorbed in their work.”

The young man’s beaming face clouded as his eyes fixed on his scuffed sandals.

“Yeah, and the real problem is they always know everything better and they always do everything better and they always tell me what to do.” His expression changed to dreamy as he continued, “Of course, Tamara was different. She didn’t care for it much herself. I tried to help her.” Then he shook his head slightly as if to shake off the mood. “Anyway, I’m learning a lot and I’m incredibly lucky to be here.” He raised his eyes to Counselor Troi and promptly started beaming again.

They reached the open door of Dr. Mordthun’s office and stepped into a

room that looked much like the other offices they had glimpsed through open doors: equipment and lab glassware and tools and specimens and manuscripts were everywhere. Threading his way through the jungle, Dr. Mordthun arranged chairs and boxes for his visitors to sit on, while Bart started the necessary programs running on the largest monitor in the office. When the ground plan took shape on the screen, Lieutenant Worf asked questions about control of entry into the dome.

“Control?” asked Dr. Mordthun.

“Into the dome?” asked Bart.

Both blinked a bit in an incredulous way. Their meaning was clear: How paranoid do you have to be to control access on an empty planet?

Lieutenant Worf rumbled an answer to the unspoken thought.

“Yes. But now you have a disease.”

Well, there was that.

“There is the prospectors’ colony to the north. Have you had any contact with them?” Worf continued.

“Yes,” Dr. Mordthun inclined his head gravely, “someone from that camp usually comes here between once a week and once a month. We trade with them for various things and sometimes we need to ship things via their spacecraft, since our own supply ships only come twice a year.”

“I will inform Dr. Crusher that the entire mining colony must be checked as well,” stated Lieutenant Worf.

Trying another avenue of investigation, Counselor Troi asked,

“Could you give us an impression of the culture here, when it was at its height? Have you also, perhaps, found any records of an indigenous disease with these symptoms?”

Dr. Mordthun issued instructions to the computer as he replied.

“We haven’t made any headway deciphering the script we’ve found up till now, so I cannot answer your second question. Doctor T’pel has been working on it night and day. As for your first question, nothing would please me more.” He paused to point toward a skeleton the computer had finished drawing. “The inhabitants were bipedal, with faces not unlike those of *Ursus* on Earth, though naturally with much more extensive frontal cranial development. Soft tissue reconstruction based on the bony processes suggests that *in vivo* the inhabitants looked much like this—” the computer had been filling in a face and body around the skeleton this whole time.

A sharp-faced, sharp-eyed creature stared back at the onlookers, with a pointy muzzle showing two impressive canines, and two cute, fuzzy ears set relatively low on its round, domed head. The effect was more of a teddy bear than of an actual bear as suggested by the good doctor, but the line of the brow gave the face a fierceness no teddy bear would ever have.

“Archeological evidence in the earliest Clinnian strata indicates that the people were initially warlike omnivores. The Vedolian period was really their peak, even though their technology didn’t develop fully until the final strata

of the late Armarian, very close to the end of their existence. Unfortunately, highly developed technologies are very poorly preserved since the mechanisms tend to be both delicate and complex, so we have to rely largely on their illustrative artifacts. Therefore the Armarian, and especially the late Armarian, is the period we know the least about, yet it is the period of most interest because, in addition to reconstructing this vanished civilization, we want to reconstruct exactly which technologies affected their environment and how they affected it, since that would contribute to the database for current planetary management.”

Dr. Mordthun was clearly capable of continuing for the next several hours, summarizing every known aspect of the civilization. Counselor Troi, however, had had a specific reason for asking her question.

“Do you have any indication,” she gently interrupted, “that the inhabitants attempted to preserve the souls of their dead at any point in their civilization?”

Dr. Mordthun thought slowly, in the manner of Benzite scholars, and looked at Troi pensively.

“It is interesting you should mention that,” he finally said. “The people were originally mound builders and then, in the Vedolian period, started to build quite elaborate funerary sites. We had, however, no reason to suspect that this was anything other than the usual ancestor or afterworld worship until recently. Dr. Nkoma Tamma found a chamber at the Epsilon dig, apparently dating from the early Armarian, though the strata are a little bit confused there, containing numerous round, sealed receptacles together with the usual funerary artifacts. The chamber had been intentionally sealed. The round objects do not appear to be artwork of any kind, nor to have any other discernible function. Neither do they emit any of the frequencies associated with engram receptacles in other cultures, as, for instance, the *katra* on Vulcan. However, we are continuing to study them, because several of us feel that these objects may well be some type of soul receptacles, in which case the indigenous technology was vastly further advanced than we have so far thought.”

“Have you opened any of these objects?”

Dr. Mordthun looked at Counselor Troi with some indignation.

“Of course not! If they are soul receptacles we could do irreparable damage.” Mentally he was appending *Any infant would know that!* “We are trying to see whether they emit any sort of energy readings, however faint.”

“Have any of the Vulcans perhaps attempted a mindmeld?” asked Commander Riker.

Dr. Mordthun shook his head.

“It would be too dangerous. If the spheres do contain engrams, we have no way of knowing what kind or what state they are in. The melder’s mind could be destroyed, or the engram could be damaged.”

Well, so much for my theory about souls in torment, thought Troi. It might be

correct, but these scholars were being so careful in their approach it was hard to see what the souls could be in torment about. An engram receptacle made well enough to last for centuries wasn't going to fall apart because somebody breathed on it.

Dr. Mordthun then led them to another office where the archeologists had set up a small display of the major artifacts and pottery marking each period. Deanna couldn't help but smile at the obviously machine-made and tacky look of the middle and late Armarian artifacts. Some things seemed to be the same in all primitive technologies. Then she reminded herself that these poor people had never made it to the other side, where they controlled their technology, rather than the other way around. Lieutenant Worf, in duty bound, looked at the artifacts, but his mind – and his scowl – was on all those open doors, and the patients who could go wherever they wanted if they were able to, and the contact with the prospectors which made the whole situation even more complex. Scientists, he was saying to himself loud enough for Deanna to feel right through her shielding, have *no* sense.

A middle-aged woman with a cloud of curly blond hair and a kindly face joined them as they clambered amongst the crates and cables of the corridors. She was introduced as Dr. Jane Mills. Something about her friendly nod to Bart and the slight, sympathetic lingering in her smile to Counselor Troi seemed to imply that she had seen Bart in several of these sudden enthusiasms and generally did her best to save him from himself when she could.

“Oh,” she said, interrupting Dr. Mordthun in a rather lengthy exposition on the role of *Petragyros scandens* vines in early Clinnian basket weaving, “give these poor people a break, Blennro. Come on, let's have a look at my tufty.”

Even Worf couldn't repress a smile at the kindly scientist rescuing them from her own tribe.

“Tufties,” she continued in answer to their questioning looks, “are the local form of rabbit. They're the most common large animal on the planet at this point. They form little grazing groups of twenty or so and they feed on grass seed, young shoots and anything else that's in season.”

“Yes, we noticed an animal like that on our life scans from orbit,” said Riker.

“Well, what I bet you didn't notice from orbit is that they are the cutest little animals in God's green universe. Large brown eyes, silky fur, gentle dispositions and very affectionate. They're just wonderful.”

The group came to a little fenced-in area, about the size of a small room, with a hutch at one end containing a little brown-furred animal. Normally it obviously rested on all four paws, but it stood about two feet tall if it clutched the fence in its forepaws as it was doing now. It was staring fixedly at Counselor Troi.

“I found this one way up north with a broken leg about two months ago and took him back here to take care of it. Dr. Stak got that all fixed up soon, but I haven't been able to bear the thought of letting him go yet. Be careful

about getting up close," she added as they approached, "he's got sharp teeth and tufties do tend to bite strangers."

Lieutenant Worf had at no point intended to get within striking range of the thing's teeth and Commander Riker took a step back on hearing the warning. But Deanna Troi continued to move toward him as if drawn in. He really was about as cute an animal as you could ever hope to see. He had huge, limpid, brown eyes, still fixed on Troi, and a rounded muzzle with golden whiskers. His ears were set rather low on his roundish head so that they stuck out sideways rather than up. They were furry inside as well as out, ending in long, graceful tufts that hung down at the ends like cornsilk. They gave the whole animal a gently comical look. The hindlimbs were quite strong-looking, while the forelimbs were much shorter and weaker, ending in almost hand-like paws, no doubt to hold the fruits and seeds the tufties lived on. But the most remarkable aspect of the creature was its fur. It was three or four inches long, dense, and as soft and smooth as silk thread. There was a thick, downy underlayer, like fine silk fibers, giving the coat body and making the whole tufty look much larger than it really was.

Deanna Troi, deaf to the world, reached over the fence and sunk her fingers into the wonderful fur behind the tufty's ears. The tufty immediately nuzzled her arm. It must be this wonderful fur, thought Troi, as she stroked it and stroked it. It was so warm and so comfortable, with such a sense of ease and of belonging. There was nothing quite like sharing that sense of comfort and of friendship. It was life itself to share. To share.

Then, suddenly, with a feeling of coming back to herself from ... somewhere else, she wondered where that had been. Probably something to do with the wonderful feel of this fur, she decided. So strange, thought Deanna inside her shielded mind, how intelligent beings who had been furred in their animal past, still found the feel of fur so comforting. So comforting. For a moment, she suddenly realized, the keening pain had even left her. With her mind lost in the warmth of the nuzzling little creature, she barely heard Dr. Mills saying,

"Well! I've never seen him take to anyone like that. You're obviously as good with animals as you are with people, Counselor." She paused. "Counselor?"

Troi shook herself as if coming out of a dream.

"Oh, excuse me," she said, "I'm sorry. What were you saying?" She removed her hand from the creature, the spell broke, and the group moved toward a waiting groundcar.

"You really should let him go," Deanna found herself saying. *Oh dear*, she immediately thought, *how rude of me*.

"To tell you the truth, I've thought so many times myself," answered the good-natured scientist. "I'll miss him so when he goes though, I just can't bear to do it. It's so wonderfully comforting to be able to pat him at the end of a long day's work."

"Really?" was all Deanna said as she looked at her meditatively.

“Yes,” continued Dr. Mills, “so wonderfully comforting. It’s that marvelous fur, I think. But you’re right. I really should let him go. He was born wild and can’t possibly be happy in a cage.”

“Just don’t let him out up north where you found him,” Bart piped up. “Some of the prospectors make pelts out of ‘that marvelous fur.’”

Deanna felt sick at the thought.

“Oh them,” Jane Mills was exclaiming. “You hang around with them altogether too much –”

“Why?” he immediately said defensively, very unlike his usual manner. “I keep telling everyone. They go all over the place looking for minerals. They might find new sites. They’re very useful people to know.”

“Oh for heaven’s sake, Bart. You don’t really think a prospector is going to slow down his mining just because he found some old pot, do you? Anyway, they wouldn’t recognize a significant site if you surrounded it with a fence of potted geraniums.”

They climbed into the groundcar. Bart managed to squeeze in next to Counselor Troi, and Jane Mills changed the subject. “Hold on!” she said, as she started the buggy out the wide open garage doors and over the bumpy ground. Lieutenant Worf heaved an expressive sigh, but all this openness was starting to wear him down. For a Klingon, he almost looked resigned.

They stopped repeatedly in the dry, scrubby plain while everyone helped in the sample taking. “We’ll go as far as the Beta dig and then return,” suggested Dr. Mordthun. Commander Riker agreed that that should keep Dr. Crusher happy.

“Our settlement is located here,” said the Benzite, “because this area has the most evidence of the old civilization. They just kept building one city on top of another here. That, of course, implies there used to be considerable water here, whereas you see it now.” His hand swept the horizon. “Once we find out more about their technology ...”

The good doctor was on a roll again and Deanna found herself tuning him out. The Captain should be here she thought. But then she thought not. They’d never get anything done but archaeology.

The landscape remained unremittingly dry and bleak, but there was also something fine and wild and free about the endless open spaces, the immense arch of blue sky overhead and the background murmur of a million insects busily visiting the countless tiny flowers of the thorn scrub. If she concentrated, Troi noticed she could even detect the faint whiff of sweetness coming from the invisible flowers.

Suddenly, out of the corner of her eye, she caught a movement.

“Hey! What’s that?” she called out as she spun around. “Oh! Tufties!” she pointed to the little grazing flock with delight.

There were about seven or eight in the group and all of their large limpid eyes were fixed on the intruders at the sound of Troi’s voice. That, however, did not stop them from chewing and eating what they still held in their

hands while they assessed the situation. Deciding there was no danger, they dropped back down on all fours, delicate whiskers probing among the grass stems as their noses twitched, looking for edibles. Their tufted ears swiveled this way and that, continuing to check on the scientists' motions.

Then, all at once they took alarm and vanished into the ground like water into the desert.

"Well!" exclaimed Troi, "I wonder what that was all about." She felt inexplicably apprehensive, as if whatever it was might be big enough to be after her as well.

"I've seen them do that before," said Jane. "And every time—" She didn't finish her sentence while her eyes busily scanned the horizon. "There!" she cried triumphantly and pointed. A large winged shape was flying toward them at incredible speed. "It's the pterodactyls. Well, they aren't really of course. They just look so much like them. They're the main predators of the tufties. Every time when the tufties do that, one of those shows up shortly. It's as if they knew somehow."

Deanna almost laughed as the disappointed "pterodactyl" veered off.

"For a minute there I was almost afraid something big enough to eat me might come popping out of a burrow."

"Yes," agreed Jane, "that's how the sight of them all instantly vanishing into the ground gets me too."

"Really?" said Counselor Troi again, even more meditatively. She looked over at Worf. It certainly didn't seem to get him that way.

They drove around some more, collected samples while Worf recorded the exact locations where each was taken on his tricorder, and ended by touring one of the digs. The Captain really should be here, Deanna thought again. He would appreciate the precision, patience and care permeating the site. There were the coarse, medium and fine sifting screens standing next to the very precisely dug vertical faces of very square holes. An archeologist using a fine brush was carefully dusting earth away from a shard now only partially buried in the earthen wall. There were distance markers, measuring lasers and strings set up with great precision throughout the site. Overseeing everything were the evenly spaced recording cameras that would allow the entire three-dimensional scene to be reconstructed at any time. The archeologists might be lax about security, but they certainly weren't lax about their dig.

Back at the dome, they found Dr. Crusher with her business done and her medikit closed, discussing symptoms with Dr. Stak's human assistant.

"Doctor Shkina," he introduced himself as the group came up. "Dr. Crusher was just asking me whether any of us had noticed other anomalous symptoms that might be related to this 'flu'. I was saying that I'd had a few nightmares this past year, but that hardly seemed to be relevant, except that they were worse than usual. Has anyone talked to you about anything, Jane?"

"Sniffly noses and that sort of thing? No, nobody. This is hardly the climate for it anyway. What we did have was two cases of heatstroke, but what with

the dryness and the sun, that doesn't seem remarkable."

"I didn't find a thing in my first examination of the patients," said Crusher. "Maybe the Enterprise labs will be able to make something of either the medical or the environmental samples."

"One thing I would like to ask you about, though," said Jane Mills in her good-natured way, "is whether you've got anything better for insomnia than Morphosome."

"How severe is the problem? And how long-standing?" asked Dr. Crusher.

"I've really never had much trouble with it until I joined this high-powered team here and it's been go-go-go ever since. I just seem to have a hard time unwinding at night. Actually it's gotten to the point where I get most of my sleep napping."

Beverly Crusher raised her eyebrows slightly.

"If you'll pardon my saying so, you hardly seem the tense, competitive type."

"Well, no, it's not really tension in that sense. It's more like some descriptions I've read of anxiety attacks. But I suppose it's all connected."

"I wouldn't suggest taking medicines for such a non-specific condition. Instead, it might be better to employ relaxation techniques. I'll download two of the series we have on the Enterprise to your computers here and then you can see if one of them works for you." Dr. Crusher made a note to herself not to forget. "We may have a pattern here: nightmares, insomnia, and perhaps other related problems. There are some diseases whose earliest manifestations are emotional rather than physical and it's just possible all of this is connected. If you would, I'd like all of you to try to remember any anomalous emotional symptoms, in addition to physical ones. It could be important." With a glance toward Counselor Troi, she added, "And we'll be doing the same on the Enterprise, since we may be finding anomalies too."

In the general milling about and exchange of courtesies before the Enterprise crew beamed back up, Bart disappeared briefly. When he came back he sidled up to Troi, who was, quite privately, starting to find her patience with him wearing a bit thin.

"Um, Counselor, ah," he stammered, "there's an, ah, bad spirit here from the civilization that died. I've, ah, had nightmares, ah, too."

No doubt, thought Troi wryly, with Dr. Mordthun asking why you accessioned the last batch of specimens all wrong.

"Anyway," Bart was continuing, "you're, ah, much too, um, much too nice a person to have to suffer through all that so here I've found these help, I'll be glad to give you some." In a mad, embarrassed rush he ran all his words together and raced off with the reddest face a fair-haired young man could have.

Deanna Troi, meanwhile, found a little cardboard box in her hand that rustled slightly.

Before she could open it, Commander Riker said, "All ready to beam up?"

In a moment they were stepping off the transporter platform aboard the Enterprise as Riker said, "Captain's briefing in fifteen minutes in the ready room."

Counselor Troi went straight there, swiveled one of the terminals toward herself, and started calling up data. Her fellow officers began to trickle in and converse, but she continued checking data until the Captain walked in and the meeting was called to order.

Dr. Crusher started the report by noting that she had detected no obvious viral or bacterial agents.

"A technician is loading all the samples into the analyzers right now and by late tomorrow we should have data on everything from mineral composition to DNA sequences of every organism present. We'll see if that gives us anything to work with. All I can say right now is that the two patients have non-specific inflammation, with considerable fluid accumulation in the central nervous system which, naturally, makes them extremely uncomfortable. I've given them a couple of things for the symptoms, but I'm no closer to the cause than before I went down."

The Captain did nothing to fill the pause, waiting for the others on the away team to mention anything of interest.

"Sir," began Commander Riker, "in talking with the archeologists it became evident that they have considerable contact with the prospecting camp. It will be necessary to check that camp as well. With your okay, I'll start to make the arrangements."

Captain Picard nodded. "Make it so, Number One."

"Security," rumbled Lieutenant Worf, "is nonexistent. No external agent could possibly be excluded. They even make pets of the local *tuf-ties*." Worf spat the word out as any Klingon would who was forced to notice something intolerably cute.

"Tufties?" Dr. Crusher leaned forward with interest. Commander Riker explained what they had seen. "Hmmm," she said, "yet another complicating factor. I wish I'd known about this while we were down there. The animal may be a disease vector. I'll have to test it the next time I beam down."

There was another pause, then the Captain said,

"Did you find anything unusual, Counselor?"

Slowly, coming out of her silence, Troi answered.

"Yes, there were several things. First, they've recently found something that may be some sort of mental engram receptacle. They have very sophisticated equipment there, but it is possible that Commander Data's abilities with computers could still be of assistance. I suggest we offer that assistance."

"Certainly, Counselor," said Picard, with an inclination of his head. "But does this have to do with the disease, or with the peculiar emanations that you have detected?"

"I'm not sure," said Troi, still absently, "that the two are unrelated. The two patients were very closed, very uncommunicative. My own abilities are, of

course, at a minimum because of the shielding I have to maintain, but they felt very closed. People in pain for a long time might get that way.” She paused briefly, fiddling with a little box in her hands.

“Then, I had a very odd conversation with the one person who had recovered from the disease spontaneously. He mentioned having tried to ‘help’ the woman, who was by far the sickest of the two, overcome the isolation of their work. Did his help cause the problem? Or did he manage to cure himself somehow, but fail with the woman? He didn’t seem like the sort to withhold a cure, but he may have information he isn’t mentioning.” She paused again, collecting her thoughts. “We also heard several reports of nightmares, anxiety, and so on.”

“Not really several, Deanna,” Riker broke in apologetically. “Two, wasn’t it?”

Counselor Troi shook her head slightly. “Except that one of them was the person who owned the tufty – which are very strange creatures, by the way, very strange creatures – and showed several indications of having uncommon sensitivity. When I checked her personnel files, I found that her psych profile includes low level telepathic abilities.” Troi looked around the table. “I find that very significant.

“And the other ‘except’ is that my friend Bart Higgon took me aside just before we beamed back and said nightmares and the like were endemic to everyone on the planet, including him.” She waved her hand to fend off the protests that naturally goofy young Bart could be expected to think some such thing. “Remember, he was one of those who got sick. Furthermore, just because he’s fairly foolish doesn’t mean there’s no truth in it, especially given the other facts we’ve heard.

“Finally,” she said, “he gave me this to cure such symptoms, just before we left.” She pushed the small, open cardboard box toward the center of the table. Inside were three little spongy circular objects. They looked like pills, but had the wrong texture.

Everyone leaned forward.

“May I?” asked Dr. Crusher, as she took possession of them. “These better be analyzed with everything else. This could be very significant indeed.”

Suddenly the Captain’s communicator chimed. “Picard,” he stated as he thumbed it.

“Captain, another Orion ship sighted briefly, holding orbit on the opposite side of the planet. It seems to be hiding from us, sir.”

After the briefest glances of surprise, they all rose.

“We’re on our way,” said Captain Picard.

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Chapter 4

The prospectors' camp wasn't far from the archaeologists' dome in space, but it was a world away in feeling and getting further by the day. Jack Conyer shook his boots off his feet with viciousness, swung his legs up and threw himself heavily onto his bed. Everything was irritating him, including the fact that nobody had bothered to make sure they had a bunk long enough for someone his size. His feet hung over the end. He'd been here over a year, dammit, and in that entire time Perilloux Prospectors couldn't get their act together and find him a proper sleeping pad. Told him just how important he was, didn't it? Not like Mike Reddle. He interlocked his fingers and put his hands under his head. Here he was, on a planet with a grand total of about forty people – and one of them had to be Mike-godawful-Reddle. Was this what he'd gotten a Master's in geology for? Was this what he'd spent five tough years in the asteroid mining colonies for?

Life was so stupid. When he'd been a student, he'd wanted nothing better than to get out into the "real world" and make big bucks. Oh, he knew it would take a few years of hard work, building up practical experience and working with the experts. His specialty was siliceous minerals, quartzes, dilithium and other crystals of industrial significance. A world like this was perfect for him because it had been pretty well mined out of metals by the extinct civilization, which meant that except for the pervasive magnetite, there weren't many confusing sources of readings when he was out looking for beds of pure crystal. When he'd been contacted by Perilloux Prospectors and told he could run his own project, doing both survey and analysis work for the quartz exploration on Clare 4 and, at the same time, pull down big bucks, he had jumped at the chance. This was it, he had thought. This was the big break.

Ha!

The irony of it was that the advertised rewards were all there. He was given a great deal of independence, he could search for quartz any way he damn well pleased and the pay, though not great without bonuses, was as expected. So far, so good. It was the bits that hadn't been advertised that were making him think of quitting. First of all, there was this wretched sideline with the tufties. Ashley and Roger Perilloux sold the pelts or something. Admittedly, they were very nice pelts and he could see that they might bring a tidy profit.

There was nothing wrong with that. If someone wanted to branch out into another business, more power to them. But that did not mean he wanted to branch out with them. The Perilloux seemed to feel that if you didn't bring in your quota of tufties, you weren't really a member of the team. The company needed the extra income to stay afloat, they said. Any real member of the team would try to help out.

Well, damn it, he didn't like to help out that way. He'd come to help out by finding quartz beds, not chasing rabbits all over the landscape. Privately, most of the other geologists seemed to feel the same way, but Mike Reddle and a few others seemed to like nothing better than currying favor by bringing in tufties on every possible and impossible occasion. Those asses didn't seem to get much geology done. But that hardly seemed to matter. Get Ashley a batch of tufties and you were her golden-haired boy or girl, as the case might be. And since Mike and his cronies were such enthusiasts, everybody else had to be too, to prevent him from getting all the credit.

Ever since Joshua, one of the three supervisors, had left last month, Reddle had been completely unbearable. There were at least five people ahead of Reddle in line for promotion, and Jack Conyer was one of them, but at the rate Reddle was going it wouldn't matter. "Oh, no trouble, Ashley. I'm just careful to check the areas I cover prospecting. Picked this set up on the way. Anything to help out, Ashley. Don't even think about it, Ashley." Jack grimaced in disgust.

Now he'd have to go out too and bring a bunch of tufties back, just to keep the score as even as he could, though he could never manage the toadying as well as Reptile Reddle. Maybe he could get Betsy to go with him. At least then there'd be someone to talk to. There was something eerie about this planet. When you were out there tracking tufties by yourself, sometimes something seemed to be lurking, slowly encircling you, waiting to squeeze the life out of you. It was much nicer with someone to talk to.

Suddenly, Jack sat up and swung his feet down to the floor. He had to stop brooding. He'd go out for a walk, look at the stars, and settle his nerves that way. He fought back the nostalgic thought that before Reddle had arrived, just under a year ago, it had been a nice friendly outfit. Then he could have gone to the mess room, swapped some stories and had a beer, instead of having to deal with this crap by himself. Roger Perilloux had been a convivial kind of guy and had usually been in there, but lately he'd kept to himself a lot. Ashley had always been tough as nails, but it had mattered less before. Now he felt as if he depended on her good graces alone and there weren't very many of them. He got his boots on and wandered out.

A light breeze outside ruffled his hair and he took a deep breath. He started to feel cooler and better. A little distance from the dome of the camp, he sat on the ground, his back propped against a convenient rock and stared at the stars. What, he found himself thinking, was he really worried about? Christ, he'd hunted squirrels as a kid. It wasn't so much the hunting that he objected

to as the feeling that this wasn't in his job description. And that Reddle was doing it better than him and moving toward promotion. Well, he could hunt better than stupid Reddle any day, whether it was rocks or rabbits. Any job turned out to have requirements nobody told you about. If it wasn't making coffee, it was hunting tufties. Who cared.

As he gazed, he noticed one of the "stars" moving slowly against the background. Must be that huge Starfleet starship everybody had been abuzz about at breakfast. Unfortunately that reminded him of the other thing he was getting to hate about his job, and his carefully crafted mood of perspective curled up like paper in a flame. He hated those slimy Orions the Perilloux traded with. If they had to trade with them, why couldn't they just do it long distance? So what if the Orions gave the best prices for pelts? It'd be worth a lot not to see their greedy green faces. For a while it had always been the same two slimeballs, invading the camp with that shifty-eyed look of appraising every piece of rock they thought they might be able to steal. He'd been quite pleased yesterday when Ashley had said they were late for their rendezvous. Of course, he hadn't let on. She was looking like the toughest nail in captivity over the whole thing, and he didn't want to be hammered to the wall.

Then this morning there was that peculiar conversation he'd overheard bits of in the adjoining office. Something about it being absolutely necessary to get more "elatine" to fill the Orions' new order. Even with his Master's in geology, Jack had no idea what elatine was. Maybe some unusual mineral they'd found on this planet? But in that case, he was really seething, because the whole point of his contract – it's biggest draw, given that he'd be stuck miles from anywhere for years – was that everyone in the group got a percentage of all profitable discoveries on the planet. You got the biggest percentage for your own discoveries, but you were supposed to get something for other people's discoveries too. It was no small inducement that just being part of the group meant you might get rich for life if someone really hit the jackpot. And now it looked like someone (and he was pretty sure he'd heard Ashley in that room) was trying to wriggle out of their obligations. He scowled in the dark. If there was any way, any way at all, he was going to find out what was going on and slap them with the biggest breach of contract suit in the Federation.

His mood not at all improved, Jack Conyer stood up, kicked a rock and tried walking to cool off. He hated hating his job, but in this tiny community he couldn't even check the computer nets for another job without being noticed. He might just take the next ship back to the asteroids. There was always work there, for obvious reasons. Finally, to cap it all off, he got annoyed with himself for frittering his time and mental energies like this. If he was going to spend all day tomorrow hunting tufties, he needed to be alert and well-rested, not angry, exhausted and frustrated.

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The next morning, circles under his eyes and a fog in his mind even after one cup of strong, black coffee, Jack Conyer saw Betsy coming in to breakfast by herself. Well, that was one small piece of luck, anyway. He brought his empty cup over to her table.

“Mind if I join you?”

She made an expansive gesture, implying he could take any of the three free seats.

“How’s it going, Jack?”

It was a mystery why a woman who was ethnically Chinese had a name like “Elizabeth Carlyle,” but it was such a common mystery in the Federation that Jack hadn’t even asked her about it.

“Not well,” he grumbled. “Downright disgusting, in fact. I figure it’s about time for me to one-up Snaky Mike again with a few trophies.” He looked at her dubiously and hopefully. “Would you come along and keep me company?” It was well known that Betsy hated this tufty business more than anyone else.

Her eyes narrowed down a bit.

“What would I have to do?”

“Nothing. Absolutely nothing. And,” he added quickly, while making a face, “you’d share in the ‘glory’ of whatever we bag – of whatever I bag.”

“So what do you want me along for?”

“The pleasure of your company,” he replied with a gallant flourish.

“Yeah!” she snorted. “And I have a beach place to sell you on the Louisiana coast.”

“No, really, I mean it. I tell you this planet is downright eerie when you get out miles from anywhere by yourself. I’d feel a lot better if there were two of us.”

Her eyes narrowed down a bit more.

“Jack, I’ve never heard you trying such utter nonsense before. I’m probably half your size and I’ve been out at least as far and I’ve never noticed any such thing.”

“Yes, but you haven’t been hunting tufties,” was all he muttered.

Jack Conyer was a tall, strapping fellow not known for his shyness, and he felt ridiculous being worried about going out alone, but there it was.

“Jack, are you serious?”

“Yes, I’m serious,” he grumbled. “And if you know anything about hunting tufties, you know it’s long and painstaking work. I’m not trying to inveigle you out to my secret love nest in the desert or something.” He scowled a bit at the effort of hiding the fact that he would have liked nothing better. He couldn’t tell her that. She’d never given any indication of wanting to hear it.

Betsy’s face finally broke into a smile.

“Ok, Jack. I didn’t have anything particular planned for today and even

though chasing poor, defenceless animals is not my idea of a holiday, I'll come along if you want me to."

Two experienced field geologists do not take long to prepare for a one day trip, so a scant fifteen minutes later they were in a ground car and on their way out the dome. Lifeform readings didn't show tufties anywhere close, except up in the hills where they'd be impossible to catch, so they had a drive of several hours ahead of them. There used to be tufties in the plains around the camp, but those had all been hunted out months ago and it was a much longer drive now.

"If we have to go that far, why didn't we take a flitter?" asked Betsy incredulously.

"Can't catch tufties with flitters," said Jack. "You ever seen any tufties from a flitter?"

"I don't know. I can't say I've really looked. They blend in with the sand and rocks pretty well."

"I've looked. There never are any within visual range of a flitter. I don't know how they know, but they know. The only way you can sneak up on them is by staying on the ground."

So they stayed on the ground. The hours trickled by, the landscape hardly changed, except for the dome becoming a tiny dot and finally disappearing. Conversation was almost nonexistent.

"Well," Betsy finally said, "do let me know if you'd like me to get out and walk."

Jack looked at her, jerked back to awareness that there was another person in the car. He wiped the scowl off his face. He hadn't even realized it was there.

"Sorry, Betsy. I guess I'm not quite the scintillating travelling companion. I always get glum on these trips."

"You could have warned me," she replied. "You know, the real money is going to come from rocks. If you hate it this much, why are you doing it? Who the hell cares about promotions or what Her Bossness wants?"

"Yeah, well, that's you," muttered Jack. She'd found one of the richest titanium-bearing sands in the galaxy just last week, and barely a month before that, the diamond-bearing layer of sediments. It was like that all the time with her. And unlike some people he could mention, she didn't try to keep the finds to herself, so it was going to be hundreds of extra credits a year for all of them once the mines were working. Anyone who was that brilliant and that well-liked didn't need to worry about bosses.

"Aw, Jack, don't feel bad. I've been lucky, and you only just got here, and you'll do fine once you have a feel for the place."

Old Betsy was a sweetie, there were no two ways about it. She was always doing her best to cheer the downhearted. And succeeding. He smiled at her, but then he looked at where they were and the frown came back.

He stopped the car.

“Ok, we’ll have to walk the rest of the way. Readings indicate a group about five minutes that way.” He pointed north. “We’ll have to be as quiet as we can.” As an afterthought, he added, “Or you can stay here, if you’d prefer.”

She seemed indecisive. “How long will it be?”

“About four hours, I’d guess, since the readings indicate about eight to ten animals.”

“I’ll pretend I’m doing something,” she said, putting on a harness with a whole range of mineral sensors. “Although, if you don’t tell anyone, I’ll admit that my real plan is lazing around, wishing there were some clouds I could watch go by.”

They trudged off, Jack carrying a large sackful of equipment. It was hot. It was dusty. There were no sounds except the soft shuffle of sand underfoot. Periodically an insect would whizz by. Otherwise it was all stillness, sand, heat and thorn bushes. Dry scrubby grasses grew around the thorny plants and also in between them where there was enough water. Sometimes they rustled underfoot.

Jack pointed silently to a large hole almost entirely hidden under a thorn bush. “Tufty” he mouthed, careful to make no unnecessary sound. They were getting close. The trick was to come up on a group suddenly when they were close to their burrows. Then, instead of running away they would dive into the holes where they could be trapped using netting. The application of a smoke generator would then force them out, one by one, at the hunter’s leisure. Most important, this allowed them to be taken alive and without a stunner, which, for some reason, was a big point with Ashley. She probably didn’t want any pelts ruined with ham-handed killing.

The two humans topped a low rise in the terrain and suddenly faced a group of tufties not fifty yards away. With one piercing cry of alarm, they melted into the sand.

Jack nodded in satisfaction, but he didn’t smile. Betsy looked over her shoulder.

“Okay,” he said quietly. “We’re in luck. That was the hard part. You just stay here. I’ve got to cover all the openings with netting – there may be fifty of them – and then I can start smoking. We’ll be out of here in two hours.”

Silently, he used his instruments to find the openings, when his eyes wouldn’t serve him. Steadily he spread netting. Slowly he strode to the next burrow. Betsy looked over her shoulder again.

“What?” Jack asked when he saw her doing it. He was feeling jumpy himself, and if there was something out there, he needed to know about it.

She shrugged, embarrassed.

“Just a kind of funny feeling that there’s somebody looking at me, or spying on me, or something. I’m sure it’s nothing. There’s all of forty people on the planet, between us and the scientists, and there’s no reason why any of them would be playing peekaboo.”

Her words were nonchalant, but Jack saw her try not to glance over her

shoulder again.

"I'll do a bit of prospecting," she said. "Give my head something to do besides daydream."

She wandered away and over the nearest hill. He missed her before he even lost sight of her, but he shook his head and set his mouth and tried to stop "daydreaming" too.

He marched back and forth, smoking burrows and bagging tufties. He did his best not to look at them. It was ridiculous to go all squishy just because they had big brown eyes.

At last, he was done. He was surprised, when he looked at the time, to see it had only been two hours. He felt like he'd been at it so long that it was hard to remember a time when he didn't feel hot and – and phobic. There was no other word for it. It felt like the whole planet was a vast hand, trying to squeeze the life out of him.

Time to call Betsy and drive away. He whistled before going to the bother of unhooking his comm, and saw her wave back from a dry creek bed where she'd been crouched.

When she reached the car, she was obviously doing everything she could to avoid looking at the net bag of squirming tufties.

Well, at least he could give himself points for not being as squeamish as she was. He tried to talk as if nothing was the matter.

"Here we are, we all say we just happened to catch these animals while we're doing our work, and you're the only person I've ever heard of who actually did any work on one of these trips."

"Uh, yeah," Betsy said. "Yeah." Suddenly, she looked over her shoulder again.

"You see what I mean, don't you?" he finally asked, giving up on pretending things were normal.

She looked at him squarely for the first time since she'd rejoined him. Slowly, she nodded.

"It's very, very, very weird."

"Find anything?" he asked, to change the subject.

"Uh, some bauxite, some of what may be iron. Hard to tell with all the dispersed magnetite."

"Iron?" said Jack. "That's odd. There shouldn't be any iron here. Where exactly did you get the reading?"

"Over at the top of that dry creek," Betsy answered, pointing.

"Let's go check it out. Most of the iron ore was mined long before the Bears died out, so if there really is a deposit, who knows what else might be there."

Both geologists took evenly spaced readings as they approached, but there was nothing except a tiny deposit of something very unusual. With her usual luck, Betsy had managed to stand on top of the only place of interest.

"Look at these readings!" he exclaimed. "There are a few veins of what looks like iron, I'll grant you that, but hardly enough to make a cast iron tub. It's these crystals that are weird. If this is for real, there are a few absolutely

massive point sources and then nothing. There may even be some organic material. I've never seen anything like it."

"You want to take the time for close-up?" asked Betsy.

"Sure. Why not." Jack strode off to the groundcar to get a portable burrowing unit that could make a passageway large enough for a man to crawl through or to lower instruments through. Betsy said she'd wait for him there, and carefully didn't look at the car with the fuzzy, brown mass in the back.

Jack came back, lugging the burrower, which was portable only for someone his size, and dragging a power pack. The burrower was the size of a large window fan in a box. Set on the ground, it used a variant of phaser power to melt a circle in whatever was in front of it and then used the molten material to form the walls of a tube. Tubes made this way were not permanent, but they were strong enough to prevent cave-ins during explorations and they were quite useful when remote sensor readings weren't enough. Patiently, Jack and Betsy monitored its progress on the small control unit, sometimes tweaking the vectors a bit to keep it on target for the bits of iron.

Suddenly the control unit registered nothing. No sand, no rock, no iron, no crystals. There was nothing in front of the burrower, as if it had burrowed right back up into the air. Jack and Betsy stared at each other.

"I'm smaller than you are," said Betsy. "I'll go in and see what's happened."

The burrower still responded to commands to come back out, so they waited for it to reappear. It seemed undamaged. Betsy adjusted her headlamp, tied a rope around her shoulders and waist and slung the loops over her shoulder. Jack tied the other end around his waist and held the rope in his fingers like a doctor feeling a pulse. She attached her open comm at her neck, but even in this day of communicators and phasers, many lives were still saved by a trusty soul at the other end of a good stout rope.

Betsy entered the hollow tube flat on her stomach, using her elbows to inch herself forward. Jack could hear her breathing, and then breathing harder. He knew just how difficult it was to crawl through a tunnel on your stomach. Then he heard her gasp.

"Bets! You okay?"

"Uh, yeah. Yeah. Fine."

"What happened?"

"Nothing, Jack. Nothing. ... Uh, Jack, the reason the burrower looked like it hit air is because it did hit air. Kind of bad air, until some of the fresh came in with me. This is a burial chamber, Jack."

"What!"

She edged back out and held the rope for him while he squeezed his way through the tunnel. His headlamp shone on a largish chamber, filled with immeasurably old shelves, apparently made out of whole logs. Trees that size no longer grew anywhere on the planet. On the shelves rested rounded,

translucent crystals bigger than his head. There were large vase-like containers standing on the floor that probably had the actual bodies in them.

Unfortunately, that's all there was. The crystals were merely pure quartz, and wouldn't even be worth lifting off-planet.

"Just my luck," he muttered after he inched his way back out. "You find something, and because I'm around, it's useless." He sifted some dry earth through his hands. "I guess we should let the pothunters down south know about this."

"Let Ashley tell them," suggested Betsy. "No amount of tufties would get you back in her good books if she thought you'd let the regulators in on something before we knew it was worthless."

"You're right again, Bets," agreed Jack. "I keep forgetting these little things. Well, our readings should prove to her that there's nothing to worry about."

They headed back to the groundcar for the long drive home. They got in their seats, Jack began steering as the car rolled off, and he knew he also began frowning again, but he couldn't help it. It was either that or sit there with his head in his hands like Betsy was doing, and if he did that, he wouldn't be able to steer.

At one point she scabbled around in her pack, pulled out her water bottle, and drizzled water over the critters on the back seat. They lapped it up eagerly.

"Jeez, Betsy, you weren't even looking at them. How'd you know they were thirsty?"

"I dunno," she muttered, and he suddenly saw that she had great big tears rolling down her cheeks.

Christ. Now what was he supposed to do?

"Couldn't ... Jack ... couldn't we just let them go?" she asked in a tiny voice. "To hell with Ashley."

He stopped the car to stare at her.

"After all that? Are you crazy?"

"I guess so."

He started the car rolling again but she said,

"No. Stop. Jack, I'm sorry, but I have to get out of here. Come back for me later with a flitter. I just can't stand it anymore."

She didn't have to tell him what "it" was. He knew.

He stopped, let her out, and checked the time. "I should be back in less than two hours. Don't forget your communicator. And here's the instrument belt, so you have something to do." He restarted the groundcar and called back over his shoulder, "I'll be back as soon as I can."

When he checked the rear viewer, he could see her sitting on the ground, sobbing. Betsy wasn't the sort of person who ever cried.

Chapter 5

Counselor Troi, seated in her usual place on the bridge, watched Captain Picard grow frustrated over yet another small, dodgy Orion ship. It was using Clare 4 just as a squirrel uses a tree trunk. After the one glimpse of the ship hiding on the other side of the planet, the Enterprise didn't get a second one for some time. The only good thing was that the pirate ship made no attempt to fire any crude bombs disguised as debris.

"The ship has basic cloaking technology," Lieutenant LaForge announced from the engineering station on the bridge. "Probably stole it from some two-bit Romulan trader and didn't really know how to install it. But it does make them a harder to spot." He adjusted a few controls. "Data, try adjusting the neutron density detectors, that should help."

Data did so, and soon everyone on the bridge could see a fuzzy blob that kept disappearing behind the limb of the planet whenever it was spotted.

Captain Picard, meanwhile, was concealing annoyance in that way which is obvious to everyone, not just Betazoid Counselors.

"We have work to do here. Instead we have to waste fuel, time and energy to find out what a bunch of Orion slave traders are doing here."

Lieutenant Worf rumbled, "It is easier to destroy them than disable them. Captain."

"Yes. Then we'll never know what they're up to. And the worst of it," said the Captain as his eyes narrowed further, "is that I'd be willing to bet they know we want them alive and they're counting on that."

Troi could feel his annoyance spike up. In another moment, he was going to give the order to blast that ship to bits.

Just before he reached the tipping point, Worf said,

"Orion ship hailing us, sir."

With a significant glance, Picard stood up from the captain's chair.

"On screen."

The upper half of a sinister-looking man filled the screen. Green skin was to be expected on Orions, as were upswept eyebrows that suddenly drooped at the ends. But otherwise they were very similar to humans, making it seem that they ought to have a human expression. Instead, the huge face on the screen had a merciless bestiality that made Troi's blood run cold. In an unusual twist, this particular Orion looked harassed, as well as brutal.

“I am Captain Picard of the Federation Starship Enterprise. State your business on this Federation planet.”

“Captain Karlan,” hissed the mustached demon on the screen. “You choose your moments well for polite conversation. We are having engine trouble and have no time for your moronic procedures.” He glanced over his shoulder like a worried demon. Suddenly the picture disappeared.

“Contact broken,” stated Worf.

Captain Picard expelled an audible and frustrated breath.

“They’re up to no good, I’m sure. They always are. But it wouldn’t be right to order them out without some actual evidence that they’re causing trouble. And if they really are having engine trouble, they may need help to get out.” He stood and thought. Then, with a small nod to himself showing a decision taken, he said, “Ready armed shuttle on autopilot to flush them out. Fire only on my signal.”

Arming a shuttle and providing it with shielding took several hours of jury-rigging components that had never been intended to fit together. In all that time the Orions never reestablished communication, much as the Captain had expected. He’d been so sure of it that he and the senior bridge crew had used the time to get some sleep.

Dawn was breaking on the human settlements below when the shuttle finally left the Enterprise and streaked around the planet in the opposite direction. The Orion ship took astonishingly long to react to the presence of the speeding weapon. Sensors on the shuttle showed the pirate ship in view for minutes before there was any reaction. Then there was clearly some difficulty in deciding whether the shuttle or the Enterprise posed the greater threat. The Orion ship apparently decided the Enterprise had to be the worst of the pair, until the midget released a powerful phaser blast across the ship’s bow. Then the ship started edging toward the Enterprise.

Finally Worf intoned, “We are being hailed, sir. Audio only.”

Picard raised his eyebrows slightly.

“I repeat,” he said, “state your business here. Or be fired upon.”

“You *pachuka* spawn,” snarled a voice. “Our whole ship is about to blow up and all you can think of is that your forms haven’t been filled out.”

“On the contrary, Captain Karlan. We may be able to offer assistance if you are having mechanical difficulty. However, in order to do so, we need to know the nature of your problem. And the nature of your business in this sector,” he reiterated. He might have no mandate to interfere in legal trade, even with unsavory characters, but illegal trade was different.

“Assistance?” sneered the Orion. “I doubt it.” His tone changed to ominous and velvety, “Unless you have female engineers who could perform the required mani-pu-la-tions.” He drew the last word out until it became obscene.

“In that case,” said Captain Picard evenly, “if you need no assistance and have no business here that you care to discuss, leave Federation space now or

we will disable your ship and bring you before Federation law for trespass.”

The unpleasant laugh at the other end was suddenly cut off as the link was lost again.

“I’ve had enough of this,” Captain Picard stated flatly. “Fire one more shot across their bows. If they don’t move off, take out their engines. Warp first, then impulse.” He paused. “Proceed.”

Data’s fingers played his board as he programmed the shuttle and the targeting. Worf prepared the weapons. The warning shot streaked through space.

Suddenly all the lights on the Orion ship went out, and it keeled over to one side.

“What the—?” exclaimed Commander Riker. “That shot didn’t come anywhere close to the ship. Or did it?”

“No, sir,” Data answered promptly. “Phaser beam passed two kilometers ahead of ship, as targeted.” He checked some readouts. “There is no evident explanation for the observed effect.”

“If I might interject, Captain,” said Deanna Troi from her seat on the bridge, “it seems to me that speaker sounded somewhat different from the first one. It may be worth checking the voiceprint to see whether it really was their Captain.”

Picard indicated to Data with a brief nod that he should do so, and a second later, Data said,

“Voiceprint differs by twenty two point four percent. It was not the same person.”

“What is going *on* on that ship?” snapped a very frustrated Captain Picard. “I can’t shoot at a crippled vessel.” He turned to Deanna Troi. “Do you feel anything noteworthy about that ship?”

She pondered a moment, thinking back to the Orion bridge spread across the viewscreen, but she shook her head.

“I felt hatred, suspicion and pain. However, those could well be the normal state of the people on board the Orion ship. I couldn’t tell whether anything unusual is going on.”

“Well,” said Picard, straightening his shirt with finality, “Don’t let that ship make a move. Call me the instant it comes back to life and we’ll try to raise them again. Also, monitor any teleporting they may try. I’ll be in Dr. Crusher’s office.” He strode into the turbolift and signalled Troi and Riker to follow him. They needed to know how the sample analysis was progressing, too.

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The atmosphere on the bridge of the Enterprise was tense. The Orion ship’s artificial gravity had started working again hours ago. The lights had come

back on. But there was no sign of communication. After increasingly impatient demands on the part of Captain Picard, the Orion Captain finally appeared to be disposed to speak to them again. Lieutenant Worf rumbled a curse under his breath at his usual station. On three separate occasions he had counseled shooting the interloper out of the sky, but each time Picard had noted that they had neither shields up nor weapons armed. Although once, he had curled his lip and said, "Don't tempt me."

"Communication coming in, Captain," stated Worf.

"On screen," ordered Picard.

And everyone on the bridge gaped. It was a barbarian-looking, green-skinned Orion all right. But it was a female. The last anyone in the Federation had heard, Orion females were either lowpriced or highpriced slavegirls and not much else. If this was one of their officers, things must be changing even among the Orions. The huge image on the viewscreen licked her lips with a suggestive leer at Picard.

"I am Captain Picard of the Federation Starship Enterprise. It is taking your ship altogether too long to state its purpose in Federation space."

"Cap-tain Pi-kard," she rolled the words around in a rich, low voice, almost as if she were tasting them. She made a low laugh that sounded appropriate for an executioner. "We have much to thank you for, Cap-tain Pi-kard. If you had not distracted our esteemed Karlan, I would not be here speaking to you." She stepped back suddenly, allowing the viewer to show something of the bridge besides her face.

Everyone on the Enterprise bridge stiffened.

Hanging in the door of the Orion bridge was a flayed, shredded figure, his Captain's insignia visible among the tatters of flesh and cloth. He was obviously quite dead, at long last.

Captain Picard, drawing himself up, said only,

"You have not answered my question. The barbarism of your people is sufficiently well known to require no new demonstrations."

"Oh, but I am answering your question, Cap-tain Pi-kard. This ship traded in many goods. Now that some of the goods have revolted," she smiled a sinister smile, "we are still deciding what our purpose here is. Right now, we wish only to trade with the camp of As-ley. What else we may decide later, I cannot tell you, Cap-tain Pi-kard." Once again, as she licked her lips slowly, her prehensile tongue seemed ready to reach for Picard right through the viewscreen.

He almost stepped backward in disgust.

"We will be monitoring your activities closely," he snapped. "At the least sign of infraction of any Federation laws, we will arrest every last one of you and impound your ship. Is that clear?"

"As clear as you are, my dear Captain," said the contralto.

Suddenly Counselor Troi's voice sliced through the bridge.

"What are you doing with that animal?"

As the others followed Troi's eyes, they too could see a tufty slumped against one of the Orion ship's bulkheads.

"And who might you be?" demanded the green-skinned maiden with a foul air. She didn't seem to like upstart slavegirls daring to address her. Troi could feel her determination to speak only with important men.

"She is one of my officers and you will answer her with respect," stated Picard.

The Orion's manner didn't improve, but she said,

"It is my pet. It was beamed up for me from the world below, before I was free. Unfortunately, they do not last long and a new one will soon be necessary. I trust that does not break any of your precious l-a-w-s."

"What are you doing to it?" cried Deanna. "What do you mean, they don't last. They live for years. You're killing it—"

Abruptly, Captain Picard made a sign to cut off communication. "Counselor Troi," he then said quietly, "I am sorry, but we really have no jurisdiction over the taking of unendangered animals for noncommercial purposes. Even by utter barbarians, if they are peaceful," he added as an afterthought. Counselor Troi swallowed and nodded, but said nothing. He made another sign to Lieutenant Worf to reestablish the link.

"Once again, Captain —, your name, please?"

"Saranah," she breathed.

"Once again, Captain Saranah, I repeat that we will view any disregard of our laws with the gravest concern. We have stringent animal protection laws and expect them to be obeyed. We will inspect your trade goods to ensure that the trade is legal. You will, finally, obtain our permission first before beaming any personnel down to the planet. Picard out."

He sat down in his command chair and drummed his fingers.

"It's like dealing with slime eels," he said. "Disgusting, slippery customers."

Next to him, Counselor Troi drummed her fingers too and fidgeted, very unlike her usual self. The last few hours had brought with them a feeling of increasing apprehension, building now to one of impending doom. Suddenly, Troi gasped in pain and grabbed her temples with both hands as she twisted and doubled over. She managed to suppress the ear-splitting scream.

Chapter 6

Dr. Crusher was on the bridge in minutes and had given Counselor Troi a sedative before she even had a chance to protest. Deanna was lying on the antigrav stretcher, and thinking that Beverly was nothing short of miraculous. The pain was still there, but it was somehow small and manageable. So much so that Deanna felt a smile coming on at the sight of Will Riker getting in the medics' way and looking anxious.

Beverly straightened up with a look of satisfaction.

"I synthesized a variant of syndynine I hoped would work better on Betazoids. Seems I guessed right."

She gave the order to begin moving Deanna to sickbay, and said to the Captain as she followed the medics to the turbolift,

"Most of the sample analyses are complete. I can give you a preliminary report at your convenience."

"I'll come down and check on Counselor Troi shortly," answered Picard. "Let's meet in the medical conference room."

By the time Picard and Riker entered sickbay, Deanna Troi was sitting up, talking earnestly to Beverly Crusher.

"I thought I was managing to shield it, but I guess whatever caused it must have died down of its own accord. That last time was at least as bad as the first."

"Not necessarily," said Crusher. "You could have shielded against it *and* it could have gradually died down, allowing you to reduce your shielding unconsciously. Then when the pain returned, it hit with full force again."

"Yes, I suppose ...," Counselor Troi trailed off dubiously.

"How do you feel?" asked Captain Picard.

"Better," answered Troi, "much better. With Beverly's new medicine, it's not even difficult to stay on top of things. I'm not sure how useful I'll be as a Counselor," she added as an afterthought. "I feel deaf. But at least I'm not deafened by screams. What bothers me most now is that I just can't understand where those psychic energies come from. Nothing unusual has happened on the ship or in surrounding space. Something must be happening on the planet. But what? There are almost no people down there and I've checked all their psych profiles. None of them are powerful telepaths. And a powerful psychic who felt bad enough to radiate these feelings would be

begging for help, instead of hiding away from us.” She shrugged. “I keep going over this and over this. It’s always the same. There’s no answer!”

“We will see,” said Captain Picard, as he marched into Dr. Crusher’s office. He activated her desktop communicator screen. “Lieutenant Worf, get me Director T’pel, please.”

“Acknowledged,” came Lieutenant Worf’s rumble. A short time later, Parva T’pel’s image nodded formally to the assembled officers.

“Captain Picard. T’pel here.”

“Director, we are hoping you can help us with some detective work. Counselor Troi has been receiving strong empathic feelings of distress. We have ruled out a source on the ship and the only other possibility is the planet. Do you have any report or indication of any occurrence, however slight, that might be related to feelings of distress?”

Director T’pel thought briefly, then said, “I can think of nothing, Captain. However, I will send out a general call for information on this topic. I will let you know as soon as everyone has reported.”

“Please,” added Counselor Troi, “ask especially about grave sites. Whether any new ones have been found, or perhaps some research has been undertaken on the recently discovered one.”

“Counselor Troi?” came T’pel’s questioning voice.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“I will ask as you request,” T’pel continued. “May I inquire, is it not unusual even for a Betazoid to gain empathic information at such a distance?”

“Very unusual,” agreed Troi. “That is why I – we are particularly anxious to find the cause.”

“I will call you shortly,” said the Director as she signed off.

Riker spoke for the first time.

“You really think it may be connected with –, well, with ‘unquiet spirits’?”

“Well, I must admit I have no reason for thinking so, except that there just isn’t any other explanation. The feeling is generalized, as you might expect with an energy form. There is nobody for light years – maybe nobody in the whole Federation – who could be in so much pain. So what else could it be but some form of energy?”

“You said ‘in the Federation,’” noted Captain Picard. “However, we’ve met two Orion ships in as many days. Do you think it could be something connected with them?”

“No, they’re known for inflicting pain, but the feeling isn’t associated with their ships. It’s associated with that planet.” Suddenly she looked startled. “Except the last time, when I felt the tufty on board before I saw it!” Then she shook her head. “That can’t be. Animals are never empaths. Their brains just aren’t complex enough.”

Everyone stood around, mystified.

Dr. Crusher finally said, “Well, we’re not going to solve that mystery just standing here. Why don’t we look at the sample analyses? Though I must say,

they don't tell us a lot either."

Captain Picard called Data and Worf down as well, since they would be on the next away team.

Dizzying geometric patterns of the chemical structures of minerals and organics started to flow on the conference room's wall screen, soon followed by the more fluid structures of biological molecules. "We've only got a few samples left to check, but the repetition rate is so high on the last 20% of samples, that the chance we'll find anything new at this point is less than 0.01%," began Dr. Crusher. "We've pretty well sampled the local minerals, flora, and fauna for their disease-producing capacity and the result seems to be that they have none.

"Now the really interesting things are these little pills Counselor Troi brought back. They have an enormously complex molecular structure that breaks down so easily, we could barely analyze them. That means they would have to be injected by hypospray, and that they're not pills at all."

"But hyposprays are medical equipment," interjected Riker. "Only a few people would have access to them."

Beverly Crusher shrugged in agreement. "I don't understand it either."

"The molecular structure of the pill material," she continued, "matches nothing currently known with any biological effect. Now, given what Bart Higgon said, the pills were supposed to help in some way either against nightmares – which, for all we know, are an early disease symptom – or against the disease itself."

"No," said Deanna Troi thoughtfully, "I don't think so. He had no reason to think I had their 'flu', or any other disease. From what he said, he gave them to me to help against the 'bad spirit of the civilization that died'. Those were his exact words. That implies a psychoactive substance and nothing to do with the disease."

"Maybe the pills have a placebo effect against the anxiety which may be an early symptom of the disease?" suggested Captain Picard.

"It's possible," nodded Crusher, "though I still maintain that young Bart might detect persecution in the planetary atmosphere for reasons that have nothing to do with anyone but Bart."

"Except," said Deanna, "that I felt some kind of spirit long before I could have even been exposed to the disease. And I don't think I have Bart's complexes."

Riker actually smiled at this, and she could feel him know that she knew what he was thinking. *You think Bart's silly. You should have seen me when I was sixteen.*

"You'll be running simulations on the pill material as well?" asked Riker.

"First thing," she began, but then her communicator chimed. "Director T'pel calling," said an ensign's voice from the bridge.

"Put her through. Crusher here."

"Dr. Crusher. T'pel. I have inquired of all our people and every work group

has responded. No one is aware of any unusual occurrences.”

“Nothing at all?” asked Beverly Crusher, frustrated but resigned. “Well, thank you very much for trying to find out for us. Please ask everyone to stay alert for anything that may possibly be important.”

“Most certainly. T’pel out.”

The six in Dr. Crusher’s office exchanged baffled glances.

“There’s still the prospectors,” noted Captain Picard.

Unfortunately, try as he might, Riker could get no information from the group. The woman at the comm station seemed to feel that the only person he could talk to was Ms. Perilloux, and Ms. Perilloux herself was apparently too busy to waste time on Starfleet. He slammed his fist – softly – into the comm console and swore, just as Ashley Perilloux finally appeared on the screen.

She simply categorically denied that the prospectors could notice any anxiety-inducing occurrence. “We’re doing a job out here,” she kept saying, “not daydreaming.” Her unwillingness to even consult her staff struck Troi as suspicious, and a glance at the others showed they thought so, too.

“Well, please keep us posted, if anything comes to your attention,” interjected Beverly Crusher. “My medical team looks forward to meeting you tomorrow in person.”

“Perilloux out,” was all the reply she gave.

Lieutenant Worf immediately said, “She is hiding something.”

“That’s for sure,” agreed Riker.

“Some of you have a long day tomorrow,” said Captain Picard standing up and bringing the discussion to a close. “You will be visiting both the archeologists and the prospectors in one day, so we should get our rest while we can.”

“We may not have as much to do as we hope,” said Commander Riker, frowning. “I’ve made five separate requests, since we’re trying to keep this friendly, and Perilloux still hasn’t promised that all her people will be available. She keeps saying they’ve got ‘work to do’ and implying that they can’t be bothered.”

“Remember, Number One, if they are sufficiently uncooperative, I can have the whole place put under Starfleet orders,” stated Captain Picard on his way out the door.

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Bright and early the next day, by the archeologists’ time, Dr. Crusher, Riker, Data and Worf were back at the camp. Deanna Troi was there too, even though she felt she’d taken enough syndynine to make herself “useless.” The doctor wanted her there regardless.

Beverly Crusher had a list of priorities, starting with taking samples from Jane Mills' pet tufty, going on to checking Bart for expected breakdown products from the mysterious pills, and then to checking everyone else for them as well. But the first news that greeted the away team when they beamed down outside the dome, was that Dr. Mills had let her tufty go.

"It was so obvious you were right," she said to Troi. "I turned him loose right near here and strike me pink if a welcoming committee of tufties didn't appear in minutes! It wasn't a territorial fight either. They all touched noses and 'my' tufty melted into the group. I wouldn't have been able to pick him out to save my life. The whole troop headed toward the hill and I lost sight of them in the scrub."

Dr. Crusher had the tight, annoyed look of a foiled doctor.

"I would have taken samples last time, if I'd known you had a pet. It could be a disease vector." She drummed her fingers on her data padd. "And you said you wouldn't be able to trace him Could you try calling him? Maybe he'll come when you call."

"Actually," said Jane Mills, embarrassed, "I tried that already. I really miss him. But I didn't see any sign of him. He might come if Counselor Troi calls, though. He really took to her."

With a significant glance at Beverly to stress what a bad idea it had been to sedate the empath, Troi did her best to reach through the soft fog surrounding her for something that felt like a tufty's mind.

Worf scanned the area for any sign of approaching animals.

"A number of tuf-ties are gathering behind those bushes." He pointed to a clump visible in the far distance at the foot of the hills.

However, although the away team waited many minutes and Troi did her best, the animals came no closer.

"We'll just have to get samples from several tufties," said Crusher. "If they are disease vectors, it'll be endemic and many of them will be carriers."

The doctor glanced at her padd and said to Jane Mills,

"The next most important thing is that I need to recheck Mr. Higgon, if you would kindly locate him for me."

There was another hitch. It appeared that Bart was away at the Delta dig and wasn't expected back for two or three days. That seemed a bit sudden. Crusher drummed her fingers again and said,

"Well, we'll find him when I visit the scientists out there. I'd like to recheck everyone here for the breakdown products of a compound that seemed interesting in one of the samples." She didn't say which sample, or that it came in the form of spongy little pills.

Dr. Mills took her into the dome, while the rest of the away team stayed outside in the hope that Deanna's efforts to attract some tufties might succeed.

It didn't take long before Beverly Crusher came back out, as professional as ever, but Deanna could see the slight compression of her lips.

“Worse,” Crusher said, as soon as she was alone with the away team. “Much worse. Especially the woman. They don’t know it because they feel more comfortable with the painkillers I’ve given them, but they’re worse.” She shook her head tightly. “The patients didn’t show any breakdown products from those pills,” she continued, “so they haven’t taken those recently.”

“Many organic beings ascribe activity to plants and other substances based on wishful thinking,” Data noted helpfully.

Beverly almost smiled.

“Yes, Data, you’re right. Those little pills may just be a placebo for Bart’s nightmares. Or maybe Deanna’s right and they’re a drug. In any case, they’re not causing this disease.” After a brief pause, she swallowed her frustration with no more than a muttered comment of, “Nothing, nothing and more nothing.” Then, louder, “Well, let’s get after those tufties and the people at Delta and Epsilon digs.”

Jane Mills accompanied the Enterprise away team in a flitter, which Data piloted.

“There are tufties all around here,” she said, “but they’ll be hard to spot from this height.”

Lieutenant Worf scanned for life forms, then noted, “Readings indicate a group west-northwest, about 50 kilometers away.”

Data took their craft in the indicated direction at high speed, while Dr. Mills exclaimed in surprise,

“What! There’s none closer? That’s impossible. We regularly see groups just outside the dome.”

“If there are any closer, they are underground,” stated Worf. Suddenly he growled at his tricorder. “*Kvesh!* The group I spotted has just gone off the scanner. They must have gone underground. Wait. I will find another.”

He did, but the same thing happened. Before the silent flitter was within twenty kilometers of them, they disappeared. Worf tried again, with the same result. After zigging and zagging across the landscape on five separate attempts, Dr. Crusher ordered a change of plans.

“Continue on to Delta and Epsilon. We’re obviously doing something wrong with those tufties and we’ll have to find someone who can tell us how to do this right.”

Arrival at the Delta dig did not improve the fortunes of the away team. Dr. Mordthun and another archeologist were there, but their medscans were as uninteresting as the first day. Bart Higgon was nowhere to be found.

“He left a few hours ago to look for sites along an ancient road that heads roughly north from here. Actually, he should have been back by now, but I must admit, I rather lost track of time,” apologized Dr. Mordthun. “He does know you’re coming, so he should be back any minute.”

However, he was not back any minute. Dr. Mordthun called him on a communicator, but there was no answer.

“I hope he’s not in trouble,” Beverly Crusher sounded worried. Not tuning in

your communicator usually signaled an emergency.

“There is probably no cause to worry. We often do not respond immediately when we are involved in something. We should wait a while, then he will no doubt call back.”

Lieutenant Worf’s glowering and rumbling at this lax state of affairs was so plain that Dr. Mordthun responded to it as if he had spoken.

“Well, what if he has both hands occupied brushing dust off an artifact? Would you have him drop it just to talk?”

Clearly, communication with superiors was a lower priority here than on a starship. Commander Riker called the Enterprise and asked them to scan the indicated direction for a human lifeform. Within moments the voice from Ops came back.

“No intelligent lifeforms within a hundred miles of your position, except at the various digs, sir. Six are present at the prospectors’ camp, sir.”

“Six!” exclaimed Dr. Crusher. “There are supposed to be twenty five! And what’s happened to Bart!”

“Maybe he has gone to one of the other digs?” Dr. Mordthun offered dubiously. “He did have a ground scooter and could have gotten quite far. But he didn’t say anything about any such plans It is customary to let your party know where you are, simply for safety reasons” He looked taken aback. Troi suspected that Bart would have new grist for his nightmares after the next talking-to by the old archeologist.

“Well, we certainly aren’t accomplishing much,” said Beverly Crusher. “Let’s push on to Epsilon and hope he’s there. We’ll be working on those receptacles there, so we’ll be in one spot for a couple of hours. As soon as he contacts anyone, please let us know, so that we can arrange a meeting.”

On their way to Epsilon, Crusher opened a channel to the Enterprise and asked Captain Picard personally to request – to order, if necessary – the presence of all prospectors at their headquarters.

“I don’t know how much more frustration I can stand in one day,” she said. “The thought that it can be this difficult to get everyone to appear for a simple tricorder reading and sample-taking is absurd.”

Bart Higgon turned out not to be at Epsilon either. Nor had any report come in as to his whereabouts. Riker noted that it would be time to start searching soon. In the meantime, Dr. Crusher shrugged her shoulders and checked the three archeologists who were available.

Troi had held her breath as they approached this site with its potential engram receptacles, but felt nothing unusual. She followed Data to the tent where he was going to help Dr. Nkomo Tamma work on the crystalline “receptacles.” Three huge crystals were there, and still Troi felt nothing. She knew it wasn’t the sedative. The background of pain was still there, like the rumbling of surf at a distant ocean, and she could tell it did not come from these crystals, not right now, at any rate.

Dr. Tamma arrived in her quick way, nearly running, but once she started

worked on the “receptacles,” she became as quiet as a cat on the hunt.

The pattern analysis programs Dr. Tamma had running were among the most sophisticated in the Federation, but the archeologists were not as well equipped when it came to energy sensors. A relatively primitive culture wouldn't have complicated energy sources. Data studied everything he could think of, right up to neutrino focusing. The computer scanned for nonrandom patterns at maximum sensitivity, so it kept finding patterns that weren't there. They'd all stare at the monitor after every beep, only to find it was reading thermally generated background noise from their own equipment, or something else equally irrelevant.

One pattern, however, did appear to be real. When the computer beeped, rates of electron excitation in the crystals followed a mysterious periodicity, building up and then returning to relative quiescence in waves.

“Let's try that again,” suggested Data. “Sonar excitation has the greatest effect so let us bring the crystal closer to the speaker –” he paused while Dr. Tamma carried it over carefully, “– and then generate a pure tone,” which he did as he spoke, “and see what happens.”

For a while nothing happened. Then there was sudden consternation. The crystal had let out a brief burst of light!

“Yikes!” said Riker, “What was that?”

“It's true!” cried Nkomo Tamma.

“How very interesting,” stated Data.

Troi said nothing. She was too busy wondering why she hadn't felt any flicker of mental energy. Surely, even sedated, she should have noticed something. It was the last time she was going to let Beverly blind her like this, no matter how medically necessary it might be.

Data and Dr. Tamma experimented with the sound-related light flashes, expecting to see evidence of a long-gone intelligence emerging any moment. But the problem proved intractable. The crystal produced regular flashes of light when sound was beamed at it, but that was it. The flashes were not random. On the contrary, they were perfectly regular. Unfortunately neither of those two conditions can contain any meaning. Try as they might, they got nothing but perfectly regular, perfectly meaningless flashes of light.

“It's something to start with, in any case,” said Dr. Tamma. “I will keep working on the problem here. I'd be very grateful, Lieutenant Commander, if you would do the same when your other duties allow. Your assistance has been invaluable.”

Data readily agreed to help. Troi felt nothing from him, of course, and yet he obviously loved – there was no other word for it – he loved puzzles. He never let one go till it was solved.

There was still no word of Bart Higgon's whereabouts, so the Enterprise away team climbed back into the flitter for a visit to the prospectors' camp. Jane Mills stayed behind to return to the archeologists' dome with her colleagues later in the day.

Chapter 7

The away team parked the flitter a few meters outside the prospectors' dome and prepared to enter. Unlike the archeologists' camp where everything in sight was open, here there was enough security to make even Lieutenant Worf stare about in amazement. The door was firmly closed to anyone whose biodata were not in its database. It took considerable conversation over the door speaker before Ashley Perilloux herself appeared, planted behind the slowly opening door and flanked by two large geologists.

She was neither tall nor small, neither young nor old. She had short, uninteresting hair, and average, unremarkable features, except for her ice-gray eyes. They could have been glass eyes, they had so little expression. There were only calculations in their cold, appraising stare.

"Okay," she finally nodded, having decided that the foursome in Starfleet uniforms were probably exactly who they appeared to be, "you may come in." She dismissed her escort with a nod.

"I'm looking forward to finally meeting your staff," said Dr. Crusher.

"They're not 'my staff'. We're a partnership and if they've got prospecting business, they may or may not be here, depending on how much time they have to waste."

"Medical checks, when there is a dangerous illness present, are not 'a waste'," retorted Crusher.

"I informed them of your arrival. There's seven of us here." Take it or leave it, said Perilloux's tone.

"All right," said Crusher, thin-lipped, "I'll check them now, and I will expect the rest tomorrow."

"Some of them are in Karlof Montes. We don't have the facilities to get people back in that big a hurry. You'll have to get them yourselves."

Worf glared at her in a way that said she was lucky he was in uniform. Starfleet uniform, that is.

"None of our scans report people on that continent or that region," he growled.

"Depends how far underground your scans go, doesn't it," returned Ms. Perilloux.

"All twenty five of you were here just two days ago when we scanned the planet," noted Commander Riker with a look of innocent surprise. "And yet

you said just now that you don't have the facilities to move quickly."

"There's a difference between two days and tomorrow. Now, do you want to check the people here or don't you?"

Saying nothing, Dr. Crusher indicated that she would proceed. Lieutenant Worf's scowl intensified and Troi could guess why without difficulty. Even if the woman was telling the truth, it would mean more than half the camp had emptied out as soon as the Enterprise was sighted. That in itself was suspicious.

"While Dr. Crusher is examining your partners," said Riker politely, "we would like to see your camp. If you would prefer to assign us an escort, we will be happy to wait."

Ashley Perilloux turned and glanced at him sharply.

"Just what do you need to see the camp for? I was informed by your Captain that there was a need for medical checks, not for security checks." Then she added, rather unnecessarily, "We're not breaking any laws here."

Troi could feel her lying, right through the soft fog swaddling her, but she said nothing. It was so obvious, she was sure Will knew it without her help.

"Nobody said you were," answered Riker with his poker-playing smile. "We are dealing with an unknown disease agent and we have to investigate everything, until we find the cause."

Perilloux hesitated, clearly displeased at letting any of the Starfleeters out of her sight, but then she said,

"I'll send Reddle with you, if you'll check him first, Doctor."

She led the whole party to Reddle's office, where every screen was displaying maps and the man himself was busy poring over an interminable printout of numbers. Data, in his innocent way, offered to show him a graphing program. It would make it easier to understand the numbers, he pointed out helpfully.

Riker's poker-playing smile lit up with genuine laughter.

"This man, Data," he said solemnly, "is Working."

Reddle, meantime, attended to the business he was best at.

"Oh, hi, Ashley. Just catching up on a few stats here. My turn to be poked and prodded, heh, Doctor?"

The man was so ingratiating, Troi was glad of her insulating fog.

"Yes," said Ms. Perilloux, with the abruptness of a command. "And after that I'd like you to show these three around the dome."

A look passed between them, quick as thought, which the Starfleeters were not supposed to notice. Troi certainly noticed it. That was an order, given and received, between two people who didn't act like equal partners at all.

"If you'd all kindly leave the room, I can get started," Beverly Crusher announced.

Ashley was on the verge of lodging a protest. She was clearly intent on controlling all interaction between her people and Starfleet and she was just as clearly frustrated by the away team's ability to elude her supervision. But

at the last moment she must have thought a protest about something so sacrosanct as doctor-patient confidentiality would look very, very strange. She said nothing and walked out. Troi wondered how many people in the galaxy could claim the satisfaction of having faced down Ashley Perilloux.

A short while later an unsmiling Dr. Crusher came out with the unremittingly ingratiating Mr. Reddle, and said, "Next." She did not seem to be in the mood for conversation. Ashley Perilloux accompanied her to the next office, while the rest of the away team followed Reddle down a long grayish corridor.

Mr. Reddle opened every door, explained the contents of every office, conference room, closet, and individual sleeping quarters. He was a model of openness. His flow of words might have been equalled by a politician with an agenda. There were rooms upon rooms full of scanning tunneling imagers, nuclear magnetic resonance machines, optochemical analysis units, rock crushers, custom computer chip production units and quantities of other constructs whose purpose a nonspecialist couldn't hope to guess.

The group walked down the featureless corridors, each one looking much like the previous one. The dome was not large, but the sameness of it all, accompanied by Reddle's endless volubility, caused Troi's mind to wander. The background roar of pain had grown louder since she'd been at this dome, but without returning to the Enterprise, she didn't know whether it was a local effect or not. She was in the process of gingerly trying to concentrate on the mental screams without really feeling them, because it seemed that the level varied slightly from hall to hall, when Lieutenant Worf suddenly said,

"This corridor is not as long as the one on the opposite side."

Data cocked his head slightly, as he sometimes did when busy with an access or a calculation.

"Twenty two point seven meters shorter."

Mr. Reddle looked like he didn't understand.

"It may be. So what?"

"The dome," said Worf in that threatening way of his, "is round."

"Yeah. Well?"

"Well, there is something in that space," said Worf, enunciating clearly, as if Reddle was a dog of limited intelligence.

"Oh, we've got storage space scattered all through the dome where structural requirements leave dead space."

"We would like to see it," said Riker.

"Oh. Yeah. Well, I don't even know how to get in there. Some of the storage segments are sealed until they're needed. You know, like sections of a ship. Let's look around. But I may need to ask Ashley how you get in."

Reddle took them down several corridors, none leading to the mystery space. If he was hoping to confuse the away team into thinking they had tried every approach, then he didn't know that Data could be confused only by humor, not by something as simple as a maze.

“We have not yet approached from the northeast,” Data pointed out helpfully. For a fraction of a second, Mike Reddle seemed about to lose his oiliness and to tell Data where he could go. But all he said was,

“Oh, really? Gee, I don’t think so. Of course I’ve only been here two years,”— as opposed to Data who’d only been there two hours “— so I may not know every possible approach to every single dead space.” He provided a pause that should have been filled with polite protestations about being sorry to bother him and how they’d go look somewhere else. Instead the away team said nothing while Riker smiled nicely. Reddle tapped a wall intercom. “I’ll have to ask Ashley.”

Her voice came loud and clear over the intercom, stating that the area in question was sealed dead space, used for storing expensive and commercially sensitive materials.

“We would like to request access to the area,” said Commander Riker, “to complete our check.”

“I’m afraid I do not understand,” returned Ashley coldly. “It was my understanding you were here on a medical mission. How is a disease agent going to come out of a sealed room? Just what, exactly, do you need to check every single storeroom for?”

They could hear Dr. Crusher’s equally cold tone in the background, telling the proprietor that the away team was merely following standard procedure in any case of a previously unknown and idiopathic disease. You never knew what might be important, she said.

They could hear Ashley Perilloux retort that she wasn’t opening sealed storerooms containing commercial secrets just on Dr. Crusher’s say-so. For all she knew, they were all an elaborately disguised industrial espionage group. If they wanted her to start opening sealed areas, they could get a duly authorized search warrant. She was not about to cooperate with such excessive demands. “You heard that, Mike? Tell your party that —”

He interrupted her. “I think we all heard it.”

“Good. Perilloux out.”

While Mike Reddle had been occupied with communicating, Data had unobtrusively pointed his tricorder at the area in question and taken a few readings. His eyebrows rose slightly and he cocked his head a bit, as he did when facts did not compute. Riker and Worf, meanwhile, exchanged significant glances.

Deanna Troi knew what to do. She walked slowly further and turned once she was ahead of Reddle.

“It’s very good of you to take so much time to help us go through the dome, but it’s so hard to do everything that needs to be done in one trip. Even equipment can be a source of the problem. The carrier may not be an organism. Historically, there have been cases where condensation inside machines allowed bacteria to breed.” She carried on and on, forcing Reddle to look at her, since she was speaking to him. Meanwhile, Will stood close

behind Reddle. Even if the man did turn around to try to check on Worf and Data, all he would see was a good view of Riker's chest.

While she talked, Deanna felt a flare of that disgust Klingons reserve for Romulans. Romulans? Here? What, exactly, were these miners hiding?

"The only other thing then," Riker began when Deanna lost her train of thought in surprise, "is to look over the outside of the dome." He moved toward a north-leading corridor as he spoke.

"We're closer to the exit in that direction," said Mr. Reddle, moving south.

"Isn't that where we just came from?" inquired Riker. Reddle couldn't deny it. "Well then, let's take the scenic route." All four members of the away team continued northward. Reddle could either follow them or leave them unsupervised.

"It's really a lot shorter the other way," he protested weakly, but he followed them.

Riker started asking Reddle about his work, shepherding him to the front of the group. Bringing up the rear, Worf and Data continued scanning every nook.

Riker moved as slowly as plausibility would allow and pointed with an expression of great interest into a side office containing an unusual machine. Once that was explained to him, he wanted to know how the miners determined the quality of crystals while still in the ground, so they wouldn't have to dig up useless ones. By the time Reddle could tear himself away from Riker long enough to look backward, both Data and Worf were doing nothing in particular, sauntering behind their Commander.

After a predictably uninteresting examination of the dome's exterior, Riker called Crusher.

"Everything seems perfectly in order at our end, Doctor. How close are you to completion?"

"Just finishing up with the last one now," came Beverly's weary voice. "The last one who had the courtesy to show up, I should say. The other owner, Roger Perilloux, didn't bother being here, if you can imagine. With that sort of attitude, who knows how long it'll take to get everyone checked. Have you got the soil and water samples?"

"Right here, Doctor," stated Worf.

"Good. Well.... Excuse me?" Beverly Crusher had obviously turned to her patient, who could be heard faintly in the background. "Why yes, what a good idea. Very kind of you. Will? Ms. Carlyle suggests we join her and a few others for refreshments in the cafeteria. As she astutely points out, we must be tired."

"We'll meet you there," said Riker with a grin, a real one. He turned to their guide, or chaperone, as the case might be. "We saw the cafeteria, but I'd hate to have to find it by myself. You probably better show us the way." Riker's bland expression conveyed an exact understanding of, and contempt for, Reddle's place in the scheme of things. It was enough to make even Reddle

lose his smarminess for a second.

Once Troi met Betsy Carlyle, she pegged her as one of those rare people who are apolitical, competent and on good terms with everyone through some magic of their own. Even Ashley seemed almost friendly, probably because she could finally keep an eye on everyone at once. And everyone else was in favor of a chance to see the first newcomers in months. It was a talkative group that assembled around the food dispensers, giving the machines orders and walking away with trays. One of the two supervisors, a woman named Joanne, ordered peanut butter sandwiches, but got a beep and a message instead: "Insufficient raw material. Please load dispenser."

"All right," she grumbled, "who was the last one on k.p.?"

"Reddle!" cried a chorus of happy voices, savoring the prospect of seeing him in trouble.

"So what's the problem?" grouched the supervisor. "Which bag of synthate did you forget to load this time? Jeepers creepers, get it right one time, will you, Reddle? At this rate I'm going to have to start wondering whether you can handle a groundcar." She quite liked peanut butter and continued muttering under her breath for a while. Ashley began talking to her, no doubt defending her right-hand man.

Riker pulled up a chair at a table with Troi, Crusher, Carlyle, and one of the two tall escorts with whom Ashley had met them at the door.

"Conyer," he introduced himself, "Jack Conyer."

"So explain to me how this outfit of yours works," said Riker. "Ms. Perilloux mentioned to us earlier that everyone here was a partner and that she couldn't order people about or waste anyone's time even if she wanted to."

There was the briefest of pauses, occupied by a glance between Conyer and Carlyle. Betsy's glance slid to a neutral middle distance and she said,

"Well, yes and no. As a matter of legal fact, that's true. Perilloux Prospectors is a privately held company in which we all own shares, with varying rights to profit from mineral discoveries depending on whether the given shareholder made the discovery or someone else did. However, there are two majority shareholders, Ashley and Roger, and there's a clause in all our contracts giving them the right to buy out any minority shareholder at the share valuation when they leave. This is whether or not the minority holder wants to sell."

"In effect, we're partners who can be fired," Jack Conyer contributed helpfully.

"Mmm," agreed Carlyle, "though we do retain our rights to profits on discoveries made while we were with the company."

"If people can be fired, they've got a boss, I'd say." Beverly Crusher said it carefully. It might be the truth, but that didn't mean people wanted to hear it. However, it didn't seem to be news to the two geologists at the table. Carlyle just smiled, and Conyer said, with emphasis,

"I'd say it too!"

“Speaking of bosses,” continued Riker, “we haven’t seen Mr. Perilloux at all on this trip. I would have expected him to be here.” The otherwise bland statement held just the slightest innuendo of displeasure that would have to be reckoned with.

“Yes,” agreed Carlyle, “but actually, a lot of us haven’t seen much of him for, oh, maybe a year now. He’s real busy in the lab, or in the field, or on business trips, I suppose. Company’s growing as time goes by.”

“And she’s one of the biggest reasons it is,” stated Conyer, nodding at Ms. Carlyle. “She’s found titanium and iridium, in addition to about six minor finds.” Ashley Perilloux, in the course of circulating between tables, came up at this point. “I’m beginning to think you just drop Bets and a sensor anywhere on this planet, and she’ll find something for you.” Betsy Carlyle waved it away with a laugh, but Ms. Perilloux emphatically agreed.

“Very valuable partner,” she said.

“What I don’t understand,” said Riker, “is why a company that seems to be doing okay mineral-wise, is involved in trading the pelts of those cute little tufties to scum like the Orions. Incidentally,” he said parenthetically, addressing Ashley, “Captain Picard will need to talk to you about procedures on that, since we’re required to act as a kind of customs agent where the Orions are concerned.”

The gray eyes, never open, became as guarded as prison cells at the first mention of tufties. They could have been polished granite by the time Riker noted that the Enterprise would be controlling the flow of trade to the Orions. She chose to respond only to his first sentence.

“You have no idea of the set-up costs of an operation like this. All that equipment you saw today has to be bought first, before any money starts coming in. Furthermore, minerals take a long time to exploit. Money on the discoveries we’re making won’t really start coming in for another three to five years. In the meantime, the pelt trade helps tide us over for operating expenses. And we don’t just trade to Orions. We’ll trade to anyone who wants them.”

“That reminds me,” said Dr. Crusher, “I need blood and tissue samples from tufties. Do you have any here?”

Betsy Carlyle didn’t say anything. Troi saw Jack Conyer steal a sideways glance at her, and then take his tone from her silence.

Ashley Perilloux radiated suspicion like a dog whose bone is about to be stolen. It was the first plain emotion Deanna Troi had felt from her.

“No, we don’t have any here. Why do you need samples?”

“One of the archeologists kept one as a pet, so I have to see whether the tufties could be disease vectors. Unfortunately, she let hers go just before I realized she had it. I’d like to test several of them and see whether there are any endemic diseases they carry.”

Ashley’s suspicion abated slightly, but only slightly.

“Well, we don’t have any,” she repeated.

“We had considerable trouble when we tried to find some we could stun on our way here. Perhaps some of your people who get pelts could give us a few pointers,” suggested Riker, as if he had nothing but helpfulness and collegiality to expect from Ashley Perilloux.

Her face held no expression, except perhaps a slight intensification of its shielded blankness. She could hardly deny that some of the geologists knew how to get tufties.

“Reddle’s our best man for that.”

Reddle sidled up when Ashley waved him over, but he was less than useful.

“Oh, gee, I don’t know that it’s anything special. Just a knack, I guess. I don’t know what to suggest. You’ve got to be real quiet on your approach, you know.” Such and similarly incisive comments were all they got out of him.

Jack Conyer, Troi could feel, was putting a lot of effort into keeping his mouth shut. She let Will know, in an undertone, just before the gathering broke up, and the away team headed back to the flitter.

“Try to get Conyer alone,” she muttered to Will.

That turned out to be easy. Jack Conyer did it for them. He strode alongside Riker, and said in a low voice, apropos of nothing,

“Were you hunting tufties from the flitter?”

“Yes,” said Worf, walking on the other side of Riker.

“Can’t get them from the air. You have to stay on the ground. Other than that, it’s just like any other kind of hunting. There’s plenty to go around,” he added, as if to explain his insubordinate helpfulness.

Worf scowled, but it was at himself.

“Of course. I should have thought of that.”

“What? You’re supposed to be able to read their tiny minds?” said Conyer, surprised.

“It is easy enough. Their predators fly. Of course they will be sensitive to fliers.”

“Well, yeah, if you put it that way I guess it is pretty obvious. Anyway, if you can stun them at a distance you shouldn’t have any trouble getting some.”

“Do you not stun them?” Worf was perplexed.

“No, Ashley doesn’t want them damaged.” Suddenly, he seemed to shift gears. He smiled, and said to Worf, “You’re kind of like a seafaring uncle of mine.”

Ashley Perilloux had caught up with the group, and Conyer must have noticed her coming.

“I expect to beam down for an examination of your eighteen remaining people in three days, as agreed” was Beverly Crusher’s parting shot. She didn’t even say goodbye.

The flitter lifted off, and with the hint he’d received, Worf had no trouble approaching the very first batch of tufties he detected. Data flew right along the ground, skimming the tops of the thorn bushes. Then as soon as there

was a straight line of fire, Worf stunned the whole group of ten from so far away, the tufties never even knew what hit them. Dr. Crusher got out, took her samples and they could finally head home.

The Captain met them as they stepped off the transporter pads.

“Seven people?” he said as the whole group entered the turbolift to go to his ready room. “Besides Perilloux, only six? After I expressly and extensively requested that Megaera to ensure that all the staff were there? It’s an insult, as well as technically flouting the law.” He pondered for a moment. “I’m reluctant to make a Federation case out of this, but we are going to have to let her know where she stands. What about Roger Perilloux, by the way? Did you get any indication he might be easier to deal with?”

“He was one of those missing,” said Beverly Crusher pointedly.

With an expressive widening of his eyes, Picard merely moved toward the door. “Any results after this long day?”

“The only positive I got,” answered Dr. Crusher, “and even that was just a dubious trace, was for one of the expected breakdown products of Counselor Troi’s mystery pills. But it was such a small trace, I’m inclined to believe the reading may have been an artifact. Except to say that work is progressing, I’m no closer to any results than I was when we started.” With a slight shrug of frustration, she fell silent.

Captain Picard gave her a grave nod.

“You are to be commended, Doctor, for giving this problem every moment of your attention, under often difficult circumstances.”

Beverly became noticeably less wilted, tired as she was.

They reached the ready room, and Commander Riker continued. “We were shown around the camp while Dr. Crusher was busy. We didn’t find anything that was connected to the disease, but the whole atmosphere was very suspicious. I think Counselor Troi will corroborate me on that”

“Ms. Perilloux and our guide, Michael Reddle, both lied continuously,” she stated.

Riker nodded, and continued,

“Specifically, Lieutenant Worf noticed there was a sealed area on one side of the dome which we weren’t being shown. Ashley Perilloux rejected permission for us to go in there and said we’d have to get a search warrant. She said for all she knew we were industrial spies.”

Captain Picard let out a long exasperated breath, but all he said was,

“A company of that nature might be expected to have commercial secrets and she is within her rights to require the proper paperwork.”

“I scanned the area with the tricorder, sir,” noted Data, “and the whole space is heavily shielded. The tricorder registered null readings across every spectrum.”

“Shielded? That raises the interesting possibility that the missing people are right there in the camp.”

“Yes, Captain,” said Lieutenant Worf. “Our scans have not picked up any

unidentified humans on the planet. I find it hard to believe they could all be underground. Besides, the shielding is Romulan.” He spat the last word out.

Captain Picard leaned forward in surprise.

“Shielding for legitimate commercial secrets can be bought in the Federation. You are sure it is Romulan?”

“Yes, sir,” said Data. “Lieutenant Worf spotted two telltale metallic strips that had been badly installed at the end of one corridor and alerted me to take a reading. The signature was unmistakably that of a Romulan device.”

“Ve-ry strange,” mused the Captain. “The only harmless explanation would be that the proprietors wanted to avoid the paperwork associated with getting a Federation device.” He paused. “Unfortunately, Ashley Perilloux does not impress me as harmless.”

“She impressed me as someone who would walk over her dying grandmother to get a new mass spec,” muttered Dr. Crusher with undisguised anger.

“And the Orion ship has a Romulan cloaking device,” added Riker.

They all looked at each other. If the Orions were supplying shielding devices for whatever products they got from Perilloux Prospectors, things looked bad indeed.

“Oh, yes, speaking of odd coincidences, I should have remembered this earlier,” said the Captain, moving on again. “A few minutes before you beamed back, I got a call from Director T’pel, letting me know that the prospectors had just informed her they had uncovered another burial chamber with large crystals in it.”

Counselor Troi looked up with interest.

“I can’t say I’ve detected anything beyond the pervasive background of pain in the last few hours. Of course, I have quite a bit of syndynine in my system, but I’d still notice a major spike.”

“Apparently they found it yesterday,” said the Captain. “At 1600.” Once again everyone looked at everyone else significantly. That coincided with Deanna’s last attack.

“I wonder why they didn’t say anything to us when we were there all afternoon!” Commander Riker was amazed.

“Not communicative about anything, are they?” said the Captain.

“Did T’pel mention whether they’d found Bart Higgon yet?” asked Dr. Crusher.

“Yes,” answered Picard with a significant glance. “He said he’d gotten lost.”

“Well, whatever Bart might be up to,” said Commander Riker, sharing the general disbelief, “is small potatoes compared to whatever they’re hiding behind that Romulan shielding. I suggest we go back over that place with a fine-tooth comb.”

Captain Picard looked at his assembled officers, as he thought over his plan of action.

“All right,” he finally said, “if Dr. Crusher confirms the medical need for it,

the hidden area should be searched. There do seem to be a number of peculiar coincidences that need investigating. I will transmit a full report to Starfleet and request the necessary permissions. We should have our answer in the morning.”

Chapter 8

The brig of an Orion ship might seem like a strange place to choose for enjoying an elaborate dinner, but Leader Saranah had her reasons. She lolled in a large chair, almost a young couch, in the large central area where the guard sat, keeping an eye on a circular three-tiered array of tens of cages. Orion ships needed large brigs. In front of her was a low table, piled with delicacies and to her left sat the lucky Lieutenant who had pulled guard duty on this particular day. Saranah herself was, unfortunately, too busy to come here as often as she would have liked. Yesterday, she'd had to delegate all the fun with the old First Officer to Gajira. Command definitely wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

But no matter, she lectured herself. Gajira had pleased her. And she had done well. The First Officer had not been returned to his cell. Now Saranah reached for a white plate with nothing on it but a bit of garnish and two, rather small, oblong, glandular-looking pieces of meat. As the prisoners noticed the dreadful dish, there was an audible rustle through the perfect silence of the brig. They moved, they twitched. Leader Saranah drank in the fear with a deep breath and smiled.

"Shall we share?" the Leader graciously invited her Lieutenant. She smiled again to see the prisoners' trying not to look.

The Leader cut off a small piece and threw it toward one of the prisoners, calling him her darling and then she laughed that bone-chilling low laugh of hers when the starving man shrank from the bit instead of scrabbling for it through the bars of his prison.

Both the women knew quite well that the dish consisted of nothing more exotic than *hokkir* kidneys, but this was one situation where appearances counted much more than substance. Saranah's enjoyment was almost complete. How often hadn't she been the one, waiting in fear for her fate?

But, if she was honest with herself, something was missing. She had to work at it to really look forward to taking all her old torturers apart, bit by bit. Filleting the old Captain, after all he had done to her and had ordered to have done to her, had been a pure pleasure. But now that she was in control, it was harder every day to fuel her hatred. What was wrong with her? She shivered, as if she'd felt the first touch of winter.

"Enough fun, Patra," she announced. "The strategy meeting begins in

minutes.”

One of the former slavegirls whom Saranah hardly trusted, came in to clear away the dishes, many still full of food.

“You may have what you like,” said the Leader to the woman, indicating that the lower ranks on the ship could pick through the delicacies. What they could not do, on pain of imprisonment, or worse, was smuggle any to the prisoners. Only Saranah fed the prisoners; only Saranah let them live or die.

Inside the grey chamber, the Leader rapped the table, calling the meeting to order.

“Report on how you are progressing in learning the machinery of your assigned departments.” Her voice held no trace of silkiness. These women she trusted had better learn to master the ship soon. So far she and her crew had managed basic navigation and life support by the grace of the automated controls and obvious emergency instructions. But that was far from enough. All of them were studying the onboard technical instruction wafers every moment they could. At least, that was what Saranah was doing and what she expected of the others.

One by one, her comrades in rebellion reported on their progress. Most had not done enough to satisfy Leader Saranah. They were used to boredom, to suffering, to waiting, but not to work.

“Khathta,” said the Leader, her voice regaining a touch of silkiness as she spoke, “if you cannot find the time to master the life support systems, I am sure Pelara, or Reksra, or any one of several others will be glad to lift the burden from your shoulders.”

Khathta stiffened and drooped her head.

“I will improve, Leader,” she mumbled.

Like everyone else at the table, she looked hungry for power, and like everyone else, she also looked fearful. Saranah did her best to do that to people.

“See that you do improve,” said the Leader shortly. “Now, I have been turning over the tuf-ty problem. We cannot depend on others for our supply. It is intolerable.” All six women around the table agreed instantly. “But the ones we beam up from the planet all die. If the humans have a steady supply, it must mean they have a breeding stock of special animals that do not die in captivity. We must get those.”

“I agree, Leader, but how? The Ship watches our every move.” The women had taken this terminology for the Enterprise from the men, who’d had a lot to say about the “Ship” before they lost power.

“That is what I have called you here for. We will figure out how. First of all, old Karlan, before the Change, told me it was going to be difficult to take over Zeb’s territory because the camp was well defended, with perimeter sensors for intruders. So we must transport straight into the camp – that was what the old *shlatin* had planned to do before it turned out that Zeb had disappeared. But, as you say, the Ship will detect any beamdown. So we must

use one of the shuttles.”

All six of the Leader’s lieutenants looked as if she had lost her mind.

“Certainly, Leader,” stammered one, “the little shuttles are simple to fly. But – but they will see a shuttle even more easily than a beamdown!”

“Not if it stays on the other side of the planet from the Ship,” Saranah pointed out.

“But we would have to be on the other side too when we let it go and the Ship might shoot if we hide from them.”

Most of the women nodded. Their knowledge of weapons was minimal and theoretical. They couldn’t very well start practicing with the Enterprise around.

“I could be having trouble learning navigation,” said Gajira thoughtfully, “and the planet could eclipse us many times. One of those times, when they got tired of looking for us, we could drop the shipler.”

Saranah laughed, but with more warmth than usual.

“Ye-es,” she said. “I like that. Then we come back in view, while the shuttle stays on the opposite side until it reaches the camp.”

“How can that work?” objected another. “The Ship hovers above the miners’ camp continually. It will see the shuttle whenever it gets close to the camp.”

“No,” countered Patra, “the Ship orbits the planet at least once a day, for some reason, though they do spend most of their time above the Federation camps. If the shuttle is quick, it could arrive unseen.”

Leader Saranah nodded slowly, well pleased.

“The shuttle will take down a roll of selonite cloth. Once you park and throw it over the shuttle, it will confuse the Ship’s scanners. No doubt, movement around the camp will trigger some sort of security check. You then kidnap the guard and use him to make the sensors open the doors. Do not, however, kill him unless you have to. The Federation people can get very persistent when any of their rats are killed.” She still vividly remembered the days upon days Karlan had spent running, the damage the ship had sustained and the terrible fear of death when he had once had the stupidity to raid a Federation cargo vessel. But she had to admit, they had gotten weapons, something called “silk” and other trade goods sufficient to live on for a year.

“Then,” she continued, “comes the difficult part. Our sensors tell us nothing about the inside of that dome. You will have to find their breeding stock.”

“There is no indication at all of where to look?” asked one of the women.

“None.” The Leader’s calculating face looked uncharacteristically dubious. “But I would suggest this. The Federation is one big thicket of regulations and I remember Karlan-the-cursed worrying about Starfleet once he started trading with the miners. So the miners are breaking some law. They are probably using a cloaking device to hide the evidence. Or they may have it deep underground. Since they trade with our people, you could use one of our communicators to detect traces of one of our devices. In close proximity, they cause interference.” She had found that out once, when she had been kept in

a cloaked prison. “Or if you detect anything underground, explore it.” It wasn’t much to go on, but it was all they had. “We will transport you up if necessary, but if you can, you should get away in the shuttle, as you came.”

“Now,” said Saranah, “who volunteers?” She knew enough about captaining to realize that this was a bizarre way to do things. You should just choose your most competent and least favorite people and order them to go. But she also knew that when she had seized the opportunity for rebellion, it would have failed without the help of these six women. And she knew that they knew it. She was too smart to push her status too far. To set the tone, she volunteered herself first of all. After that, all six volunteered, allowing her to choose Patra and Gajira to accompany her.

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Leader Saranah was rather pleased. In the small hours of the night, she’d managed to pilot the shuttlecraft right up to the humans’ camp without accident or discovery. Satja’s brief communications from the mothership were enough to ensure the shuttle stayed hidden from the Enterprise behind the planet. And now here they were, the dome of the camp looming in the distance. A brief microburst appeared on their communicator, rapidly descrambled to show that the Ship was orbiting and they had half an hour to get into the dome.

Before setting the craft down, Saranah checked the wind direction. East-northeast. A pity. The humans’ vehicles were all parked downwind, but it was essential for the women’s scent to drift past the entrance and it was essential for them to have something to hide under, all of which meant she would have to park the shuttle all by itself on the eastern side of the dome. Saranah shook her head as she slowly and silently set the craft down. So many unknowns, all uncontrollable. But it did not bother her too much. She’d spent her life as a slave and was used to having no control.

The shuttle touched the ground. There was only about one hour of night left so they would have to act quickly. Saranah opened the door and signaled to the others to bring out the selonite tarp. With much struggle, they managed to get it heaved over the shuttle, covering the craft. A passerby would have seen nothing but a shrouded shape in the darkness and no sign of the ship’s alien outline. The three Orion raiders crouched briefly under the front of the craft, watching. But there was no one conveniently outside.

They began making darting forays closer and closer to the dark, looming mass of the dome, trying to trip sensors that would draw someone out – and draw him out quickly. Saranah knew women worked here as something other than slavegirls, and she hoped it would not be one of them that came out. Fights were noisy and time-consuming. But precious minutes passed and no

man came out.

In rapidly mounting desperation, Sarah tried the door, but it didn't budge. Even her knife just ricocheted off the control panel. She began to run back to join the others hiding under their shuttle to come up with some plan, any plan, for getting into this accursed dome.

Then she heard the door hissing open behind her.

She froze, crouched in the dark. It would take a hunter to see her if she didn't move.

It was a big man. And the wind was blowing toward him. Would that be good? Or bad?

He was muttering to himself. Something about bad dreams and empty planets.

He looked toward their shuttle. Now she cursed their stupidity in parking it by itself. She should have known it would never work when it had seemed like a good idea at the time.

But he didn't go toward it. Instead he started talking to his communicator. That was much worse!

"Hey, Pulvi," she heard him say. "There's something strange out here. I'm going to check it out."

"Okay, Jack." The tinny voice from the speaker carried well in the quiet night air. "I'll be right out."

No-o-o-o. Was she going to have to kill them all? At least she had to get this one before there were two of them. Her muscles tensed to sprint, but his head lifted and she could see him breathe in.

Her scent. It had reached him. Now was not a good time.

Or maybe it was.

He had turned and was walking her way, trying to follow the scent. At this rate, she wasn't going to have to run anywhere. All she had to do was raise her arm for the strike.

The big man's eyes widened in surprise when he finally saw her because she moved, but by then it was too late. He fell like a tree.

"Good," whispered Gajira, after she checked for a heartbeat and found he was still alive. "This one should be out for hours. Now, we drag him to the door and use his thumbprint to get in."

"He's awfully big," noted Patra, "and all we need is his thumb."

But Sarah shook her head. "The pain of removing it might wake him and then we might have to kill him. Come. I'll take the arms and each of you take a leg." So it happened that before the Enterprise had resumed its station above the two camps, the Orion raiders were inside the sleeping dome. They stashed the big man in the first room inside the door. It wouldn't do for someone to trip over him. They began to creep cautiously through the first corridor.

Almost instantly Patra's eyes grew wide. Sarah heard it, too. Some son-of-the-cursed was coming toward them! A pale, straw-colored man rounded the

corner and ran right into them.

"We are three!" hissed Saranah to her companions and leaped at him. Yet as she drew her arm back to knock him out, he flailed at a slider bar. An alarm! He was going to set an alarm!

All three were on him by now and the slider never went all the way. Patra twisted one arm painfully, Gajira had the other. Saranah held a knife to his neck, dimpling the skin. He froze.

"We must kill him!" Gajira muttered urgently, but Saranah had more important things to do than kill people. Disabling the alarm was the first priority.

She studied the little slider bars. The lower numbers were to the left. Tentatively she pushed one of the bars that way. One indicator light went out. Good, she had guessed right. She pushed them all left, and the little red eye in the hall camera went out too. Better and better. If she needed any more confirmation, it was there in the desperate look of their prisoner's eyes. She gloated, enjoying his terror, enjoying the sight of him trying to swallow and barely being able to manage that.

It was time to get some information out of him. She understood more Federation Standard than she could speak, but it would have to do.

"Where," she said, with as much quiet menace as she could, "is your tufty farm?"

The idiot looked amazed. There wasn't even that brief flash of preparing for a lie.

"Wh- what tufties?" he stammered.

Gajira and Patra tightened their grip on his arms until the pain in his shoulders would tell him to talk, if nothing else did.

"If you waste our time," said Saranah, still very quietly, "you will not live to regret it."

The man had a strange bleached color, even more so than some of these Federation lumps, and seemed to get whiter and whiter as she talked. Now she could see his face start to sweat.

"Down there," he said suddenly, nodding his head toward the hall in front of him.

"Where down there?"

"First right, then left, then right again."

"Liar," muttered Saranah, then knocked him out with all her strength. "Hide him!" she nodded fiercely toward a room door. They had no time to torture him properly. Their time would be better spent using their communicators as detectors. The dome didn't look that big from the outside.

But after only a few steps the gray corridors seemed long and interminable. They approached an intersecting corridor cautiously, then peered rapidly in each direction. Nobody. They skittered across the open space and continued on. Saranah felt as if she had ears all over her head. She listened for the slightest bit of static on her communicator, for the whispered whoosh of an

opening door, for the faintest footfall. It felt so bare in this corridor. All anyone had to do was step out of one of the many doors and there they'd be, as exposed as bugs on a plate. Sarah was unpleasantly reminded of her several escape attempts. The settings were different, but the feeling of watching eyes and hidden triggers was just the same. With a sinking feeling she remembered that always she'd been caught. But not this time, she vowed. Now she was free and she would succeed.

They reached another corridor intersection. Again nobody. That was good. But what was not good was that they really had no idea where to look. As the three exchanged increasingly desperate glances, Sarah realized the dome was too large to search in a few minutes and that luck could be a sometime thing. Any second now, they would be noticed before they could even begin their raid.

At the next intersection Sarah took them down a side corridor, not from any reasoned plan of action, but simply to do something different. Then there was yet another intersection, still without any static on the communicators or any other sound in the sleeping dome. Yet as they glanced down the corridor before crossing it, all three drew their breath in sharply. There was a light in one of the rooms, spilling out through a window in a partially open door. Was it Security? Perhaps monitoring the cameras even though they appeared inactive? Maybe Security was just trying to lure the three of them into a trap. Maybe they were sitting there, chuckling at the women's aimless wanderings through their endless corridors.

Very carefully, silently and slowly, Sarah crept closer to the lighted door. She moved slowly until she could peer into the room. A gray-haired man was wrapped in thought, bent over a computer screen covered with graphs and numbers. At least it wasn't an image of her, standing with her heart pounding, right behind him. She couldn't imagine why anyone who wasn't a guard would be working at this hour of the night, but whatever he was, he wasn't in security. Then he raised his head, as if he was surprised, as if he remembered something.

Her scent! He'd noticed her scent! She fled toward her companions, silently, she hoped, and they turned a corner and ran away from there.

Surely, they'd been everywhere in this cursed dome. Where else was there to look? They had no map. There could be – and then her communicator started vibrating against her wrist, as gently as a trapped fly at first.

Sarah could see by Gajira's and Patra's wide eyes that they felt it too. With significant glances and renewed hope, they studied every inch of the walls around them for signs of a cloaked door. There was nothing. Then the static started to fade. They were past it and they had seen nothing!

Retracing their steps, they tried again, with the same result. This was impossible. They tried one more time, when suddenly Patra pointed to the floor. As she lowered her communicator the static increased, when she raised it, the purr diminished. They saw nothing on the apparently seamless floor.

They felt around desperately with their hands, as if fingers could see where eyes could not.

And that is exactly what happened. Saranah felt the hair-thin seam of a large trapdoor, like the invisible beginning of tape on a roll, and saw that they were standing right on it. After a bit more examination, they found a small section of removable flooring, just big enough for a hand to reach through. It had an irregular outline to camouflage it and a handle underneath.

A quick nod from Saranah cued them to begin lifting the big heavy-looking door. It almost flew up in their hands, it was so light and well-oiled. Steep narrow stairs led down, descending into pitch darkness.

Saranah switched on a small handlamp, at its lowest intensity.

“Close that door,” she whispered urgently. “No! you idiot. Put the little piece back on the handle first!”

When it was done right, she nodded and proceeded, step by step, toward a room that lay at the bottom. It felt good to be out of the naked corridors and this had to lead to the humans’ precious tufty farm. She exulted. They would be successful! All they had to do now was grab as many animals as they could, inject them with the tranquilizer they were carrying and then head for their shuttle while everyone still slept. However, it was strange that there was still no smell of animals. She hoped they didn’t have too much further to go. And, of course, the animals were probably guarded. She waved a sign of caution at her two companions as they approached the dark opening at the bottom.

Shielding the handlamp to let as little light escape as possible, Saranah tried to make out what was in the dark space ahead. It was not a corridor. She let a little more light leak out. A large room was revealed, with no obvious way out except where they stood. Clothes and belongings were strewn over three couches and old stale leftovers lay congealed on the low tables. There were no tufties. But there were four sleeping forms on couches. As silently as a dream, Saranah crept closer. The first was a human female. The second was a human female in a state of obvious undress. But the third and the fourth were Orion males! Saranah drew back, full of unreasoning fear. They had been her masters so long, she knew they would wake and grab her.

“No-o,” she ground out, actually saying the word aloud in her emotion. Their sleep was so sodden nothing woke them. She stole back to the others at the entrance.

“Two of our men,” she whispered, “but I do not recognize them from our ship. We will come back and take them to keep the other prisoners company after we have the tufties. We must search again.” Her eyes looked toward the ceiling and the endless corridors.

Raising that hatch and sticking her head out was the hardest thing Saranah had ever done in her hard life, but she was not Leader for nothing. She did it. The coast was clear and all three raiders scrambled up and out. Then the aimless slinking and skulking began again, but this time, not for long. Day would dawn soon outside, and some of the earliest risers were getting up and

about.

Saranah suddenly swept her two companions back against the wall with her arm, flattening herself up against it as well. With her wide staring eyes she indicated the corridor they had been just about to cross. Her meaning was clear: someone was walking down it. As silently as they could, the three raiders crept away from the intersection and hid around the next corner. Saranah peeked out just in time to see the disappearing back of a shuffling, slouched human, obviously not completely awake yet. "Coffee," she heard him mumble, but whether the strange word meant she should be afraid or not, she did not know.

Taking a quick decision, she indicated that they would follow him. Maybe he would go somewhere useful. Watching their backs and watching their unwitting guide, both at once, the Orion women followed the slowly shuffling and yawning human till he opened a door and walked into a room. They did not dare to follow him in, yet they had to see what he was up to. Cautiously peering into the room, Saranah saw that it was as full of strange devices as all the others. The man was bent over one of them, pouring hot water over a dark brown powder. The three women retreated further down the hall, where a recessed door gave them a bit of cover and hurriedly conferred. What was he doing? Should they wait and see? Would it lead them anywhere? Or should they go on exploring while they still had time? A strange and pleasant smell started to fill the hallway.

Suddenly, as one, the three raiders flattened themselves into the doorway and held their breaths. Another person was coming down the hall. If she passed them, she would definitely see them. Saranah fingered her stunner.

But she turned into the same room as the earlier human. The pleasant smell grew stronger, while the women tried to decide what to do. They could hear the humans talking and chairs scraped the floor. The two humans came out together, still talking. The hidden Orions held their breaths again. But the two humans turned to go back up the passageway. The Orions followed as stealthily as before.

The humans went down a dead end corridor and started opening a complex door. Saranah peered carefully at them from around the corner, planning on stunning them as soon as they had the door conveniently open. But the moment Saranah inched around to get a shot at them, her communicator started purring.

In the complete stillness of the passageway, she might as well have said, "Hey! Behind you!" She saw the humans' heads starting to turn.

The three leaped back behind the corner, flattened against the wall, and held their breaths. Saranah would have believed her ears were as big as saucers as she strained for any sound of the humans coming to investigate.

There was none.

Cautiously, slowly, the three Orions turned their communicators off completely and Saranah peered around the corner again. The humans were

occupied in a sort of antechamber in front of yet another complex door. They must have decided they'd imagined the purring noise. In many ways, this was even better. Saranah and her helpers would be shielded from the humans' view if they sneaked along the opposite wall, while the humans opened yet another door. Then, as Saranah made out what was on the shelves lining the antechamber, her heart leapt. There were hundreds of vials there, and that white stuff inside had to be *flierth*!

Waving her arm once, sharply, Saranah started to make her way down along the opposite wall. Her two cohorts leaped to join her. As she saw their eyes gleam, she knew they understood those little vials, too.

By the time the three raiders reached the first door, they could hear the second door quietly sliding open. Now! thought Saranah, leaping into the open door, stunner ready to fell the two humans.

But there was no one there. Her eyes hunted every nook and cranny in bewilderment before she realized they must be hiding in the second room. Something had alerted them. No matter. She would cover the entrance, while Patra and Gajira swept the innumerable vials of beautiful *flierth* into their bags. Keeping her eyes firmly on the inner room, she signaled to the two to start. They needed no second command. Faster than the eye could follow, their arms swept vials into bags, hundreds of vials in just seconds. Luckily the containers were sturdy, or many would have broken. Saranah, meanwhile, puzzled over the inner room even as she looked for any sign of movement. This room too was full only of strange devices. There were no tufties.

Then a movement just beside the inner door caught her eye. Just a second ahead of the woman, the man leapt out, phaser trained on Saranah. He never got to squeeze the trigger. She stunned him and he crumpled to the floor almost before he had even seen her. However, that brief moment was all the woman needed. She hurled herself at Saranah, who realized with a shock that she had seen this woman. She had seen her talking to old Karlan on the big ship's screen. Saranah's distraction lasted an instant, but it gave the human enough time to wrestle her to the ground. Her! She was younger, stronger, faster, and better in every way. She began to fight for real, spurred on by the delicious sound of the vials falling into the bags. The human could hear it too and it seemed to drive her wild. With the strength of a beast, she tore at Saranah's hands to get the phaser. Saranah kicked at her and bit, and finally lifted her bodily as she stood up with the human still holding on to her. The vials poured into the bags. Suddenly the woman gave up. She twisted herself free of Saranah's grasp, leaped back and clear, ran into the inner room, and swished the doors closed before Saranah could follow her.

"Quick," snapped Saranah. "Back. She will raise the alarm."

All three Orions raced out of the dead end corridor.

"To the underground room. They'll beam us up." Saranah tapped her communicator to alert her ship to stand by, but it was dead. Cursing, she remembered she had turned it off. But now she was too busy fleeing to turn

it back on.

Then, behind them, they could hear the characteristic chime of a transporter beam. Throwing a wild glance over her shoulder, Saranah saw two Starfleet officers materializing at the end of the corridor. She even heard the ugly Klingon curse, "*Khest!*" as one of them started in pursuit, just before they turned a corner.

Chapter 9

Deanna Troi knew she'd been asleep because she woke up. Her mind hadn't rested for a second. Wandering through nightmares never felt like sleep. She stared at the bedside clock. It was the small hours of the night. Four hours of sleep was all a double dose of syndinine had managed to get her.

She swung her feet to the floor, and rested a bit. She got up and pottered over to her command terminal. There was nothing going on. The Orions were still doing the half-baked navigation loops they'd started before her futile attempt at sleep. Over and over. Like her nightmares. This wasn't helping.

Should she try to sleep again? Yeah. Sure. She could also try teleporting back to Betazed without a transporter. Should she potter over to the replicator and get something to drink?

No, she'd potter over to Ten Forward and see if Guinan was there and maybe she could mix her something with rainbows in it.

That would be much better.

Not only was Guinan there in her usual long robes, but she had the mixture all ready, and served it without a word and with her usual knowing smile. Time flowed in different loops for the Enterprise's alien barkeeper. She must see the future and know what it held. For some reason, she thought the best use of that eerie talent was to preside over rest and relaxation on the Enterprise. Deanna gratefully took the drink from her and felt even more grateful to know that she didn't need to say a word. She relaxed a bit for the first time in hours.

A moment later she was even stifling a chuckle at the wave of horror emanating from a beautiful blonde woman standing in front of the food synthesizer. She'd ordered something magnificent. Deanna could feel her regretting its loss. In front of her were two bowls of oatmeal in fine china and two glasses of cut crystal full of milk. Champagne! It was supposed to be a champagne breakfast with mushroom omelettes! Well, synthehol, but still.

The woman, an ensign judging by her collar pip, turned toward a table occupied by a handsome, but very bored man. Deanna had seen him before. In a moment she had him placed. He was the Warrant Officer, and she'd had to counsel a nice young woman in Hydroponics because he'd grown bored. Right now, he seemed to be taking the oatmeal personally, even though the ensign was already laughing at it, and trying to get him to lighten up, too.

She has her work cut out for her, thought Deanna.

“What’s wrong with the synthesizers?” she asked Guinan, who came by with a refill.

“Dr. Crusher’s simulations. All the non-critical systems are working on that. And breakfast dates, even with the Warrant Officer, are not considered a critical function.”

“Shows you how much the computer knows,” said Deanna with another chuckle.

She felt better, but she knew that one second in her cabin would blow that away like mist on a mirror. She decided to go to the bridge. Once there, she’d be smothered in the congealed feeling of junior officers trying to be good around the senior staff. But that was better than staring at her cabin and not-sleeping.

The junior officers looked bored, but Deanna Troi saw them all try to sit up straighter as she walked onto the bridge. Data was on the bridge too, but he could turn up anywhere during off-duty hours. Except for his self-check routines and file journaling tasks, Data was never really off-duty.

“Good morning, Counselor,” he said.

She felt like answering *Good night*, but said, “Hi, Data,” instead. She didn’t have the energy for proper formality. She went to stand by the station where he was working with a very intimidated ensign.

“We are trying to track microbursts coming from the Orion ship. Ensign Ravipatnam thought they were static from poorly functioning equipment. I noticed them too, as I was spending time in my cabin. The bridge equipment made it clear that they were tightbeamed to the planet.”

“So the Orions are communicating with someone in code?” asked Troi.

“It would seem so,” said Data. “We are currently trying to triangulate the destination of the bursts, but there have not been any recently for us to probe.”

As Troi looked at the display, the Orion ship set off on one of its loops again.

“Have they been doing that all night long? Even I learned navigation faster than that. I wonder if they’re hoping we’ll get bored tracking them.”

The ensign looked embarrassed.

“We, uh, actually did miss it once and didn’t track one of the loops. That was when Lieutenant Commander Data came up.”

The poor ensign’s awkwardness was generating a fog thick enough to compete with Troi’s syndynine.

“The Orion vessel has been in a stable orbit above the Federation camps for the last two point two five hours,” said Data.

As he spoke, the Orions fired starboard thrusters and seemed about to change orbit. Lieutenant Haskins, sitting in the command chair, groaned.

“Looks like we have to do another useless run around the planet after the damn greenskins. Go for it, Ensign.”

As the embarrassed ensign complied, Data talked to himself, his head slightly cocked as it usually was when he was accessing internal data banks at a high rate. “Greenskins. Green. Skins. People with green skin. A term of opprobrium. Sometimes also used for Romulans. Query: Their skin is not as green. Why is the same term used? Green can also have connotations –.”

Deanna Troi planned to give him another few seconds and then interrupt. Without the Captain around to tell him to stop it, Data could probably go on that way for hours.

“Another microburst,” said Data.

That was the thing about Data. Even when nine tenths of his circuitry was busy decoding slang, the remaining one tenth was still sharper than everyone else put together.

Meanwhile, the Orion ship held its former position instead of practicing orbits.

“The signal goes to the prospectors’ camp.” After only a few more seconds, Data added, “This burst followed the firing of our engines by thirty five point seven seconds. Now that I have one more sample, the pattern is clear. The bursts all coordinate closely with our movements. Someone on the planet is being warned of what we do.”

Without missing a beat, he pressed a comm button on the panel.

“Bridge to Captain Picard. Bridge to Captain Picard, please.”

Minutes later, looking well-groomed and fit, without a wrinkle in his clothes, the Captain strode onto the bridge, closely followed by the other senior bridge crew. The junior officers quickly rose from their stations and made way for them.

Data ended his report by saying, “I have not yet identified the target of the microbursts. They seem to go to nothing next to the dome. I searched the area.”

“Unless it’s something hidden under a cover with phraxinine-series metals,” Geordi LaForge pointed out. “It’s the oldest and simplest trick in the books to confuse the sensor scans. Nobody’s used it in a few decades, so the equipment doesn’t check for it these days. Let me see if I can reprogram one of the Engineering sensors.”

It took him a while to program the special instructions to the adaptable sensors. “Okay, now all we need is to filter the possible beta emissions, and – there you are.” He gestured at the outline of parked shuttle where the previous image had shown only lumpy rock. “Selonite filaments laced into the covering.”

Riker leaned closer. “That’s not a Federation-made vehicle.”

“Shuttles of that and similar designs have been reported associated with Orion ships on stardate 4701.33, 5332.46, 5567.98, 5742.56 –”

“Thank you, Data,” said Captain Picard dryly.

“So,” said Worf. “Maybe the prospectors are not involved in this incident. The Orions may be acting alone.” Worf seemed unwilling to admit that the

geologists might be both uncooperative and uninvolved.

“Sensor readings on life forms inside the dome?” queried the Captain.

Geordi checked. “Three Orions, sir. Moving. And,” he changed a few parameters, “ha! I read *ten* unmoving humans, sir. All sleeping, I expect.”

The Captain rubbed his chin. “Now, what are they doing? The Orions meeting with the prospectors, but arriving too early? The Orions raiding the prospectors? The Orions having a shipboard emergency and seeking help?” He turned to the Lieutenant who’d been on night watch.

“Have you had any communications from the prospectors? Or have you intercepted any?”

“No, sir, nothing at all.”

“Lieutenant, there was one time during the past night when you did not follow the Orion ship during one of its disappearances. Why was that?”

There was the briefest of embarrassed pauses.

“Uh, it was its sixth or seventh disappearance on my watch, sir, and the Ensign at Ops didn’t notice it go. We only saw it coming back. Since it was back and everything appeared normal, I decided there was no reason to follow it.”

“It appears to have dropped a shuttle during that one opportunity, Lieutenant, and our sensors now read Orions inside the prospectors’ dome. In future, stay sharp, Lieutenant.”

The Lieutenant said “Yes, *sir*,” in a crestfallen voice.

“Get that Leader Saranah out of bed,” ordered the Captain. “I’m going to speak to her.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Keep a constant life form scan on that dome,” he continued. “The minute it looks like trouble, Riker, Data and Worf will beam down. As soon thereafter as feasible, I want you to go down too, Counselor. We will need your special senses to understand what is happening inside that dome.” He straightened his uniform jersey. “But first, we will see what that blue-eyed devil has to say for herself. Keep your senses peeled for lies, if you can, Counselor.”

Leader Saranah, however, was unavailable. She was, apparently, indisposed. A woman’s face with nightmarish orange eyes occupied the main viewscreen on the bridge.

“Saranah sleeps, Captain Pi-kard,” she purred. “I am Satja.”

“So long as you can speak for her,” said the Captain shortly. He couldn’t resist adding with heavy irony, “I should be distressed to think I was interfering with her rest.”

“Oh, for you it is a pleasure to wake in the middle of the night, Captain.” The Orion woman leered.

Troi could feel the Captain suppress a sharp retort.

“You have sent a shuttle down to the surface and three of your people are now in the prospectors’ dome. Explain your actions.”

Satja imitated surprise.

“A shuttle you say? And three of us? Really, Captain, you seem to know more about us than we do. If you will wait, I will see what I can find out.” She turned and issued questions to someone.

Impatiently, Captain Picard signed the Ensign on duty to cut audio.

“She’s lying,” Troi said promptly.

“*Zut!* Even I know that,” said Picard. “I’ll bet she’s just buying time, trying to keep us distracted. Stay on those sensors!” he turned to LaForge and Data, bent over the bridge science section.

“Nothing so far, sir. Orions still moving. Two humans now moving as well, but no contact between the two groups.”

“She’ll take as long as she can with this nonsense,” Picard continued. “Just watch.”

Satja, indeed, did not seem able to get rapid information from her untrained crewmates. She said as much to Picard, noting how hard it was for them, so recently freed, so inexperienced, to coordinate information as well as might be expected.

Troi marvelled at the precision with which the former slave played Picard’s scruples against each other until he could do nothing. It made sense, of course. A slave would get very good at manipulating people.

The tiger-eyed wretch gave a low chuckle in her enjoyment of her game, and Troi could feel the Captain’s patience wear so thin that any moment even sympathy for slaves might not stretch to cover it.

“Oh, ancient Mothers!” she finally exclaimed. “You are right, there does appear to be one shuttle missing. Now you say three of our people are down there —”

“Captain!” Data and LaForge both spoke at once.

Picard made another sign to cut communication and marched over to the science station. One look at the green dots and red dots overlapping told him all he needed to know.

“Away team,” he said. “On the double.”

They were in the turbolift before he finished speaking.

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Riker’s voice came to Engineer O’Brien’s station, who stood at the controls, ready to teleport Counselor Troi down as soon as the Commander gave the go ahead.

“Worf and Data are pursuing the Orions. I can see the storage area that was supposedly welded shut. The doors seem to have magically opened. Send the Counselor on down. I doubt it’s safe, but it is quiet and I’m going to need her ESP in there.”

As Troi materialized next to Riker, she could feel his arm pushing her back

against the wall and she could hear the sound of running feet approaching. It was, however, quiet, just as he'd said. No shouting. No phaser whines.

Riker dove through a doorway, dragging Troi with him. Luckily, it was a lab and there was nobody inside at this hour of the morning. The pounding feet raced by outside.

"Stay here," whispered Riker. "I have to get a closer look at that room."

Before she could say anything, he'd run off, bringing up the rear of the running group as if he belonged there.

The inner door of the cloaked area opened to meet the group, but Troi could see Riker looking at the shelves in the antechamber, lined with vials of white powder.

She saw him grab some vials just as Perilloux burst out of the inner room.

"What's he doing here?" she was shrieking. "Get him! GET HIM!"

Troi saw Riker thumb his communicator, and knew he'd said, "One to beam up." As he disappeared, he turned to Perilloux with his good-old-boy smile and Deanna could see him say, "I just don't feel welcome, ma'am."

Ashley Perilloux stood staring at the empty space, dumbfounded.

However, if Troi knew anything about her, she wasn't going to be shocked for long. Time to move on out, see if there were any centers of pain in this dome in addition to the horrible background roar. Deanna could hear the Klingon rumble of Worf's mind off to her right somewhere, and ran in that direction, straightening from her low crouch after she turned a corner.

Suddenly, a fury of malevolence came between her and Worf, and she stopped abruptly, unable to go back straight into Perilloux's group, and unable to go forward. She peered cautiously around a corner.

The three Orion women were there! They were fighting against several men with hideous effectiveness. To a Starfleet-trained officer, it was messy, but streetfighters with knives were bound to leave blood all over the place. Three men were already down, the fourth and fifth dropped as she watched. One had blood pouring from his chest, the other from his stomach.

The blue-eyed Leader laughed, pushed a button on an old-fashioned, clunky comm, and the three women disappeared, holding onto two of the men. That was when Deanna realized that those were Orion men, and not prospectors at all. What was going on here?

She pushed her comm button as she stood near the wounded. "Three, directly to sickbay, from my coordinates. Stab wounds."

They disappeared, leaving nothing but slippery blood in the corridor.

Then Troi noticed the open trapdoor just a short way up the passageway from where all the action had been. Worf was down there. Why hadn't he been arresting those Orions?

She ran down the open stairs, taking a moment to close the trapdoor. No point advertising her trail.

The long flight of stairs ended in a large room. Worf stood there, with a pencil behind one ear, of all things, and glowering straight ahead in his

official “at ease” position that looked like anything but. Data was seated in front of a computer working the control panel faster than the eye could follow and scanning the monitor, with that odd, jerky eye movement he used on those occasions. Two unconscious human females were draped over a couple of couches.

Troi just stood for a moment, taking in the situation.

“Report, Lieutenant,” she said.

“Counselor,” he said formally. “The three Orion women escaped with two men when I tracked them here. This is a cloaked area, so I decided to investigate rather than pursue. Lieutenant Commander Data came in just as I removed the control unit of the modified Romulan cloaking device.” He pointed to the pencil-like object behind his ear. “I stunned the two women so he could work without interruption. The Commander is still busy. I told him I was ready, but he did not respond. I am waiting for him.”

Troi couldn’t help boggling about him for a heartbeat. He would continue waiting for his superior officer even if all Perilloux’s minions poured down the stairs. And then he would die defending him.

“Well,” said Troi, “we have to stop waiting for him. I can feel a whole group of separate and very unhappy minds headed this way.”

Data came out of his trance and showed that he’d heard every word. He thumbed his communicator immediately, but with an odd jerk.

“Three to beam up,” he said, stating a simple fact.

“I am sorry I did not respond to your questions,” Data continued to Worf, not missing a beat as he stepped off the Enterprise transporter pad. “I was occupying all active sites for data storage. I must download the information to the ship’s computer before I will regain the available memory to function normally.” Even his movements were noticeably less coordinated than usual.

Troi continued on to the bridge to report to the Captain, but when she got there, she saw it would have to wait. He was thundering at the smug-looking Leader, who seemed to be thinking he looked cute when he was mad.

“Captain Saranah – or Leader, or whatever you call yourself – my patience is rapidly coming to an end. You are in Federation space. You have been ordered to get permission for planetfall. Instead you have sent an entire shuttle down. Now you have beamed up five people. I can have you towed to the nearest Starbase for legal proceedings.”

“Captain!” came an urgent voice from Ops, “they’ve just beamed down *another* person. Outside the dome.” After the briefest of pauses the Lieutenant on duty continued, “Next to their shuttle. Oh! Sir, shuttle lifting off!”

“Captain Saranah! Even while I am speaking to you, you beam people back and forth!” This was not strictly accurate, but Picard obviously didn’t care. “You are testing the extreme limits of my patience. That is foolish. Even I don’t know exactly when you will reach them.”

“Captain Pi-kard,” Saranah’s voice was at its sultriest, “you are unreasonable. You tell me to get my people off the planet, so I do. We detect the stolen

shuttle, so I immediately send my best lieutenant to retrieve it and then you get cross. Re-ally, Cap-tain Pi-kard.”

Troi knew, *everyone* knew, that she was lying. She was simply saying, “You can’t prove a thing.”

And she was right. Unless the prospectors finally decided they’d had enough of their business partners and turned state’s evidence, the Captain had nothing. It would be hard to justify making an interstellar incident out of an illegal shuttle flight and beamup.

“And just who do you have on that planet?” Picard continued. “You say all five of those were your people. Before you said there were three of you. If you have kidnapped Federation citizens —”

The sapphire-eyed woman interrupted him. “I never said three. You did, my dear Captain. No, as it turns out, two of them were criminals from among our people, hiding at the human camp. We relieved the humans of that burden.”

“Criminals?” he asked sardonically. “How can you have criminals when anyone can do anything? What have they done?”

“The catalog of their crimes is too long to describe, my dear Captain. But they are now safely in my brig and no trouble to anyone.”

“No doubt,” said Picard. “You, in the meantime, will be expected to hold a stable orbit above the human camps, and to be available for questioning whenever needed. We have seen that you are fully capable of basic starship piloting. Any deviation from that orbit or any further planetfalls will result in the immediate confiscation of your ship and the imprisonment of yourself and its crew. Picard out.”

He took a deep breath.

“They can’t be doing all this just for fur coats.”

“All right. Get me Perilloux,” he said, addressing himself to the next problem.

But Perilloux was not immediately available. When she appeared, she was anything but a grateful Federation citizen seeking Starfleet help.

“What Orions? If there are Orions down here, I sure don’t know about it. I don’t have any complaint to lodge against Orions. If I have a complaint, it’s against your crew. We’re trying to run a business and get a job done here. I was under the impression you were supposed to be dealing with a disease, not interfering with our work.”

“Thank you for your cooperation,” said the Captain pointedly. “Picard out.”

He sat for a moment in the command chair, drumming his fingers on the armrest. Then he stood, pulled his uniform straight, and signalled his senior officers to report to him in his ready room. They all filed into the small room off the large main area of the bridge.

“Dr. Crusher may have some results to report as well,” Riker said.

The Captain nodded curtly, and Riker thumbed his comm.

“I have quite a few things to report,” came Crusher’s voice. “I’ll be right up.”

As soon as she entered the room, she was so obviously going to begin

speaking, that the Captain gave her a nod to proceed. Only Troi caught the way his spirits lifted, and the way he thought, "Ah, that's my dear Doctor."

"I've analyzed the white powder Will brought back. It's exactly the same substance as Bart Higgon's little pills. In addition, since the three prospectors in my sickbay are among those I missed the first time, I gave them a thorough checkup. Two of them have the likely breakdown products from that mystery molecule in their blood." She glanced significantly around the table.

"So," said the Captain. "That substance is a drug. Now everything makes sense. I always found the idea far-fetched that people would cross interstellar space for pelts, even very nice pelts."

"Also," continued Riker, "despite Ms. Perilloux's protests about how difficult that space is to get into, it seemed to be the first place they checked in the morning."

"What did the lab look like?" asked Dr. Crusher. "I mean, did it give you the same general impression as the other geology labs in the dome?"

"Well, no, that's the funny thing. There was all sorts of tubing with liquids flowing through it and glassware and I'd swear I saw a whole bank of flash evaporators, but I'm not sure."

"Flash evaporators?" Dr. Crusher's eyes widened. "It wouldn't be too hard to get some kind of powder out of a liquid using an evaporator. That lab must be where 'Bart's pills' are made. I wonder what the liquid is."

"So it's a drug production lab Perilloux was trying to hide from us," said Counselor Troi.

"Well, I haven't proved the pills' neurotropic action yet," cautioned Crusher. "We just have circumstantial evidence so far."

"There was also the second cloaked area," said Worf. "I was able to make the cloaking device inoperative by taking its central controller, although they should be unaware of the removal for some time. I hotwired the connectors, so the absence of the controller may not be immediately obvious. Engineering, with Lieutenant Commander Data's help, will decode the structure of the controller. Assuming the cloaking around the lab is the same, we will also be able to bypass that."

"Excellent, Lieutenant Worf." Captain Picard was getting close to smiling. Troi could feel him grow less tired and frazzled by the minute. "If we can start tracking activity in that lab, I am sure that at least the mystery of 'Bart's pills' will be solved. The whole Federation will also benefit from the opportunity to study this new wrinkle in Orion cloaking technology."

"I wonder why they had to have two cloaked areas," mused Geordi, "because there doesn't seem to have been much going on in that underground room."

Well, thought Troi as she remembered the clothing littered around the room, it depended on how you defined "much."

"On the contrary," said Data. "I believe that room was, in effect, their business office for meeting with their Orion clients."

Riker nodded. "That makes sense. They wouldn't want Orions in their lab, finding out how to make whatever-it-is for themselves."

"What I thought was a terminal in that room actually turned out to be a completely standalone computer, unconnected to any other."

Eyebrows shot up all around the table. There had to be strong reasons for people to sacrifice functionality to that extent.

"It seems to contain the entire clandestine business records of the concern. I say 'seems' because after the initial indications I was unwilling to spend time processing the information, and instead switched into priority storage mode. I could not make a direct connection with such a primitive computer, so I could only scan and store. This required tremendous quantities of temporary storage space, and, unfortunately, since I am not a computer, I had to store data even in space devoted to other functions. This may turn out to have degraded some of the data. Upon my return, I immediately downloaded the information into our computer, but I have not had time to analyze it before our meeting."

"Very good indeed, Data. Very good indeed. Could you call some of that information up here?"

He could and did. There was everything there: transactions completed, transactions contracted for, a long customer list, a much longer prospects list.

"They seem to have quite a few Federation pleasure spots on their list of prospects, don't they?" LaForge noted.

"Everything," said the Captain, "points to a thriving, if embryonic, drug trade. With this new evidence, I think I am fully justified in giving emergency authorization for further searches. I should note that while you were busy on the planet today, the following came in." He touched a table panel, causing the screen at the end of the room to display the Federation's starry logo. Then a message appeared.

Stardate 7701.45

Re: Search Warrant for the premises of Perilloux Prospectors,
Clare 4.

Judiciary notes that you have no evidence of illicit activity at the firm noted above. Nor do Starfleet Investigation units, UFP Excise Bureau, or UFP Customs Bureau have such evidence. Judiciary feels there is insufficient evidence to provide reasonable grounds to suspect criminal activity, or that cloaked area referred to in your communiqué houses other than commercially sensitive materials. Search warrant denied.

“Well, obviously there’s no evidence in Federation databases!” exclaimed Geordi. “We told ’em. They’re trading drugs with Orions, not with the Federation.”

Captain Picard nodded slightly. “Yes. Well, we do have reasonable grounds to suspect criminal activity at this point. Enough so that I feel justified in exercising the emergency powers vested in the ranking Starfleet officer on this planet. Since evidence may be destroyed while we wait for word from headquarters, I am authorizing an emergency search warrant for the premises of Perilloux Prospectors.” Picard was too polite to call his superiors desk jockeys, but the timing of his presentation of the communiqué did it for him.

“Captain,” said the First Officer, “we need to be prepared for armed resistance this time.”

“Yes, Number One. We need to bring the maximum authority to bear on the situation. That will be our only chance of avoiding violence. So I will lead the away team this time. Because of the risks, you, Counselor, should beam down outside the dome until I can give you the all-clear. Given the strength of the emanations, that will still put you close enough to warn us if you detect any changes.”

“With respect, Captain,” said Troi, “I have received the same training in the use of phasers as the other officers.”

“I am aware of that, Counselor,” said the Captain, looking at her steadily. “Do you want to use that training?”

Troi smiled in spite of herself.

“No.”

Captain Picard gave her a brief nod. “Lieutenant Worf, select five security guards to accompany us. You will take command of the ship, Number One.”

Riker didn’t try to argue about the Captain putting himself at risk. This was one of those cases where he could see that his boss had his mind made up.

Chapter 10

Deanna Troi shimmered into sight about two hundred yards away from the dome, in the middle of a clump of scrubby bushes. The hot afternoon sun blazed down on her, but she shivered. Like a person touching a hot stove, for the first few milliseconds her mind registered no pain. Then it hit her. She gave an involuntary gasp and screamed. There was no one in the dry desert to hear. It was all the loss in the world, rolled into one mind. It was all the torture, all the suffering death, all the limitless despair. It was all here. She had found the source, but she might lose her mind. It hadn't been this bad before. What had changed? Wildly, she grasped her temples in her hands, her face contorted. She doubled over in a primitive attempt at self-protection, but nothing stopped the terrible cries lancing through her head where her mind should have been.

She did not think to call the Enterprise for emergency beamup. She sank to the ground, her hands pressed on her temples as if her head would burst, while moan after wordless moan escaped her. She did not think at all. There was no room for thought. All her soul was a terrible cry.

Deep within her, deeper than any conscious thought, a kernel of self-preservation thrashed into life. Away! She had to get away! She leaped up with the wild energy of a lunatic. She ran and stumbled and ran again, blindly, desperately, without any idea of direction or purpose. She ran as fast as she could, away from the hellish dome, away from the horror it contained. She crashed through thorn bushes, which tore at her face, her hands, her clothes, but she gave it no mind. Away! She had to get away! She had to save herself!

Her comm badge tore off in her flight. She noticed that least of all.

She ran for miles, she ran for hours, or maybe it was just minutes. She had no sense of time. She ran and ran and ran, the horror pursuing her, the cries that rang in her mind not abating, but driving her on, past endurance and past hope. She stumbled on a large hole in the ground and hurt her face in the fall, but instantly she was up again and running to save her life. A warm fluid trickled over her lip, but she did not think "blood." She did not think at all.

As she fled, she fought more and more with thorn bushes, reaching out vicious arms to hold her back, trying to prevent her from reaching safe haven.

She flailed wildly and always crashed through in the end, torn and cut and hurt.

Now there were vines too, holding her like ropes, fastened by a torturer, so she could be done to death. She screamed and fought to get away. She broke free, ran, was caught, broke free and ran. She gave it no thought, but the ground had changed too. She was fighting her way uphill. Sometimes she gasped and stumbled and lost strength and sank. But always she rose and ran again, was caught, and broke free.

How long this went on, she could never tell afterwards. Sheer exhaustion finally took the edge of terror from her mind and she sank to the ground, enclosed by the low trees, hemmed in by vines. A cool wetness brushed her skin as she sank down, awakening countless cuts and scrapes to painfulness. She had come down right in a small stream. The physical pain and the cool water helped to jolt her back to the real world. The terrible cries still whimpered in her mind, but she was simply too tired to absorb them. She just sat in the stream and cried and cried as if her heart would break.

The sun was low in the sky when it finally occurred to her to move out of the flowing water. With that thought came a flood of others. Why had she run so senselessly? What was she doing here? Where was her comm badge?

Looking around she could see it was already growing quite dark in the thicket of trees, all crisscrossed with vines. The best thing she could do would be to move to the top of the hill, where the Enterprise lifeform scanners would pick her up and she could be beamed aboard. The difficulty was moving in any direction, with the mass of vegetation impassable on all sides. Straight up the stream bed would actually be the easiest, since there was a bit of a crawl space right over the stream.

With the return of relative normality, came also the return of her feelings. As exhausted as she was and with her shielding destroyed, she felt a small source of hurt not far away. Who could possibly be up here, unmoving, on this hopeless hillside? No longer fighting her way through the vines, but carefully stepping over and under them, pushing them apart, wincing from each new thorn, Deanna Troi haltingly approached the person hidden somewhere in the wild growth.

She almost stepped on the being before she saw it. It was not a person. It was a tuft. Crouching down, she cradled it, and murmured soothing words. All the while she was thinking, "But this can't be it! This is absurd! These are animals. There must be someone hurt here somewhere." But whenever she moved away to look, it was evident even to her wounded soul that the source and center of the small sorrow she felt was right there, in the little animal with the large brown eyes, staring up at her from the hard, stony ground.

It was obviously dying and had crept here to die in peace. What had injured it, Deanna Troi couldn't tell. Its pelt was thick and shiny, its eyes clear and dark. There were no obvious injuries or swellings. Yet the pupils of its eyes were each of a different size. That, she knew, was a sign of major brain injury,

but there was no indication anywhere of what had given the creature the fatal blow.

She had to get to the hilltop before nightfall. But she couldn't leave the poor little creature here, alone, adding to the weight of misery already thick in the air. She picked it up and carried it with her, while it clung to her. Somehow, that made her feel better.

She returned to the stream bed to make her way up the hill, but it was hard going. The clear space over the flowing water was so low that she had to double over or crawl on all fours. Carrying the tufty didn't make this any easier. And with every passing moment each cut and scrape made itself more acutely felt, even as new cuts accumulated on top of the old ones. Deanna kept going more and more slowly. The shades of evening were so thick now she could barely see her way and yet there was no sign of the top. She began to be afraid she would be unable to make it before nightfall. She wondered why the Enterprise hadn't spotted her yet. After all, even if she wasn't right out in the open, they should be able to see her Betazoid readings through a bit of vegetation. Well, she thought wryly to herself, more than a "bit" perhaps, but still, they should have found her by now. She began to be afraid something was wrong up on the Enterprise.

It was a slight movement made by "her" tufty, as Deanna now thought of him, that alerted her tired senses to the clearing. Left to herself she would have just gone on fighting her way blindly up the stream until she fainted. But her tufty strained a bit toward a barely discernible patch of sky visible through the knotted trees. Simultaneously she felt his longing, his homesickness, right through all the various harmonics of pain this planet specialized in; right through the lancing, permeating cry that had followed her since her first moments here, right through the pain of the little tufty himself, and right through the excruciating physical inflammation that her skin had become. It was the longing of a creature who desired nothing but to see home and mate and children just one more time before he died.

Deanna turned to start picking her way through the interwoven vegetation, but it was now so dark under the trees that it was impossible to avoid blundering into thorns and snagging on vines. Tears started to form in her eyes from the sheer physical pain, but she never once thought of giving up. She was carrying a creature in need.

When she was still several yards away from the clearing, which was now plainly visible ahead of her in the light of the twilit sky, she was startled to hear a curious low trilling noise almost at her elbow. At the same moment her dying tufty found almost enough strength to leap out of her arms. Looking around, Deanna dimly made out another tufty hanging from a branch and peering at her strangely. She continued toward the clearing, with the new tufty following. At long last, with a sigh of relief and liberation such as she had rarely felt in her life, she was able to straighten up and lift her head, free of the grip of the dreadful growths.

The clearing was a rather steep area where there had been a landslide in the recent past. The thorns and vines were already starting to clamber up, but they were still only about knee high. This time her tufty really did climb down and collapsed next to the one who had come out to them. The two did nothing. They just sat together, fur touching fur, surrounded by the stillness of a wake.

Deanna found a spot where a tangle of vines covered the seedling thorn bushes and made a nice, springy spot to lie down on. She brought the dying tufty over there, closely followed by his mate and settled in to await rescue. That was when she noticed there were tens of eyes, maybe hundreds of eyes gleaming at her from the carpet of undergrowth.

She gasped in fear, too weak and exhausted even to leap up. But just as quickly, she got a grip on herself. "They don't feel any hostility or fear," she pointed out to herself, "so why do I?"

On peering more closely she finally realized that it was scores of tufties, hunkered down in the plants, slowly making their way towards her. Like that very first tufty she had encountered with Dr. Mills, these too all seemed to be fascinated with her. And she, likewise, found that feeling of ease, of belonging, of benevolence, building and building until finally she lay back and closed her eyes and basked in it.

She didn't know how much later it was when she finally opened her eyes and realized with a shock that even the terrible cry of despair that had followed her for an eternity had been briefly but completely lifted from her soul. The searing pain of her thousand cuts, stiffening and worsening the longer she lay still, even that felt minor, compared to the heart's ease the tufties gave her. The more Deanna thought about it, the harder she found it to believe that these creatures, who could counsel the Counselor, were really animals. There must have been some mistake. She prepared to enter into a deep rapport with one of them, deep enough to feel conclusively whether they hid an intelligence so alien that she had not recognized it as such.

Just then, however, the dying tufty's mate gently pawed her arm.

"Ow!" exclaimed Deanna aloud as tens of cuts awoke anew. Furthermore, she suddenly discovered she had not lost her phaser, as it dug into her side when she turned. But she understood the creature's intention. Her mate would soon be gone forever and for some reason she wanted Deanna's undivided attention to the moment. Deanna stroked them both, murmuring comfort and projecting shared sorrow. After all these creatures had done for her, it was the least she could do.

It seemed to work. The hurt that had first drawn her to the little creature was gradually dissipating (though she found it hard to imagine that he could be in less pain) and he even started weakly reciprocating his mate's low trilling noises. The sense of ease and quiet resignation grew once again. Deanna felt the presence of the other tufties, like a background hum.

When the tufty died, it was with the stillness of a fish slipping into water. A

hush reaching all the way to the heart fell upon the whole silent group.

Once again, Deanna realized, as a raindrop spattering on her face brought her back to the present, the haunting pain of despair had been lifted from her for a space. What was it about sharing soul with these little beings that did that? But meanwhile, she must get back under the shelter of the trees, because every raindrop was like acid on her cuts.

As she moved, the tufty's surviving mate clung to her and lay next to her as she crouched under the trees. The other tufties also drew closer and closer, some even climbed into the trees above her. They were just darker shapes against a dark sky, but she imagined they were still gazing at her with that soulful look of theirs, as if they were drinking her in. Just as she was drinking them in, together with their wonderful sense of ease. It suddenly dawned on Deanna that it was almost as if she completed a circuit for them and strengthened their feelings, as they strengthened hers, resulting finally in a perfect harmony.

"Time," she thought, "to test my theory. And who better, than this little tufty here who seems to be determined to act as a band-aid for me."

Gently, Deanna wrapped her mind around the little creature's. Gently she sent more and more specific feelings to it, delighted, especially initially, when each kindly feeling generated an appropriate response. But the responses remained general, even when the feelings were specific. Then, once she tried telepathic communication, there was no particular response at all. The creature simply did not think. She would be fooling herself if she persisted in assuming they must be thinking at some level. She was convinced she had reached to the deepest levels of the tufty's mind and thinking simply was not part of it.

The light rain pattered on the leaves overhead. Deanna sat, waited, and thought, surrounded on all sides by a sea of tufties. She simply couldn't get past the perplexity of the contradiction: they were animals and yet they were empaths. They were animals and yet you could feel their joy and sorrow and longing from meters away. They were animals and yet they could suffuse her soul with such peace she forgot the planet's pain. It made no sense.

What was their connection to that awful pain? Could it be that it came from them? And if so, why? She didn't feel it now, for instance, when she was in the midst of more tufties than could fit in the clearing. Could they be acting as amplifiers for someone else, as she and they seemed to do for each other?

The burial crystals! she thought, her breath quickening in her excitement. That had to be it. The crystals' vibrations when they were disturbed were too slight to be sensed by the equipment, but the tufties amplified the feeling until it reached all the way to space.

But her euphoria at finding the answer faded on closer scrutiny. Whether they were powerful empaths or amplifiers, they were unique in the universe. She hadn't really found a more plausible explanation.

The rain stopped and she moved back out to her springy mat of vines. The minute she lay down, exhaustion took over. In moments, Deanna felt herself slipping toward the calmest sleep she had had in days. She found herself holding “her” tufty’s mate with as much warmth as the little animal held her.

She also began to feel the night cold surround her and her last conscious wish was for something warm to cover her.

Chapter 11

Jack Conyer wasn't sure what to make of the new wrinkle in his job. Now he seemed to have honor guard added to his other work. Ashley wanted him there when the Starfleet Captain and a bunch of officers beamed down. At first, he'd assumed they were coming to investigate the invasion of the dome by a bunch of Orions, but Ashley made it clear that his sore head was the least of her worries. Apparently, she just wanted to be surrounded by large men when she talked to Starfleet. Meanwhile, the asteroid colonies were looking better and better.

Sparkles of light winked on and swirled in front of Perilloux, her toadies, and her four-man escort.

"What the—? How many—?" Ashley cursed and then straightened and set her mouth in a thin line.

There were a lot of swirling shapes appearing. There was the imposing Captain that Jack had otherwise seen only on-screen. In person, something about him made Ashley seem like nobody special. There was the crazy Klingon, and the white-faced android who Conyer kind of liked, for reasons he couldn't quite fathom. It was a machine, for Christ's sake. And flanking them—oh boy—five security guards with drawn phasers. Hopefully, the phasers were on "stun."

Maybe Ashley hadn't intended to use him purely as an *honor* guard. The woman had a way of not providing the essential information. He noticed that Reddle and two of the bigger guys were moving their hands away from their prospecting phasers on their tool belts.

Whatever Ashley's insane original plan, the addition of five Starfleet security personnel made her pretend she'd assembled nothing more than a welcoming committee.

"We just received your message," she said. "I fail to understand either the message or its tone. We have cooperated fully with your rather peculiar medical research methods. If you need to disrupt our work all over again, I shall insist on a proper search warrant, duly authorized by the Eighteenth Sector Judiciary." She looked like the proverbial immobile rock, and yet faced with that Captain, she didn't look like a very big one.

He answered her. "First of all, Ms. Perilloux, you have not cooperated—"

"If you insist on breaking down the dome to examine the wall insulation,

don't be surprised when I object. It'll take hours with cutting tools to get into our classified storage space."

"My First Officer reports that you seemed to have no trouble getting in when it suited you —"

"That's just a front closet. It'll take hours and a lot of damage to get into —"

"— nor did you see fit to show us even this so-called front closet. I am glad to be able to satisfy you on at least one point, however. The emergency search warrant I am executing is legal and proper under Article 237, section 15, paragraph 55 of the United Federation of Planets Legal Code. I quote: —" He began reading from the data padd he was carrying.

Outposts without a duly constituted judiciary shall be adjudicated by the highest ranking civilian authority present, or, if none such, by the highest ranking Starfleet Officer present. Such emergency powers shall be applied when the delay involved in waiting for the arrival of a member of the duly appointed judiciary would seriously impede the aims of justice.

"This planet has no civilian authority," Captain Picard stated. "As the ranking Starfleet officer in this area, I have duly authorized this emergency search warrant." He handed Ms. Perilloux an official-looking, archival sheet of printed plastifilm. "Further uncooperativeness will result in your immediate arrest."

"Now wait just a minute," snapped the head of Perilloux Prospectors. "To begin with, I have no indication except your word for it that you didn't make all this up. I never heard such nonsense in my life. Emergency search warrants indeed! And even granting that point, that thing you quoted says these emergency actions are only allowed when waiting would 'impede the aims of justice'. I'd say allowing you the run of this company does just the opposite, and you can bloody well wait till the proper authorities give their go ahead!"

"The same section, paragraph 57, Ms. Perilloux, goes on to define at whose discretion such action is to be taken, and that is the 'aforementioned civilian authority or Starfleet officer, in that order.' I am glad to hear that you have not heard of this before, since it implies that you do not make a habit of being uncooperative with the authorities. Here is a partial list of recent precedents for such action." Picard's data padd started slowly scrolling through a legalese list of five specific precedents. "Now. These are the areas we need to see. Assuming we start getting something resembling cooperation from you, I will not include your attitude so far in my report."

Ashley Perilloux's gray eyes stared narrowly at Picard. She was obviously calculating just how far she could push this man. "I don't know," she said dubiously, swallowing her pride with bad grace. "This is all very irregular. I definitely should inform the other senior stockholders before taking unilateral

action. It would be even better if you would give me the time to inform all our partners.”

The Captain looked steadily at Ashley for some moments.

“We will expect to begin in half an hour.”

Ashley made no answer. She headed out the door, telling Reddle to stay with the Starfleeters. Everyone else, Jack included, followed her, but she turned to him and said,

“Stay here with Mike in case he needs any help.” She covered her “guests” with one of her blank, gray stares.

What, exactly, did she think he was going to do against Starfleet? Did she think, because he brought in the occasional bag of tufties and otherwise kept his head down, that he was in her camp? Was she nuts? Apparently so.

There was some back and forth among the Starfleeters with someone up on the ship about a missing person named Troi. She was, it seemed, outside the dome. Ashley would like that. Reddle was occupying his time grinning feebly at the assembled uniforms. The Klingon, Worf, was restless, growling softly under his breath, and throwing fierce glances at his Captain. Picard was staring at the wall, apparently thinking deeply about something. Then Worf stood up and strode toward the door. The inscrutable Captain just tracked him, as if curious to see what he would do next.

“Oh, uh, excuse me, uh, where do you want to go?” Reddle stood in the doorway, bleating in his anxiety to placate the Klingon even as he thwarted him.

“You are not excused,” stated the big Klingon.

Reddle, thought Jack, is as crazy as Ashley. He, big as he was, wouldn't have stood in the Klingon's way when he looked like that. Mike was just asking to be laid out as flat as a steak on a plate.

“I'll be glad to show you to wherever you'd like to go,” Mike continued bleating.

“When I need your help, I will tell you.” The Klingon shouldered him aside and went out.

Reddle tagged along after Worf into the corridor, wheedling and yammering, until suddenly there was an increasing growl, a dull thud and the sound of a body hitting the floor.

Captain Picard was on his feet and at the door.

“What is the idea, Lieutenant?”

Worf bent down and did something to Reddle's communicator before responding.

“He was set to spy on us. His communicator lets them know where we are at all times. That is why he was talking continually and following me. That woman is up to something. She never stops for consent except when it suits her purposes. We should find out what those purposes are.”

Well, thought Jack, he certainly had her pegged.

The Captain considered for a moment, then nodded briefly.

“Make it so, Lieutenant. Assuming you are correct, her likeliest location is that secret lab of theirs.” He signalled three of Starfleet security to accompany the Klingon.

“Yes, Captain,” said Worf, already rounding a corner.

Then the Captain turned to Jack.

“And what is your part in all this supposed to be, Mr. —?”

“Conyer. Jack Conyer.”

The Captain’s general air mellowed. He had been looking like he was restraining himself, with difficulty, from throwing every prospector in the brig. Now a warmer light came into his eyes.

“You assisted the Doctor on her last visit, did you not?”

“Tried to.”

“Well, despite what Ms. Perilloux seems to think, it is no part of my intention to interfere with work here. If you have been told to accompany us, you may do so. Understand, however, that I will not tolerate any interference in our investigations.”

“No, sir,” said Jack.

He trotted along, behind the Starfleeters, and wondered which secret lab they were referring to. Why would Ashley try to hide any of the labs from them? And how could she possibly expect to succeed? With the resources Star —

The entire end of the hall was a mass of fire. In the middle of it was the black shape of the Klingon spraying at it from one small fire extinguisher, and three security guards trying to stamp flames out.

Jack was pretty sure he knocked somebody over in his rush to get one of the big units out of Arvida’s lab. There were about five of the things in there, because Arvida did a lot of work with ether. Jack was tossing out big units, and he didn’t hear them hitting the ground, so someone was smart enough to catch them. He grabbed the last one himself and raced toward the flames.

Worf’s extinguisher was empty, but with four people pumping out white foam in all directions, the fire was smothered in seconds.

Silence fell. There was nothing but the soft whispering sound of foam bubbles evaporating and people panting, leaning on their empty extinguishers.

There was the sound of running feet. Ashley came around the corner, followed by Reddle and four other men. Jack was surprised to see Pulvi in the group, his right arm still in a sling.

The group came to a halt some distance away from the Starfleeters.

“I didn’t believe it,” said Ashley. “The monitors said you guys had started a fire, but I couldn’t believe it. Well, that does it. Out. All of you.”

Captain Picard didn’t answer her. Instead he turned to Worf. “Lieutenant?”

“She was not conferring with senior partners when I caught up with her. She was firing her phaser at cloth she had put on the floor. It had been soaked in something. There was an explosion of fire. She ran right past me, but I had to let her get away. I thought it was more important to preserve the

evidence. I take full responsibility for any error in judgment that I made.”

“Oh, for God’s sake,” said Ashley. “It’s obvious to anyone that you’re a bunch of industrial spies. Setting fires to cover your tracks or some damn thing. Well, I’ve had it, playing along with your charade. Get out.”

The Captain ignored her.

“We are ready to examine the lab behind that door. Open it, or we will open it for you. You are also, as of now, under arrest for interference with officers of Starfleet in the execution of their duties.”

There was a lab there? Jack had never seen any of these doors open. He’d assumed it was a storage area.

“Yeah, you’d love it open, wouldn’t you?” said Ashley. “I should open it for you so you can walk off with anything you want. And that goddamn white-faced goon of yours better get away from that door or I’ll shoot him away.”

Worf and five other Starfleeters aimed phasers at Ashley.

“Blumian code, Captain,” said the android, still tapping at the wall panel with the speed of a machine.

Blumian code! Christ, thought Jack. What the hell did Ashley have back there? Blumian code was totally unbreakable, so nobody used it, except the military. The bankruptcy of Mrakov Monoclonals a century ago had shown what could happen when one disgruntled employee locked a whole company out of its own files.

Ashley, meanwhile, had lowered her own phaser and her whole group was stepping back, away from the Starfleeters.

“Hold your position, Jack,” she called to him. “We’ll get some more help and get these bastards out of here, since talking to them politely is useless.”

He was standing to one side of the Starfleeters. He supposed that could be construed as a strategic position, if he’d had any intention of firing at these people. If they were spies, they were doing a very good imitation of trained officers. And what was there at Perilloux Prospectors to spy on? Unless that mysterious elatine stuff was worth millions.

There was the sound of running feet again. The Starfleeters all had their phasers drawn and aimed, with the big Klingon in front of his Captain, who was trying to get out in front himself.

Jack realized he was standing there like one big target and tried to figure out what to do when the shooting started.

Phaser fire whined around a corner, down a hallway, nowhere near the Starfleet group. Who the hell was shooting at who? Had some of his co-workers finally decided they’d had enough of Ms. Ashley? If so, he knew whose side he was on.

Ashley and some of her guys ran past the end of the dead-end corridor where he stood, phaser fire burned the walls next to her, somebody took cover in the dead-end hall briefly, got shot at, tried to leap out, but was shot at again. The shots missed him, but Jack felt, and then smelled, his singed hair.

Two men and two women rapidly backed down the corridor. Worf bellowed at them to stay out, but they were so desperate and so busy yelling, they didn't seem to hear him. Whoever had been aiming at them fired again. Worf threw himself to the floor, and, where his head had been, the wall became a small, smouldering crater.

From the ground, Worf fired a warning shot over the brawlers' heads, but instead of getting out, a couple more ran into the dead-end corridor, moving down it as they fought, closer and closer to the Starfleeters. It was all happening as fast as an eye blink, and the Starfleet security guards were moving into position to fire when Worf barked,

"Don't shoot."

Everybody looked startled, as if he'd never said such a thing before. Phaser fire was searing their hallway.

"There are many shots," growled Worf. "But we are the only ones who have almost been hit. Even geologists could not have such bad aim."

It was a good point, although Jack had to stop himself from saying that some geologists had very good aim.

"That woman," Worf continued growling, "is trying to get us to injure someone. She probably hopes we'll kill someone."

And then Jack started to wonder whether Ashley was merely insane, or something much worse. He, after all, would have been the first casualty if his civilian non-reflexes hadn't kept him frozen. Why, exactly, did she want him to "hold his position"?

The pseudo-fight rolled back out of their hall for a while, probably to make it look realistic, but the reprieve wasn't likely to last long. Accidentally-on-purpose, they were all going to get killed.

"We'll come back with enough guards to take over the dome," said the Captain. "Time to beam out."

He sounded regretful, of all things. Jack knew that if he'd had that option, he would have beamed out about six months ago.

"Will you be all right here, or do you want to come with us?" the Captain asked Jack.

It was more concern than Ashley had ever shown for him.

"Uh, Captain," said one of the gold-shirted guards, "Communicators are dead."

"Hoo, boy," said somebody, tapping at his own communicator, while the android, Data, started a lecture.

"Simultaneous loss of communication from two independent units is normally indicative of interference fields rather than malfunctions intrinsic to the units." He was tapping at a tricorder as he talked. "Yes. Field extends at least fifty meters beyond the dome in all directions. If communication signals are blocked then teleportation —"

"Thank you, Data," said the Captain. "We'll have to fall back into the famous mystery lab. There'll be some cover there."

Phaser fire to break down the door behind them left nothing but a big black scorch mark.

Now what? Steel would have melted like butter.

Data was pointing the tricorder again. "It is not steel, Captain. It is made of trititanium. Breaking in will take us two point ten hours, plus or minus —"

Jack had assumed Starfleet would know what to do. He'd assumed he should keep his mouth shut. Apparently not.

"Follow me, folks," he said. "Quick." The whine of phasers was getting closer again, but he ran toward the horrible sound, until he was halfway down the hall. He dove into Arvida's lab, followed in close but orderly progression by the Starfleeters.

"The labs have to have emergency exits ... somewhere there should be a nice big red —." Ah. Right over there. A nice big red "EXIT" above a door with good old Ion Arvida's field equipment heaped in front of it. Worf helped him throw tents and poles and pickaxes aside, and they all ran through. There was silence outside. The people with the phasers were probably wondering where everyone went.

Then a few tentative bellows started again, punctuated by the sizzle of phaser fire scorching the walls.

Worf scowled. "There are still no casualties. The number of voices is always the same. They have a further purpose."

"Yeah," said Jack. "Coming to get us."

Worf grinned till the points of his teeth showed. He seemed to be looking forward to it. Luckily, the Captain had more sense.

"They will start searching the labs soon. Go through the wall." He pointed. "And put that field stuff in front of the hole to make it harder for them."

"Our position will show up on sensors if we use phasers, Captain," Worf objected.

Phasers, thought Jack, aren't the only way to get through walls. He scanned the lab, ran over to the cabinets which usually held the heavier equipment, and pulled out a buzz saw.

"Crude," he said, "but effective. They won't even hear it over all that noise they're making."

They came out in another darkened lab full of humming machines.

"The problem with this," muttered Jack, "is I'm turned around. I think this is Violet's lab, but it could also be someone else's who I don't see that often."

"North," said Data, "is that way. The south entrance is one hundred twelve point three meters that way. The —"

"Where's the canteen, Mr. Map?"

"Between us and the south entrance, forty point five meters in that direction, with one hallway, two more labs, and another hallway between us and the facility."

Jack looked at Data, astonished, for a split second.

"Okay. Keep us on track for that. I could plausibly be wandering around

there, looking for coffee, or something, and we should be far enough away from the folks with phaseritis so I can scout out the hallways and get you out the main door when it looks safe. Unless Ashley has already removed my access codes.”

“I imagine she’s busy with other things,” said the Captain.

Jack peered cautiously out the door. That hall was empty, although he could still hear muffled sounds of the fight.

He admitted to himself that he was waiting for it to be safe. It was never going to be safe. He might as well go. His brain had even sent his legs the order to sprint when phaser fire scorched the floor in front of him. His brain tried to send a totally different order and he wound up on his ass, skidding into the hallway. A couple of labs over, in an open doorway, not even hiding, Jack could see a white face with wild, staring eyes.

“Lee!” He remembered not to shout at the last minute. “What the hell? What’s got into you? It’s me, Jack, for Christ’s sake.”

The wild light died in the staring eyes, replaced by a dull, boiled look. A young man with lanky black hair wearing a prospector’s tool belt came shambling out.

“Uh, sorry, old buddy. Sorry. There’s a big fight going on. You can hear it.”

You could. Jack wished he couldn’t.

“And there’s Starfleeters.” Lee got the hunted look again. “They’re after us. They’re trying to get us. Something really big is out there. It’s trying to get us, Jack. I – I got this feeling there was something wrong, really *wrong* out here. I mean, I *know* there’s something wrong out here. But obviously you’re not it. But there’s something out here. It could get us all.”

Lee seemed set to go on that way forever. The poor guy had lost his mind. It wasn’t a nice thing to do, because what the man really needed was to find Arvida and get some tranquilizers, but Jack didn’t have time for that.

“Starfleet? You know, I saw some of them down that way.”

Lee sprinted away. Jack crossed the hall to the lab opposite – but its door was locked. He ran to the next one, tried that, it was open, thank God.

There was still a wall to the next lab and another hallway to go before they were at the canteen. Jack wasn’t exactly sure where they should break through into the next lab, but Data pointed to where their next cut through the wall should now be.

Minutes later, Jack was listening to the sound of footsteps walking down the corridor to the canteen, trying to figure out how he was supposed to look innocent, suddenly stepping out of someone else’s lab.

He chanced it after the footsteps passed.

“Oh, hi, Jack,” said a woman’s voice behind him.

He wheeled. He hadn’t heard her approach. It was Betsy, in her jumpsuit underwear and slippers. He waited till his heart climbed back down out of his throat and said,

“H-hi, Bets. What, uh, what are you doing?” What he really wanted to ask

was why she was pacing the corridors in sleepwear.

She smiled nervously. She looked over her shoulder. She was, now that Jack took the time to notice, jumpy and completely unlike herself.

“Oh. Jack. I don’t know. I couldn’t sleep. No, that’s not really it. I could sleep and that was the problem. I had this awful nightmare. Something was after me. It hated me with a horrible passion. Then I couldn’t get back to sleep. Thought I’d hang out in the canteen for a bit.”

Jack Conyer eyed her.

“Weird,” he stated. She nodded, but he waved it away. “No, I mean I just came across Lee acting paranoid. Are we all going crazy?”

“Well, at least you’re not,” said Betsy with a wan smile. “As a matter of fact, you’re quite reassuring, exuding all that strength and confidence and whatnot.”

Why couldn’t she tell him these things when he could do something about it? There she was, with enough whatnot for four women, and not a thing he could do. Not now.

He eyed her calculatingly.

“Listen, Bets, did you know there was a search warrant out for this place and an arrest warrant for Ms. Ashley?”

She looked genuinely shocked and shook her head.

“Bets, Ashley’s up to something. What’s more she tried to imprison a bunch of Starfleeters doing it. Care to help me help them?”

Betsy looked even more shocked.

“Imprison ...! What can I do?”

“I could really use another pair of eyes close to the entrance. If anything’s going to be guarded, that is. Divert anyone who might happen to be there.” He signaled the hidden Starfleeters to come forward. Betsy, after her eyes widened in amazement, became full of efficiency and purpose and went on ahead.

Numerous corridors intersected close to the entrance. Jack spent long seconds checking the closest ones. Suddenly they heard the most unwelcome sound in the world: the main entrance was opening, followed by footsteps headed in the direction of the Enterprise crew. Just as suddenly, they could hear Betsy’s voice.

“Ashley! Thank heavens you’re here. Listen, Lee’s apparently gone paranoid and needs tranquilizers. I’ve been looking everywhere for Ion Arvida, but he must have gone to sleep early. Unfortunately he’s put a lock on his room and I’ve forgotten the override codes. You must remember yours? Good. Let’s get over there and wake him. I’m afraid Lee’s going to do something dangerous.”

Jack and the Starfleeters behind him froze. Ashley Perilloux herself!

Betsy’s high, calm, reasonable voice talked on, and practically convinced Jack, listening around the corner. It certainly convinced Ashley.

“Where’s Lee?” they heard her saying, as the footsteps faded in a different direction.

"Thank God for Betsy," breathed Jack, as they all quickly made for the door.

They ran out into the night. A short sprint took them past the interference zone, and in seconds the Captain was thumbing his communicator. Jack could see he was going to include him in the beam-up.

"I'll stay here," he said. "I should be okay. Ashley never spotted me. And, uh, Betsy'll wonder where I went."

The Captain nodded.

"Nine to beam up. Now."

In seconds they dissolved into shimmering columns of light, while Jack watched from the shadows. Before the light had disappeared a white-clothed figure leaped in from somewhere screeching,

"*There!* There they are!" A phaser beam lanced through the still glimmering spot.

"Oh Christ," Jack swore softly to himself. "Lee again. This has got to stop." It wasn't hard to creep up behind him, he was so completely engrossed in shooting the ground the Starfleeters had stood upon. One quick twist of his arm made the phaser clatter to the ground.

"Now Lee," said Jack softly, "you just come quietly. If you were feeling yourself, you wouldn't be out shooting at the dark. We'll get you to bed and tomorrow you'll feel much better." Jack didn't really believe it himself. The man seemed too far gone, but you had to say something.

The dome door hissed open again as Ashley Perilloux and Betsy stepped out.

"They were there!" Lee shrieked. "I saw them! They want to get us! They hate us! I saw them!"

"You'll be all right," said Ashley, applying the hypospray to his neck.

Betsy and Jack exchanged relieved glances over her head. Jack picked up Lee to carry him into the dome.

The dome began looking a long way off before they were even half way. It had been a long day. Of course, any day that includes being knocked out and shot at seems long, but the worst part turned out to be now, walking back to the dome with Ashley and trying to act normal. If Betsy hadn't been there to cover for him, he would have been a goner.

But she did such a good job of it that Ashley even warned them about the Starfleeters.

"Be careful of those spies. Reddle says he has them bottled up, but they've been trying to shoot their way into labs. I thought I told you to keep an eye on them, Jack."

She was probably wondering how much he'd seen, and he was nowhere near an answer when Betsy said,

"So that's why you were after that tanglefoot. And there I was, yammering at you about Lee. You should've said something, instead of dropping everything to help damsels in distress."

Jack was too busy trying to figure out how to work tanglefoot into a sentence to say anything. He shrugged, embarrassed, and tried to look like

someone who would plausibly do everything to help damsels.

So Betsy, bless her, continued.

“Yeah, he said one of the guys had asked him to get some tanglefoot, which sounded kind of strange to me, but I guess everyone’s been running around, trying to figure out some way to slow those people down now that they’re rampaging.”

Jack finally had the clue. All he had to do now was come up with a specific person who could have sent him on the errand, such as one of the big guys who’d been reaching for a phaser, perhaps.

“Arvin thought it would be a good idea. I guess I got sidetracked, because Arvin seemed to have things under control, and he said a few more guys were coming any minute”—that would give Ashley the impression he hadn’t seen any mayhem after the fire was put out—“so I guess I kind of dropped the ball on that. Did it turn out they really needed it?”

“I’m not sure what he was thinking,” said Ashley, “since phasers could burn through tanglefoot in any case. And those spies sure know how to use the things. Lee must be one of the poor guys they’ve been messing up. This is the problem with being out on the frontier. But I’m going to call in help. I don’t have to put up with this crap. And I’ll make sure our evac capability is okay. For medical reasons, if nothing else.” She indicated Lee and began to go toward one of the two space-rated shuttles.

Jack didn’t think Lee had the kind of problems evacuation could solve, but he had his hands full carrying him and just wanted to get him to his room.

“Sure, Ashley,” said Betsy. “We can take it from here. You go on and do whatever you need to do.”

He wondered what sort of help Ashley was calling in and from which circle of hell it would come. Then he and Betsy began the task of staggering through the dome, carrying Lee. That is, she carried Lee’s feet and Jack walked backward, carrying the rest of him.

“Was Ion really asleep?” he asked.

“I don’t think so. And he played along immediately when I started talking about how worried I’d been at how hard it was to wake him.”

“He doesn’t say much,” said Jack between breaths, “but sometimes I get the feeling he’s not too happy about how things are going either.”

Ion Arvida was old and gray, and didn’t seem to be waiting for wealth like the younger folks. He reminded Jack of people in stories who join the Foreign Legion in order to forget. Although there was obviously a lot of stuff he remembered. Besides hydrocarbon geology, which was his official job, he was the camp’s jack-of-all-trades, doubling as remote sensing troubleshooter, medic, plumber, and inventory keeper.

“Not too happy,” Betsy quoted with a grin. “Where’d you grow up, Jack? In the town of Understatement, Minnesota?”

“Saskatoon,” he said shortly.

“Oh, for Pete’s sake, they’re even worse. But it probably means you feel

right at home with the landscape here.”

“Not really. I miss the mosquitoes.”

At that, Betsy actually laughed, which made Jack smile. They finally reached Lee’s room and could heave him onto his bunk.

Chapter 12

“Saranah – I mean, Leader,” said Satja from the comm station, “the As-ley tries to call us.”

“Tries? What do you mean, tries?”

“There is a signal, but when I answer, nobody speaks.”

Patra, sitting at another control console, suddenly said, “One of the miners’ little ships just fired its engines!”

“Put it on the main screen,” said Saranah.

Everybody on the bridge stared.

If the Ship can’t stop it, then maybe we can defy them, too. Saranah always looked for weakness. She didn’t find it often enough, though.

“It is not going anywhere,” she said.

“The thrusters are building up pressure,” said Patra, studying her display.

“It is not going anywhere,” repeated Saranah.

Patra scanned her display, pushed panels, and looked puzzled.

“I thought engines overloaded or exploded or something when –. Oh, they’ve been turned off. Oh!”

“What?” said Saranah sharply.

“The Ship has the little one in a tractor beam.”

“Federation swine,” muttered Saranah. “Always interfering.”

“Listen to this,” said Satja, as she took out her earbud, and a high, reasonable voice came over the bridge speakers. “It is the As-ley’s voice print, but it doesn’t sound like her.”

“I keep telling you, I had no intention of lifting off. Safety regulations require us to test shuttle engines periodically, to make sure they’re operational in case of emergency.”

“In future,” said some male voice on the Ship, “don’t test any engines without informing us first.”

“Anything you say,” said the high voice on the ground.

The Orions on the bridge of their ship looked at each other.

“They lie to each other, too, these Federation swine,” Saranah summed up. “I wonder what is going on down there?”

The tentative voice of a very junior woman spoke from the furthest and smallest of the bridge stations.

“Leader. This equipment still looks for tuf-ties, the way Karlan-the-cursed

left it. I don't know if I read this right. It says there is a crowd of them, a thousand animals, not far to the north of that dome."

A thousand! Everyone on the bridge looked at each other again. With enough animals to try different things, maybe Gajira could finally find out how to make the *flierth*.

"Send a message about it to those miners, Satja," ordered the Leader. "Make it as public as you can, so they all go out looking for them. Once they catch them, we will take them. Track—"

But the same male voice that had been annoying Ashley now came over the open comm channel.

"Enterprise to Orion ship. Respond, please. The Captain needs to speak with you. Enterprise to Orion ship."

Satja whispered excitedly, "And now the As-ley also calls again. Microburst. Everyone wants the great Leader." She grinned until she caught Sarah's eye.

"Somebody speak to the man. Tell him I am ... in bed. I will speak to As-ley."

It took Satja some time to sort out the comm channels, and when she did, she missed the beginning of the coded microburst packet.

"— just have to hope they miss bursts while they're talking to you at the same time. Their Captain is in my dome. I've just prevented him from destroying the remaining flierth, so those damn spies may have other things on their minds, for a change."

Sarah looked at the image of a frustrated Picard on the bridge of his Ship, very obviously not in any dome, trying to get something useful out of Satja. The Ashley must be stupider than she looked.

"I repeat that I am disgusted that you, as our so-called business partners, would raid and damage our dome. You say this was a few criminals who are now in your brig, but I will find that easier to believe when I see payment for damages. I remind you that you are not the only possible partners with whom we could do business."

Who did this pig think she was? How dare she try to scare her, Sarah, Leader, while she herself couldn't even get off the ground without the Ship holding her down under its fat thumb? And yet ... and yet she couldn't stop a knot of nerves growing in her stomach. There were a million Orions who would jump at the chance to trade *flierth*.

"However, in view of our past productive collaboration, and assuming some tangible evidence of your regret, we have decided

to give you the opportunity to participate in a special business arrangement.”

Saranah couldn't stop a flare of eagerness at the thought of a “special arrangement.” It was when you had your suppliers on the rack and you could name your price that the true wealth-building opportunities arose.

”To simplify our business model, we have decided to use a single distributor for our expanding elatine business.”

Great Mothers, thought Saranah. If she was not that distributor, she would be back to depending on —, back to —. It didn't bear thinking about, even though she knew that this panic was precisely the effect Ashley was trying to create.

”The reason for this unique offer at this time is that the so-called Starfleet presence threatens our business. They are spies who have somehow found out about our trade secrets and are trying to steal them from us. For a ship and for people of your capability, it would not be difficult to disable the Enterprise, thus allowing our, yours and ours, business to proceed normally. I can contribute my knowledge of Federation computers to the endeavor. We will construe successful completion of this mission as the entire initial licensing fee. Our fees thereafter will be a moderate percentage of the price of the goods.

We await your reply. Ashley Perilloux.”

Saranah condensed the received message into three words.

“She needs help.”

A calculating look lit her face. “How badly, I wonder. How badly?”

“She asks *us*, Leader. She must need it very badly,” said Patra.

Yes. But did Ashley need it badly enough? Or could she wait for a few more Orions to show up and start a bidding war?

“If another ship comes by,” Saranah pointed out, “we would not be able to keep them away. We have little time to establish our own position. Besides ... imagine controlling the galaxy's supply of *flierth*” Saranah felt a glow at the thought of all that wealth and power.

“We might gain less than we think if those fees of hers are too high,” noted Gajira.

“Fees!” sneered Saranah. “We are free Orions! We will pay nothing she

cannot take from us.” Her eyes refocused on distant dreams of *flierth*. To control any of that wonderful and fearsome substance would be more than she would have dared to hope even one short week ago; but to control *all* of it Her life would be secure for the first time since that dreadful day, five years ago. She would be able to buy anyone and anything: her old slavemaster (ahh, now there was a pleasant thought), and old Djorth on whose ship her mother had last been seen. Then there was that curious boy who had worked in the kitchens of Karlan’s home estate. It would be paradise. She must control the *flierth*, whatever it took. She must. As for Ashley, she would betray her right hand with her left, if she could figure out how, but an Orion was more than a match for some puny pink human. The only question was the size of the woman’s need, and that could be measured by naming an impossible price.

“Ashley Perilloux, Greeting.

What you propose is difficult. This is a very expensive “licensing fee.” We are not sure that an exclusive arrangement is worth our lives. You are asking for an act of war by Orions against the Federation. If we succeed, the rules of war will apply. This will be an Orion planet, and your business can run without Federation meddling. We await your promised assistance.

Leader Sarah.”

The Leader pushed the “send” panel and leaned back, satisfied. If the Perilloux human agreed to these terms, she was desperate. If this became an Orion planet, everything on it was Sarah’s, from the rocks to the animals to the few humans, even to Ashley herself. Sarah almost chortled. She had no particular resentment against Ashley; she would allow the woman to stay on as manager of the tufty farms. It would be better for her than death at the hands of Starfleet.

She noticed that Satja was still talking to the Ship. It was not the Captain anymore. It was a much younger man, big and handsome and frowning.

“What do they want?” she hissed at her lieutenant.

Satja excused herself to the big man on screen. “Some nonsense about not dealing with the miners except through them. They say the Ashley is to be arrested, and so on.”

Sarah rolled her eyes. “Men,” she said. “Can’t be happy unless they’re ordering people around.”

“Sarah —” began Satja.

“Leader,” Sarah snapped. “If you cannot remember my orders, I will find

someone else who can.”

“Leader,” Satja began again. “A long message from the As-ley. Too long. At this rate, the Ship will soon notice.”

Saranah did not bother to tell the woman that she would ask for her theories if she needed them. She was too busy reading the complicated message. It was an interminable list of instructions followed by a short list of numbers and symbols to be entered exactly into the Ship’s computers. No, into a specific computer. The Ship would then be able to do nothing, and they could all go about their business again. She sent her answer back in four words.

“Received. We will proceed.”

Chapter 13

After dropping off Lee, Jack Conyer could finally head down the hallway to his own cabin. But now that he could, he didn't want to. Betsy was walking toward her own room, in the other direction. "This has sure taken my mind off nightmares," she'd said. "Hopefully, I won't have too much trouble getting to sleep now," she'd said.

It was all Jack could do not to offer to help.

Now was not the time, for God's sake. When would be the time, he wondered. Neither shootouts nor rock hunts segued particularly well into romantic discussions. His bunk was going to look even more boring than —

There was the sound of hurrying feet behind him, and when he turned to look, it was Betsy, in her jumpsuit, straight black hair billowing out as she almost ran toward him.

So far, so good. But then she started talking in a low, hurried voice.

"Jack. I was going past the main comm station on my way to my room. Pulvi and Sam were in there talking to some woman with an accent who was coming through loud and clear. She was siccing them on a whole mass of tufties. She had to be one of the Orions! Jack, help me stop them. Please. I know it's crazy, but help me. I couldn't stand it to know more of them got killed. I still have dreams — anyway, please —"

"Bets," he said, trying to sound as reassuring as he knew how, and shelving his own priorities one more time. "Simmer down. It's okay. Sure I'll help you. I'll be glad to. Just tell me what you want me to do."

She gulped a bit.

"What's happening to all of us, Jack? Why is it so easy to panic?" She looked at him for a moment, seemed to get a grip on herself, and continued. "I don't know what to do. I just want to be sure they don't kill a zillion of those little critters."

"Well" he said, "let's trail Sam and Pulvi and see what they do. Then we'll follow them. But first, why don't you go get some warm clothes on, and take as many things that would work as weapons as you can. I'll do the same thing, and we'll meet off to the left of the entrance, behind the clump of bush grass."

She nodded, began looking determined, and then flashed him a smile just before she ran off. It made the day seem a lot less long than it had been.

A few minutes later, he strolled out the main entrance, trying to be nonchalant, like a man looking at nothing but stars. There was nobody out there. Not the two men, not Betsy. He edged closer to the thicket of bush grass, and realized she was there, completely hidden. There was no way it was going to hide him that well.

"If they're out there somewhere, they sure as hell saw me," he muttered as he joined her.

"They both got into the flitter parked at the extreme end," she muttered back.

"Shouldn't we be getting a chase flitter ready to go, in that case?"

"Then they'll know we're following them."

"We can dodge from canyon to canyon, and follow their ion trail."

Betsy looked at him as if he'd said something stupid.

"What?"

"Jack ... I mean ... come on. To begin with, there aren't enough canyons. And it's the oldest trick in the book. If they're not watching for that, they should be minding their sports vids instead of dealing with Orions."

He tried not to get offended, without much success.

"I wouldn't even know how to watch for it. What makes you think they do? How come you know so much about it?"

She looked at him again, steadily. Before he could demand an explanation, she said,

"You know, Jack, one of the things I like about you is you've never tried to follow me when I'm prospecting. Other people, well, some of them seem to think I'm just a warmblooded dowsing rod. I've had to learn about every kind of tracking, so I could throw the slime off."

"You mean *co-workers*? Trying to filch your finds?"

She smiled slightly.

"Totally new concept, huh, Jack?"

"That can't —. Oh, hell. There they go."

The flitter fired its engines. It would lift off any second.

"Tell you what, Bets. There's no way to follow them except in another flitter. There's no way to take a flitter without them noticing. So we take a flitter and let them notice. I'll just pretend I'm hunting the same bunch of tufties. Why shouldn't I be? Come on!" He started running toward the closest flitter as the engines began to whine on the other machine.

She followed, and jumped in right behind him.

"What about me, though?" she said urgently, as he thumbed the engine on. "Everybody knows I've never hunted tufties."

"We don't have to tell them you're here. It'll be a nice surprise for them at the end."

"Yeah," she said. "What are we going to do when we get there?"

"We'll think of something."

Betsy slid into the pilot's chair next to him, lifted the craft, and arrowed

after the first flitter.

The radio flashed with an incoming message.

“Well, that didn’t take them long,” said Jack with a wry look. “Remember, don’t cough or anything.” He opened the channel.

“Yo. Conyer here. What can I do for ya?”

“You can go home, Jack. We found these. They’re *ours*. Get it?”

“Sammy, you never told me. You should’ve shown me when they gave you the deed to the planet. I would’ve thrown you a party.”

“Listen –”

“Give it up, Sammy. You didn’t find diddly, and the lady said there were thousands.” He was just guessing at a number, but it would have to do. “Sounds like enough to go around to me.”

There was a brief silence, as if Sam had cut the connection while he conferred with Pulvi. Then he was on the air again.

“If you’re going to follow us like somebody’s damn kid brother, I guess we can’t stop you. But if you take more than a bag’s worth of critters, I swear, I’ll shoot. And if you get anywhere near the spy, I’ll aim for something essential. She’s *mine*, so piss off.”

Jack was so shocked, he almost forgot to answer.

“Uh, sure, Sam. Sure. I’m just after a few pelts. Plenty to go around.” He shut down the radio on his babbling. “Christ. What was that about? What spy?”

Betsy stared at him.

“Ashley’s always calling the Starfleeters ‘spies.’”

“We better let the Enterprise know.”

“We better not do it through our own comm station.”

“How do we –. There’s only the Enterprise and the Orions up there. We should find a direct link pretty fast.” He started scanning through the channels as fast as he could push the equipment, while Betsy made sure they didn’t lose the other flitter, which was doing it’s best to get rid of them.

The comm locked onto its own satellite again. Jack cursed. He didn’t have time to read the instructions and find out how to tell it, “anything but that.” He restarted the scan, got a lock, heard someone come on the air, and cut the connection. A throaty woman’s voice with an accent. It didn’t sound anything like the Enterprise. Another scan, and he got the prospectors’ satellite again. He slammed his fist into the console so hard, he hurt himself.

“Chief Engineer LaForge here. We noticed you scanning for a lock. Are you in trouble?”

Well, Jack supposed it was one way to jog a radio into finding the right frequency, but he wouldn’t want to have to do it often.

“We’re not in trouble. Yet. But I think you may be. Two of our guys are after somebody who may be a Starfleeter.”

“And you are ... ?”

“Jack!” said Betsy suddenly. “Look at that!”

The flitter ahead of them had slowed way down, and Betsy had matched their speed, hanging back out of phaser tool range. Now the hunters' flitter had switched on the high power searchlight.

The rolling hill below was covered in tufties. There were, indeed, thousands of them. They were sitting on their haunches, all looking at the lead flitter with the peculiar intensity of intelligence. They weren't running. They weren't diving into burrows. They didn't seem to be afraid at all.

In the middle of the crowd, something moved. A pile of dead grass fell away from a woman with wild-looking black hair and a Starfleet uniform.

Betsy gasped. Jack felt something odd, a strange, low rumbling in the air, like thunder might sound if it was too close to hear.

The woman stood up. Something about her was a lot like the tufties. The same quiet, deliberate power. Sam had opened the side hatch of the flitter and was pointing a stun gun at her, but she didn't seem afraid. On the contrary, there was something about the way she moved and the way her hand was going toward her phaser that felt like rage. What, exactly, was one person with a hand weapon going to do against an armed flitter?

"You guys better get your people down here," said Jack, suddenly remembering the radio. It gave him the surreal sense of calling another universe, and being part of both of them.

"We're on it, mister," said a voice. "All it took was one scan, when we knew where to look."

The thunder broke. A wall of fury like a physical force made Jack gasp and grab his head with both hands. He heard Betsy scream.

He heard the whine of the other flitter as it pushed its engines to escape out of there. All he could think was that he'd be damned if he let them get away. They were going down, dead or alive. The red rage filled him, made him reach for the controls —.

He missed them as he was slammed back into his seat by Betsy's reckless acceleration in pursuit. She'd beaten him to it. She was running rings around the other flitter. Literally. She'd overtaken them, turned, and was now barrelling at them, head on.

It seemed to him like an excellent thing to do.

And then everything stopped, motionless, in mid-air.

Jack couldn't move. He couldn't breathe. He realized, as his ordinary mind came tiptoeing back, that he was feeling a tractor beam from the inside.

If they didn't back off on it real soon now, his heart was going to stop beating.

They did back off. The flitter still hung there, but he could move.

"Sorry about that," came a voice over the radio. "We wanted to be sure you weren't spread all over the inside of your flitter."

Slowly, carefully, their flitter and the other one were eased back toward the hill and the crowd of tufties.

The rage had left him, and now he felt spent, worn out, a shell of a man.

He'd crumble if someone spoke too loudly. He looked over at Betsy, and she had tears running down her cheeks. He knew just how she felt. He reached over to touch her shoulder.

She turned toward him. He put his arm all the way around her shoulders, and she turned as far as she could in the pilot's seat, and laid her head on his arm. They were both worn out.

And yet, come to think of it, Jack found he wasn't worn out. Not at all. This, said his ordinary mind, was not the time – but suddenly he didn't care what time it was.

He tightened his hold on her shoulders and began kissing the top of her head.

He felt her surprise. And then she turned her face up, not crying anymore. Quite the contrary in fact. He'd never seen anything so beautiful in his life.

A second later, or maybe it was an hour, he didn't know and didn't care, the flitter gave a small jolt that said it had been set down on the ground. Outside, there were Starfleeters who would want information.

It was always something.

When he stepped outside, right behind Betsy, the first thing he saw was a whole flock of uniforms and Sam lying on the ground, bent at an odd angle, as if –

Another couple of Starfleeters materialized, and Commander Riker said, "Broken back. Probably brain damage too. He fell on his head. He's officially under arrest, but get him to sickbay first. Same with this guy."

Pulvi was sitting on the ground, clutching his forearm, which had an ugly phaser burn on it. He was babbling.

"He fell. He just fell. He fell before she fired. He fell. That's why her shot hit me. He just fell."

Jack had seen Sam opening the flitter's hatch to have a clear shot. No wonder he'd toppled when that wall of rage hit. He himself had felt like his head would explode.

But did that mean Pulvi had taken off *after* Sam fell? He couldn't have just abandoned him. Could he? Being on the wrong side was one thing, but abandoning your buddies in a fight.... How low could you go? Jack had thought of him as a friend, once, in some other lifetime. It was with a sense of loss that he watched him vanish in transporter sparkles.

"So," Commander Riker was saying with a grin to the wild woman, "you decided to start using your phaser training, after all."

She hadn't said anything so far. Now that Jack really looked at her, he noticed that it wasn't just her hair that was wild. Her eyes were wild, her clothes were torn, and she was covered in more scratches than skin. She even had straw sticking in her hair.

She just shook her head, at first.

"It wasn't like that. I wasn't thinking or deciding anything. It's these animals. They're empaths. Amplifying empaths." She raised her hand to

forestall some comment he was going to make. “I *know* they’re animals, Will. But I’ve spent the last however-many hours with them, and I probed, and I tell you, they’re empathes. They even ... they even took away the pain. They’re incredible.”

“So what happened?” he asked.

“When that flutter approached ..., Will, those men wanted to get every last tufty. They were horrible. And by then I knew what the animals could do, and I couldn’t stand it. I just got so mad –.”

“You?”

“Yes. Me. I got so mad. All these tufties shared my feelings. I tell you, they did. And you know how feelings are stronger when they’re shared. In the couple of seconds it took after I saw the flutter and before they could shoot at me, I would have killed them. I didn’t even check the setting on my phaser.”

“That sure doesn’t sound like you, Deanna, but if it’s some kind of amplification effect, it should have got everyone, not just you.”

“That man did fall before I shot.”

“For all we know, though, he was pushed, or something. And what about those two?” He nodded toward Jack and Betsy. “They seem okay.”

“They’re in love,” said the woman absently, as if it was a known fact of no importance.

Jack felt a foolish grin appear on his face. He looked down at Betsy to make sure she hadn’t taken offense, because otherwise, Starfleet or no Starfleet –. No, she was fine. He’d never seen her blush before. It made that radiant smile of hers even more so.

“I see what you mean,” he heard Riker saying. “And that shields against it?”

“Of course,” she said, still obviously occupied with something else.

“It did get us,” said Betsy. “I thought I’d been shot. Even Jack felt it.”

What did she mean “even Jack”?

“And then,” she continued, “you saw me diving at Pulvi’s flutter.”

Riker’s eyes widened. “That wasn’t a steering malfunction?”

“No.”

“Oh.” Riker turned to the Starfleet woman, who was looking at one of the tufties as if they were having a conversation nobody else could hear. “Looks like you were right, Deanna.”

She said nothing to that, but just kept communing with her tufty. Maybe she always was right, and had grown tired of commenting on that obvious fact.

“Well,” said Riker, “we have a lot to thank you two for. Without your help at that crucial moment, this might have ended very badly. Needless to say, we won’t be letting Ms. Perilloux in on your part in it, and we’d appreciate it if you continue to let us know when developments need our attention.”

“Will do,” said Jack, and Betsy nodded.

“Let’s get you to sickbay, Deanna.”

“This one wants to come with me,” said the woman. She had her hand on

one tufty's head.

"Beverly will have a fit. And the Captain will have something to say about bringing animals on board."

"This one wants to come with me," she repeated, as if he hadn't spoken. She was holding hands with the animal now, and it looked like it would take powerful machinery to separate them.

Riker didn't try, although Jack could see that he was still objecting as the transporter beam took all the Starfleeters away.

Silence descended on the landscape, broken only by the rustling sound of tufties melting away into the night, and the occasional call of a night bird. There was a light breeze.

Jack looked around at a whole new world. An infinity of stars blazed in the sky.

"Betsy," he said. "I don't really want to go back to the dome just yet. Do you?"

"No," she said.

Chapter 14

Once again, Sarah had a project best carried out while the world slept. Or at least that part of it found on the Ship. Patra told Sarah they were finally in position. A short nod to Satja and Gajira and the three of them marched out of the room, silent and purposeful. Just like men, thought Sarah. Soon, three tiny pods were ejected from the ship.

They were ejected slowly, away from the Enterprise in its high orbit above and ahead of them, and they even tumbled. For a few brief seconds, activity on the hull of the Orion ship was masked by the cloud of ions trailing the powerful nacelles of the Enterprise. And once the three tumbling pods came into the sensors' range, they'd look like orbital debris to a computer, too small and too inert to require human attention. Low-level deflectors took care of the small stuff, so there was no need to track it.

After a complete orbit, and a quick boost up to the level of the Enterprise while they were masked by the planet, they would continue looking like nothing at all as they floated closer, and then used the Ship's engines again to mask their approach to the hull. There shouldn't be any sensors worrying about debris in that direction, since it had already passed the ship and wasn't going to make a U-turn on its own. Now, if some fanatic was scanning for lifeforms in orbit, they were in trouble. But why would anyone do that, unless he already knew they were there?

The slow trip to the Enterprise lasted over an hour. Anti-nausea medication prevented disgusting accidents inside the cramped pods, despite the spinning and tumbling of the entire universe. It would have been a boring hour, since they had to maintain communications silence, except that in her isolated pod, Sarah couldn't help uselessly straining to see or hear the blast that would kill her. Any moment the Ship might discover them and they would, of course, be instantly shot.

She tried to occupy her mind rehearsing her plan of action. According to information in her ship's data banks, Federation ships had a safety feature to prevent anyone from becoming trapped out on the hull: any source of localized heat next to an access door, even the tiny bit leaking from a space suit glove, was enough to make a hatch open. It was odd that Starfleet would worry more about trapped workers than possible forced entry, but many things about the Federation were odd. The important thing was to use it.

After the hatch opened, she would have to override the emergency codes and turn off the alarm, and do both as quick as thought. Ashley's data said she had only a minute for this before everyone was alerted, right up to the very bridge. After she shut down the alarm, her two helpers would join her, remove their suits and go straight to their goal, using the map on which she was fiercely trying to concentrate in her tiny coffin.

The Ship loomed larger and larger on each successive tumble that brought it into view. Sarahah hoped harder and harder that orbital debris really was ignored by the sensors' programs.

Cautiously, the Leader turned on a slight current in her pod, magnetizing it and causing it to move slowly toward the Enterprise. She noticed the other two immediately follow suit. By judiciously turning the current on and off, they could do enough crude maneuvering to come finally to rest near a hull access hatch. Regardless of what dangers followed, half the worst was over. Looking into the face of infinity, with nothing but a thin skin of pod between her and it, was Sarahah's idea of hell.

She extended a thin, telescoping arm, ending in a three-pronged grasper, from her pod. The arm bent back on itself until it touched the pod, opened a compartment in the skin, and removed a small rod which the graspers squeezed. The chemicals in the rod mixed and gave off weak heat. The arm extended to its full length, and held the rod at one precise point next to the outline of an access hatch in the hull.

As expected, the heat caused the hatch to start opening, sinking into the ship a bit, then sliding sideways and revealing the airlock chamber beneath. In one swift movement, Sarahah opened her pod, moved hand over hand down the arm to the door, felt the Enterprise gravity tug her and dropped into the lock. Immediately, she started working on the control panel near the hatch. The door slid closed.

She tapped the control panel slowly and carefully, following the patterns and numbers displayed on her helmet, trying to make no mistake. The pulsing red lights faded and she breathed a sigh of relief.

The next thing was to open the door again in an orderly fashion and fasten all the pods to the hull, so they could return the same way. Minutes later, Sarahah and her two helpers had stepped out of their spacesuits. If someone had peered into the airlock antechamber, they would have seen nothing but three junior Starfleet crewmembers, breathing too hard, and staring around.

Their uniforms were red, for Engineering, which was their goal. Sarahah wasn't sure what rank the insignia indicated, but it was one of the few for which their synthesizer had a reliable pattern. Their green skin was thoroughly hidden under a natural-looking layer of light brown make-up. Satja's yellow eyes had been turned brown using contact lenses. Sarahah and Gajira had left their blue eyes undisguised, which should be all right. Humans also had blue eyes, although theirs were pale and watery.

The door to the corridor opened, and the Enterprise's three newest

“crewmembers” stepped out. They were pretending to be three friends on break, their carryalls slung over their shoulders. The fact that the carryalls were overloaded with phasers, nerve gas, and electronic lock pickers better not be obvious to a casual glance. They were in the lowermost regions of the ship where their pods had attached to the underside. There were few people about. Sarah almost wished they would meet someone, so she could reassure herself their disguise worked.

Soon, they did meet someone. A man, thank the Great Mother. Sarah threw her shoulders back a bit more, and cursed the Starfleet uniforms that made work like hers difficult.

The man was walking along the curving corridor, opening doors, reading information off a sensor on the inside, and making notes on his data padd. He looked bored. He seemed surprised when he noticed them.

“I don’t think I’ve met you before,” he said, and smiled in that way men have, that wasn’t really a smile. “I thought I knew all the gorgeous women on the ship.”

This one was going to be easy, even with a Starfleet uniform.

“We are new here,” said Sarah, in her best voice. She saw Satja and Gajira move on either side of him, so whichever way the subtle ventilation worked on this ship, he would soon – ah, there it was. Sarah saw his eyes widen. She saw him swallow.

“We-ell, let me show you the ship,” he managed to say.

She smiled. It was exactly the right answer. Humans nodded to show acquiescence, so she moved her head up and down. He looked at her, puzzled as well as hungry. She must not have done the gesture well.

“Where’re you from?” he asked.

She had expected this. “From Lantos.” It was the Federation frontier on the other side of Orion space, and she wouldn’t have to worry about anyone ever having been there.

“You don’t say? Well, it’s a small galaxy. I’ve been to Lantos – just the spaceport, of course. What part of town are you from?”

“From the north,” Sarah ground out. What wouldn’t she give to knock this scum out. But everything would be much easier if he led them to what they needed. She had to get him off the subject of the old home town.

“You were going to show us the ship.”

“Sure. You just stick with me.” He turned to Satja and Gajira. “Don’t you two ever say anything? How about a smile?”

The two Orions just looked at him, and he turned toward a door to make it open.

“Some of the ship’s biological stores,” he said. “Raw material for the synthesizers, algae to restart the recyclers in case of accident, medicines and that sort of thing.” He took data from the door sensor before moving on.

This wretched Ship went on forever. Next, he would probably show them an entire warehouse of confetti for the ship’s parties.

“Don’t get me wrong,” he said, grinning like a stupid human. “I like women who don’t waste time talking too much.”

“This,” he said, opening yet another door, “is the emergency stores. Those huge tanks contain drinking water. There are the oxygen and nitrogen cylinders; basic foodstuffs; antibiotics; antivirals; and so on. You’ve probably been over the drill a zillion times at the Academy, right?”

Saranah stared. It sounded like the right answer was “yes.”

“Yes,” she said.

“So where do you work on the ship?” he asked.

Saranah had expected this as well, and yet she had to stop herself from telling him that she also preferred men who didn’t talk too much.

“We are with Engineering,” she said, careful to keep any edge out of her voice. It didn’t help. All he did was look surprised.

“Engineering? Which incompetent gave you red uniforms then? Why didn’t you get gold?”

Curses! Were Karlan’s old data banks as useless as the rest of him? She was sure she hadn’t made a mistake. She’d asked the system for Engineering uniforms. She had to think of an answer for this idiot, and fast.

“It was all they had in our sizes,” she said.

“A miserable excuse if I ever heard one. They can just synthesize new ones. I’m the Warrant Officer, you know. You just tell me who stuck you with the wrong uniforms and I’ll get it all sorted out before tomorrow.”

Saranah felt her fingers tighten involuntarily around the strap of her carryall, and consciously relaxed them.

“We, ah, would not like to start by making enemies,” she managed at last. “We would rather look at this wonderful ship. With you.”

That did it. He swallowed visibly.

“Oh. Ah. Yes. Of course.”

He was staring at Saranah and being totally useless.

“Further along this way, perhaps?” she asked, keeping her voice as low as she could. That was the direction her map said she needed.

“Ah. Yes. Yes, of course.” He took a deep breath. “If you gals are exploring the ship, why bother with this godforsaken part of it? Why don’t we skip a few decks? I could show you the scenic junior officers’ quarters.”

Saranah tried as hard as she could to keep her desires out of her eyes. Except that the Federation was obsessed with the loss of the least of its citizens, it would be such a pleasure to garrot this dimwit. She did nothing to him – yet – because he was walking in the right direction as he prattled.

“This next hold,” he said, as the door swished open, “is low-level security supplies.”

At last! Saranah exulted. At last.

“Over there is the phaser armory, and the bigger weapons, like the cannons.”

There was another door in the direction of his nod.

“Can you open it?” asked Sarah, unable to keep the eagerness out of her voice. He didn’t seem to notice.

“I may be a Warrant Officer, – what’s your name, by the way?”

“Sara.”

“Well, Sara,” he lingered over her abbreviated name, “as a Warrant Officer, I’m not at the bottom of the barrel, but only senior command and security can open it. You know that.”

She did now. Curses.

“Now, over here,” he continued, “are ceremonial weapons for full dress occasions and here are the riot control supplies: stunners, triothene, sulfothane, –”

“Can you open it?”

No, it appeared he couldn’t open that either.

“Related supplies over here,” he pointed to an open cabinet, “gas masks, helmets, padding.”

Sarah exchanged a glance with her helpers behind his back. Then she threaded her hand through his arm, much to his obvious surprise, and murmured,

“Oh, but this is all useless, on this ship, of course.”

“Enterprise personnel have never rioted, that’s true. But there have been times when hostiles have boarded, and then it’s very handy to have something like sulfothane which can activate a knockout gas like trio –.”

His career as a tour guide ended as suddenly as it began. A double-handed blow from Satja landed on the back of his neck. But the Warrant Officer was tall and solidly built; the blow didn’t quite knock him out. He spun around in surprise, opening his mouth to ask something.

“Fool,” breathed Sarah, and delivered another and harder blow to his head.

Gajira moved her foot back to kick his head when he was down, but Leader Sarah cut that short.

“Remember what I said! No killing! If you have no memory, I will take other assistants in future.”

Gajira subsided.

Quickly they broke open the riot control cabinet and loaded one sulfothane canister for each triothene gun in their carryalls.

“This will work much better than those lumpy sulfur crystals we brought,” gloated Sarah, “and now the triothene will be odorless, as it should be.” She pointed to another shelf, an open one that they didn’t even have to break. “Breather masks. Theirs are better than ours.” A quick switch replaced their own bulky masks.

They were ready to step back out into the corridor, but Gajira said,

“Wait. This will slow him down a bit if he recovers too soon.” And she pulled the man’s pants off, underwear and all, and hid them. Then they left.

They carried Ashley’s code which, to be effective, had to be planted at the

deepest levels of the computer. Her instructions showed three computer maintenance terminals outside the high security main server rooms. All they had to do was find one and knock out the slave using it.

The only problem was that the Ship was too big for her to memorize the whole complicated route, and she couldn't wander around the hallways, referring to a map, like some sort of Orion tourist.

They walked down corridors. They turned left and right, left and right. They used the turbolift, then walked down more hallways. In the higher levels of the ship, there were more people, but nobody tried to talk to them. Finally, they came to an area with too many people and a wide hallway that looked all wrong.

"This can't be it," Sarah said softly to her companions. "Somehow, I *must* look at that map again."

"Hey," someone called to them, "three beautiful women don't just stand outside of Ten Forward. They go in! Come on, we'll show you around."

The two men were met with three silent stares. Shrugging their shoulders, they went in by themselves.

Ten Forward? Where, in the names of all the demons, was that?

"Come," Sarah whispered desperately. "Huddle around as if we are discussing secrets or something. We are lost."

They found a spot next to a fire extinguisher, Sarah stood with her back to the wall while the other two formed a barrier in front of her. Desperately, she tried to find her place on the map. "Bleeding children!" she finally moaned. "We are right in front of their social center. But the good news is that we are also not too far from our goal. Up two more, left, left, right" They set off again, trying to look inconspicuous.

But if the attempt to look like normal crewmembers had been difficult while they were walking, it became near impossible when they finally found what they thought was their goal. How could you hang around a door, waiting to find a way in, and not look like you were lurking? Luckily, there was no one in this particular corridor just now, but it was clearly morning on the Ship and that luck was hardly likely to last. Sure enough, the next instant, someone appeared.

The doors of the very room they had to enter swished open and a dapper young ensign came striding out. One look at the low-level insignia of the three loitering women was enough for him.

"Well, come on," he said sharply. "Don't waste time. If you have an errand here, run it. No point standing about, gaping."

Sarah had seen his kind before. "Mmm, yes," was all she could think of, but she kept her voice low and soft. It had its effect. The next time the dapper ensign spoke more mildly.

"There's nothing to be shy about. It's just like any other door." With a curt nod, he disappeared around the corner.

Just like any other door? On this peculiar Ship, very few doors seemed to be

locked. Most opened whenever people stood before them. Sarahah had seen it several times as they strayed through the endless Ship. Taking a sudden decision, she slipped her hand into her carryall and grasped the triothene weapon inside it. Then she marched up to the door.

"Come in," said a musical voice, faintly audible through the door. It immediately swished open.

Leader Sarahah unhesitatingly marched through it, closely followed by her two helpers. In the same instant, she lifted her weapon just high enough out of the bag to fire it and clapped the breather over her own face. The room had numerous terminals in it and the two women working there faced their monitors and not the door. The one who was swiveling her chair to greet the newcomers fell to the floor before she had even turned all the way. The other slumped over the command panel.

Finally, exulted Sarahah. Finally, finally, finally. Now they must work quickly. She studied the screen of the first panel, but her heart sank as she noticed that the crucial symbol was missing that Ashley had said showed the user was at the correct level. She checked the filmplast she carried and carefully compared the symbol to those on the panel, but there was no match.

Gajira, meanwhile, dumped the woman slumped over the other screen to the floor. Hungrily, she studied the panel.

"Here!" she whispered loudly.

Sarahah crossed over in one step, sat, and started carefully tapping in the series of commands Ashley had given her. She hurried and tried to be careful, both at once, until her fingers trembled. She checked the strange symbols one more time, and hit "accept". The computer swallowed the virus without a murmur.

The three women looked at each other, unable to believe they had actually been successful.

"We must still get back," said Sarahah softly. "And we must make it difficult for them," she added as she blanked the screen. Luckily, her stroke worked the same way as on an Orion machine. Maybe that was because most of them were from the Federation. "Let us hide those two, so the very next person who comes doesn't raise an alarm." They dragged the two inert bodies behind several rows of datachip cabinets.

And now away. Away, as fast as possible! She threw a fevered glance down the corridor, saw nobody, and all three of them boiled out of the room, ripping the masks from their faces and stuffing them in their bags as they ran.

"Walk!" ordered Sarahah in a whisper, but they still looked like contestants in an invisible race. She couldn't stop herself from searching the faces of the few people they met, even though it was a sure way to attract attention. However, everyone seemed wrapped up in their own worlds, and didn't notice. The corridors seemed even more interminable than before; the wait for the turbolift stretched to eternity. When the wretched device finally came,

there were several people inside it, including a young man. Curses, thought Sarah. If this one tries to talk to us, I will kill him. However, though he surreptitiously tried to breathe in as much of their “perfume” as he could, neither he nor anyone else said anything. They didn’t even talk to each other, as if there was some sort of taboo against speaking in the small space.

Gradually, deck by deck, the other passengers all got off. The three Orions breathed sighs of relief. The turbolift plunged to the second lowest deck. They got off and circled round to their airlock.

Only it wasn’t there.

Approaching panic, they ran past a whole series of high, cargo bay doors. Still there was no airlock.

“Wait!” hissed Leader Sarah, “we must *think*, not run!” She pulled out her map again, her two cohorts staring at it over her shoulder.

“Look,” Satja suddenly pointed out, “that turbolift comes down on this side, but the map says security stores are over here and our lock was closer to that.”

Sarah nodded. “You are right. We have come down on the wrong side of the ship. But there are bulkheads on these levels. We will have to go back up and then over.” All three groaned. “Come. The faster we go, the faster we will be back.”

Once again they braved the turbolift. At least this time, they didn’t have to go very far up and they met only one person. But they were so impatient to get away and to be safe that even one stranger was almost intolerable. They almost ran through the corridors; they couldn’t resist pounding on the turbolift panel when the second one took a few seconds arriving. They came down to the right level again. And there, at long last, was their airlock.

They piled into the antechamber, and Sarah felt her heart pound with more than fear, for a change. They were almost out and safe, almost. They pulled on pressure suits. In a moment, she would be out, readying the pods. The extensible arms would push them off, and their own ship was just a short journey planetward. Success was just around the corner.

Then red lights started pulsing everywhere. There was no sound. Just those awful lights. The hatch, which had barely started to open, slammed closed again. With a dreadful, clammy feeling, Leader Sarah knew those lights were for them. Maybe they had been tracked the whole time, the way cleared for them just to see what they would do. The thought made her sick, as sick as the thought of being recaptured, re-enslaved, repossessed.

The only thing they could do was try to hide somewhere. They ran back into the corridor, past the endless, pulsing red lights. They fled back into the Ship.

Chapter 15

Deanna Troi was sitting up in her bed in sickbay, holding “her” tufty on her lap and stroking its fur. Deanna’s hair was brushed, her eyes were bright, and her skin had its normal pearly glow after eight hours of regen salve.

Dr. Beverly Crusher stood at the foot of the bed, together with Captain Picard. She had her arms crossed, tapping irritably on her left elbow with her right hand.

“Well, I say you’re not ready for another stint with the away team yet, and we have to go down immediately. I – this should really be part of a formal report, but there isn’t time for all that.” She turned toward Picard. “Director T’Pel called. Tamara Kenshin died.”

Deanna gasped before she could stop herself. The Captain opened his mouth to say something, but Beverly Crusher didn’t wait for him.

“And I know why.”

“Do you, Doctor,” said the Captain quietly. “I would like to hear it.”

With the same quick, harassed gestures, Beverly started a monitor near Deanna’s bed. The Counselor knew what the problem was. The doctor hated it when a disease won any victories, and losing a patient, she hated worst of all.

The monitor displayed a billowing surface of spheres, which Deanna knew represented the surface of a cell, and on it was a huge tangled thing, like a ball of yarn after the cat had finished with it. Little white slivers of molecules would float by, get snagged on it, and stay there.

“You see,” said Beverly, staring at the screen, sunk in her own thoughts.

“Yes,” said Picard. “I see. And I’m sure that soon you will start explaining, and I will also understand.”

She looked up quickly. “I’m sorry, Jean-Luc. I think I’ve been working too hard on this.”

“I *know* you’ve been working too hard, Beverly,” he said. “So, what is it?”

“That thing is the drug molecule. It attaches to nerve cells, and it can replicate like a prion, so it spreads throughout the brain. It alters the processing of these growth factors,” she pointed at one of the slivers, “which is what eventually causes death. It makes the body think it needs to fight off a disease. More drug slows that down, but eventually the body fights the ‘disease’ to death.”

“But,” said Troi, sitting up suddenly in her shock and almost dropping her

tufty on the floor, “you’re saying that addiction is fatal.”

“That’s right,” said the doctor grimly. “I’m not sure how much addiction is lethal, but the simulation implies that eventually everyone dies. Of course, life being what it is, the health effects may be permanent, but the high isn’t. As usual, the body overproduces the neurotransmitters the drug destroys and you need new doses of the drug. I assume, as with most drugs, the ability to get high is lost after a while, and the user has to keep taking it just to stay functional.”

Troi and Picard were both speechless, while Crusher stared at the monitor.

Lieutenant Worf strode into sickbay. His left eye was swollen shut. He had a three long, straight scrapes across his face, from top to bottom, almost like claw marks, and they had dripped blood onto his uniform. He stopped near Captain Picard, planted his feet the regulation distance apart, clasped his hands behind his back, and stared ferociously at the wall behind Deanna with his one good eye.

“Permission to report, Captain.”

“By all means, Lieutenant. Proceed.”

“Lieutenant LaForge noticed an unscheduled hatch access. After some cross-checks, he alerted me to it. Further study of the sensors revealed the life signs of three Orions in cargo bay ten. He accompanied me and a team down there. That bay proved to be empty. However, he noticed the infrared mark of people listening behind the door of what should have been the empty cargo bay eight. The three Orion women had hidden in there. I arrested them.”

“With some difficulty, I take it,” said the Captain dryly.

Worf scowled, staring straight ahead. “No, sir.”

“And what were three Orion women doing on my ship?”

“I don’t know, sir. They wouldn’t talk. Using Starfleet methods.” Worf’s scowl deepened.

“Well, we’ll deal with them later. Tell that obnoxious leader of theirs –”

“She was one of those captured, sir.”

Picard’s eyebrows rose. “Tell that whole damn ship that one more move, one solitary word, out of them that is not directly sanctioned by me will see them towed to Starbase – no, will make me deport them back to Orion space without the benefit of a trial, as soon as I have a minute to waste on them. And find out how they boarded the ship. Make sure it can’t happen again.”

“Already done, sir. They used inert body pods. Lieutenant LaForge has altered the sensors to detect any future approaches, even, as he said, by paint flecks.”

“Very well, Lieutenant. Dismissed.”

Worf pivoted on one heel and began to march out.

“Oh, no, you’re not,” said Crusher. “You go straight to Dr. T’ren and have your eye seen to.”

Worf opened his mouth to argue, closed it, and went to the indicated office.

“And now,” said Crusher, “I really should get down to the archeologists’

camp. I need to give the other patient what little of this drug we have, or he may follow in Kenshin's footsteps any time. I also have to get at that Bart before he can disappear again. He obviously knows all sorts of things he's not telling us."

"You see, Beverly," said Deanna in her most persuasive voice, "I really should go, too. Our questioning of Bart Higgon will be more effective if I'm there."

"I know it will be," said the doctor, crossing her arms and irritably tapping again. "That's the worst of having an empathic patient. She pulls my best counterarguments right out of my own head and uses them against me."

Deanna smiled. "It's not my fault," she said gently. "I found it that way."

"Hrmph," said Beverly. "You see what I mean." She looked at Deanna narrowly. "Is the pain gone?"

"Some of the bruises and cuts still let me know they're there, but I'm certainly comfortable enough—. Oh, you mean *that* pain. No, it's still there, but somehow these little creatures," she cradled the tufty, "make it much easier to bear."

Dr. Crusher shook her head wonderingly. "They're more effective than syndynine, judging by your neurological signs. All right. Off you go. But if you come back a basket case"

"I'm sure you'll make it a very comfortable basket," said Troi soothingly, losing no time in hopping out of bed. "Data's coming too, right? To work on deciphering the crystals?"

"Yes," said the Captain, as they all walked toward the transporter room.

"When will you be arresting the Perilloux's and the rest of them?" Crusher wanted to know. "Give me enough of a heads-up so I have sickbay ready."

"Doctor," said the Captain, "I am waiting until Lieutenant LaForge's team has the cloaking and interference devices thoroughly decoded, precisely so we won't need sickbay next time."

"I still want sickbay to be ready. The best laid plans, you know."

I know, Deanna heard him think so loudly, she was sure Beverly heard him too.

While they waited for Data, Chief O'Brien transported Troi's tufty back to her home range. Deanna felt her eyes fill with tears and struggled to let them go no further. It would take nothing at all for Dr. Crusher to send her right back to sickbay.

By the time Data arrived at last, Beverly's foot-tapping had gone from psychically deafening to physically manifest.

"My apologies, Captain," he said as he walked in the door. "I was successful in time-dilating some extremely short communication bursts that I thought my equipment had detected between the prospectors' camp and the Orion ship. Now that I know they were real, and not mere static, I wanted to start the decoding programs as soon as possible, since —"

"Thank you, Lieutenant Commander," the Captain broke in. "I will expect your full report when you return. Right now, I think perhaps you had better

beam down without further delay.” He glanced at Dr. Crusher.

Troi saw the transporter room fade, as usual, but as it faded, it suddenly pulsed with red lights while the emergency klaxon blared.

And then, completely disoriented, she was outside the archeologists’ dome, with no sound but that of the wind, and the measured crunch of rocky soil as Director T’Pel came out to meet them. Beverly was looking about, as bewildered as Deanna, but Data was thumbing his communicator and calling the Enterprise.

“Come in, please. Away team to Enterprise. Come in, please.”

Beverly started trying her own communicator, and also heard nothing but static. Unlike Data, she was cursing under her breath. “– damn, blithering, god-forgotten, cloned pieces of *junk!*”

“Ah, Doctor,” came the Captain’s voice suddenly.

She straightened up visibly and fell silent.

“It’s good to hear from you,” the Captain continued. “You and your party are safe?”

“Yes, sir. Quite safe. What happened?”

“A new Orion ship just uncloaked at pointblank range with all phaser banks fully charged. Shields went up in the middle of your transport, and we were worried.”

“So were we,” she said shortly. “Why didn’t they show up on our sensors? Their cloaking isn’t that good, is it?”

“We had an equipment malfunction that’s being looked into as I speak. Meanwhile, their Captain is apparently hailing us.” There was a moment’s pause. “An unpleasant-looking customer, but that’s no surprise. He says his name is Zeb something. Now he’s saying his brother disappeared in this sector, and if we – I am quoting – Federation swine had anything to do with it he will make us pay and that he is going to clear his territory of the scum and their rustbucket.”

The Captain’s sigh was loud enough to be audible right over Beverly’s comm pin.

“Time to go talk to him,” he continued. “Don’t be alarmed if there is incoming debris shortly. Picard out.”

“I think he was joking,” said Troi dubiously.

“I think so too,” said Beverly, less dubiously, “but I’d like to hope he wasn’t.”

Director T’Pel reached the group. “Is there a problem?”

“Not really,” said the doctor. “Not compared to what’s happening here. Let’s get to it.”

“We were so sorry to hear of your colleague’s death.” Deanna’s gentle, heartfelt voice carried shared sorrow as well as words. The reserved Vulcan entered that deeper stillness which was their expression of grief.

“We thank you,” she said formally and completely sincerely. She turned to Dr. Crusher. “Everything has been done according to your message. The body is awaiting your examination, as are Dr. Jones and Mr. Higgon.”

Data said, "I assume you do not need me for anything, Doctor?"

"No, Data. You go right ahead."

"Call me when you are ready to leave," he said as he walked straight toward the office where his satellite data told him Dr. Tamma and the crystals would be.

Dr. Crusher went in a different direction, in all senses, and entered the autopsy room. Half an hour later she emerged, looking grimly satisfied.

"It all checks out. It took so long because I had to get actual samples of limbic brain tissue to program the tricorder for the new molecules. At least now I don't need to do that on a living patient. Ninety percent, *ninety percent*, of the receptors in Kenshin's brain were bound to that drug. The intermediates predicted by the simulation were traceable. She died of that drug. No question about it."

There was silence for a while.

"Now what?" Counselor Troi finally asked. "You've found the cause of this condition, but its only cure is more drug. Are we going to give it to everyone who's addicted? We don't even know how it's made."

"In the short term, giving people the drug is the only thing we can do. In the long term, someone is going to have to find a cure." Dr. Crusher stood up. "Time to go see Jones."

Dr. Crusher and Counselor Troi walked into the little room to which Clarence Jones had been moved after the death of Kenshin. Troi talked with him in her kindly way, easing both his grief and fear. Dr. Crusher unobtrusively took tricorder readings as they talked. At a certain point he turned to her and said, half accusingly,

"You promised to fix it."

He was very weak by now and clearly certain that he would follow in Tamara's fateful steps. Beverly Crusher stopped what she was doing, and her blue eyes fastened on his.

"I have," she said quietly. "Unfortunately, I was too late for Dr. Kenshin."

Apprehension fought with hope in the patient's face.

"You have?" he asked anxiously. "So when do I get the cure?"

"How long has it been since you last had it?" Dr. Crusher returned.

His eyes fell. He wound his fingers nervously around the bed sheet. He raised his eyes to her again.

"You have found it." It was a statement, not a question, this time. "Forty three days."

"You've been counting?"

He nodded silently.

"Why, for heaven's sake, for your *own* sakes, didn't you tell me this the first time?" Dr. Crusher was doing her best not to growl at an almost-dying patient, but it was easy to see that if he'd been healthy she would have shaken him by the collar for not helping her save Kenshin's life.

He waved his hands hopelessly.

“What could you do for us? You didn’t have any elatine. And we knew it was the only thing that could help. All we would have done is caused a lot of people, ourselves included, to be disgraced. The end would have been the same.” In his weakened condition, his despair engulfed him without resistance.

Deanna had once seen a bird beating its life out against the walls of a room in a blind panic to escape, while the whole time the door was wide open. She’d been a child then, and she felt the same way now.

“Why didn’t you ask Bart Higgon?” Dr. Crusher persisted.

Troi could feel the patient’s hopelessness sink further.

“We did,” he said in a low voice. “He had run out too.”

Crusher and Troi exchanged glances.

“Then why isn’t he sick?” Crusher demanded.

“He did get sick. But he recovered on his own. Just one of the lucky ones, I guess. It didn’t get him as bad as it got us.”

Dr. Crusher’s blue eyes blazed briefly at the thought of Bart simply letting his friends die.

“How long were you taking it – what did you call it? elatine? – before you noticed a problem?” asked Crusher, changing the subject.

“Tamara and I first tried it about four months ago.” He dropped his eyes and his fingers nervously worked the sheet again. “Tamara and I were together, you know,” he said very softly. There was no fear in him now; it was all pure grief. Deanna Troi gently took his hand.

“It’s an incredible high,” he finally continued, “it lasts four or five days and during the whole time you just feel on top of the world and capable of anything. Nothing’s boring, nothing’s difficult. Your work slides a bit because you spend more time enjoying yourself, but you feel absolutely great. After the first time we liked it so much, we did a second week and then a third week. By the fourth time we kind of said, this is wonderful, but we can’t spend our whole life taking pills. So we stopped. After about ten days we both had bad, continual headaches and we were feeling worse and worse. So we took some again and felt better. Not as great as the first times, though. Well, there was enough for another two doses and then Bart ran out. And that was that.”

Dr. Crusher nodded. “Yes, you said it had been about six weeks since your last dose. Do you have any idea why Tamara proved somewhat more susceptible than you?”

His fingers twisted around the sheet so thoroughly, it looked like it would rip. Suddenly, tears rolled down his cheeks.

“She gave me the last dose we had,” he whispered, “before we really knew what would happen.”

Everyone was silent. Deanna Troi continued to hold his hand.

“Well,” Dr. Crusher returned to business, “as I said, I can fix it. But I can’t cure it yet.” She took a small white pill out of a vial and loaded it into the

hypospray. "Here's the fix. You'll be the first to know when we find the cure."

For a while it looked like the silently weeping man was going to refuse his medicine. But, slowly, he allowed Dr. Crusher to inject it and turned his face to the wall.

"I'll come and visit as often as I can," promised Troi. He did not turn to look at them before they left, but he nodded his head where he lay.

Out in the corridor, a very grim Dr. Crusher said,
"Now for that Bart."

They got lost and glimpsed Data deep in conference with Tamma, before they bumped into someone who showed them the way.

The door was open to Dr. Mordthun's office, and he came out as they approached.

"Ah," he said slowly, looking embarrassed. "I am sorry to take up your time, Doctor, when there are so many pressing needs. It's just that I'm very concerned about my young friend. Very concerned." He glanced back toward his office apprehensively, as if he expected something sudden to happen any second, an explosion perhaps. "I must say, when you called and said he should be watched, I thought it was not really necessary. But I've had a terrible time keeping him in my office. I begin to think you were right, and that he would have disappeared again. May I ask what he has done?"

There was silence until Counselor Troi said,
"Something very stupid, I'm afraid."

Dr. Mordthun looked relieved. "Oh. That is nothing new for our friend Bart, of course. I'm glad it's not worse."

"Counselor Troi is being diplomatic," said Dr. Crusher austere. "It seems to be much worse."

"Oh dear. Oh dear. Please don't be too hard on him. He's a young man of considerable promise. It's just these last few months that he's sometimes been suddenly sullen or forgetful. It may have been that disease. Or, maybe, as Jane maintains, he needs a vacation."

"I think he'll get one," Dr. Crusher said, no less thinly than before. Well-meaning Dr. Mordthun followed them anxiously with his eyes as they entered his office.

Bart Higgon turned with a visible gulp as he saw who was coming in. Then he put on a sad attempt at carefree friendliness.

"Hi! Good to see you again."

He was sitting at an L-shaped desk, so that when Counselor Troi sat down on a chair between him and the door and Dr. Crusher planted herself on the perpendicular part of the desk, likewise between him and the door, there was no way he could hope to make a run for it. He looked more and more nervous.

"Why," demanded Dr. Crusher without any preliminaries, "did you let Tamara Kenshin die?"

"Huh? What? What are you talking about?" With an effort he suppressed a

nervous giggle.

"You know *exactly* what I'm talking about," said Dr. Crusher in a controlled but brittle fury.

But Mr. Higgon persisted in saying Huh? and What? in between nervous giggles that could no longer be suppressed.

"Bart." Deanna Troi's quiet voice cut through the tension in the room. He stopped giggling. "There's really no point lying. We know about the drug. We know how it acts. We know you had it. We know you have it now because you're not sick again. If you just tell the truth and help us as much as you can, it'll help you too."

Bart looked hunted, betrayed and angry, all at once.

"I, I was trying to *help* you, because you seemed different. If you didn't need help, you could have said so."

"The first rule of interplanetary travel is not to put strange things in your mouth – or your skin," said Counselor Troi quietly. "We were looking for the cause of your colleagues' condition. Any bit of information might help. It turned out that one did. The point is, you knew that all the time. If you didn't feel you could tell us, why didn't you at least save Tamara's life?"

Bart looked sullenly at the floor.

"I didn't know it would go that far," he muttered. "I thought they'd just be sick for a while and then get better."

"And when Tamara just got worse?" Troi asked.

"Well, how was I to know?" he cried, splashing his arms up in the air. "By that time I didn't know if anything would help her."

"Really?" asked Troi, with an edge to her voice.

He looked at her. Suddenly his face collapsed into a grimace of pain.

"Well, for God's sake, when I found out you could die without it, I had to keep what I had, didn't I? I just *had* to. What if I couldn't get any more?" He held his arms crossed rigidly over his stomach, his hands in fists.

"When did you find out you could die without it?"

"A couple of days after you guys arrived," he mumbled.

"You gave it to me, but you didn't say anything when you found out."

"Oh, a little bit doesn't hurt." Bart sounded like he was trying to convince himself most of all.

"How much does hurt?" asked Troi.

"Um, at least several times, I would imagine. Reddle told me a little bit never hurt."

"And you believed him?" Troi was unable to keep a note of incredulity out of her voice. This young man was supposed to be intelligent, after all.

"Well, I didn't see why it shouldn't be true," he mumbled at the floor. "It's true of a little bit of most things."

Deanna Troi stared at the yawning gulf of the boy's thoughtlessness. It was big enough to swallow any amount of intelligence and make him one of the stupidest people she'd ever met.

“Does Reddle take it too?” she asked.

“Don’t know.”

Dr. Crusher had a mystery of her own she wanted cleared up. “Where did you get the hypospray to administer it? Also from the prospectors?”

Bart wouldn’t look at her. He stared at the floor, and muttered, “Don’t need a hypospray. Dermapatch works just as well. And slower so it lasts longer.”

He looked up at Counselor Troi.

“What’s going to happen to me now?” he asked desperately, the wild light of panic in his eyes.

“Dermapatch,” said Crusher, following her own train of thought. “Three hundred year old technology and I didn’t think of it! Where do you wear it?”

But Bart wasn’t listening to her. “What’s going to happen?” he pleaded.

Troi answered, “The drug is not listed as illegal in the Federation code since it is unknown. You were ignorant of its full effects at the outset. I expect you’ll be charged with criminal negligence for withholding a lifesaving substance, because you did know about that. A good lawyer will probably argue youth, as well as the fact that you were trapped by your own condition. You will likely be placed in a low security facility, probably with mandatory rehabilitation.”

Counselor Troi’s frank and factual exposition of his legal situation seemed to crack open a wall in Bart Higgon. He unclenched his fists and sank his face in his hands. She felt him flailing against the thought of criminal charges.

“If I were you,” she continued, “I would take a rehab program whether it was part of the sentence or not. I’ll be blunt. Anyone who could let a friend die like that needs it.”

She stood up to leave, so the doctor could start her examination. “There are two things we need from you,” said Counselor Troi. “One is that you will not leave this camp until word comes back from the judiciary regarding your trial. The other is that you let the Doctor examine you and that you answer her questions.” The latter was a pointed reference to the ignored dermapatch query.

Bart finally raised his head. He looked years older already. He stared at Troi, as if she was the last thing he’d see before going blind, and nodded slowly.

“Yes,” he said.

Dr. Crusher started a lengthy tricorder scan, and Deanna Troi went to see what Data and Tamma had discovered about the burial crystals.

T’pel had joined Data and Tamma at the large-screen terminal. Troi remembered that deciphering the ancient script was the Director’s specialty and wondered whether her presence here meant that she’d made progress.

“Counselor,” Data greeted her in that formal, yet pleasant, way of his. “I was hoping you would come by. I think we know what the burial crystals are at this point.” He looked a question at Dr. Tamma, who only shrugged her shoulders. “We are still not quite sure, because we cannot get the references to them deciphered properly.”

“Can you get them deciphered at all?” asked Deanna.

“Yes, Counselor Troi,” said T’pel gravely. “About two days ago there was a breakthrough –”

“– and she hasn’t slept since,” interrupted Tamma.

“– so that we are finally making some progress. Ironically, it was an artifact from the late Armarian that gave me the clue. I finally realized that a jumble of symbols in one book was intended as a key to a series of pictographs of common objects or concepts, with the diminutive pictograph followed by its meaning in one or two words. It is much like our use of icons on computer screens to summarize certain entities conveniently –”

“Ah, I see.” Troi stepped in smoothly when she felt a comma coming, without seeming to interrupt, “And what has this allowed you to learn about the burial crystals?”

“We are still trying to extract the meaning from the script to see whether it agrees with my calculations,” answered Data. “You recall that the crystals reacted to sound. As we experimented, it soon became clear that they reacted to specific sounds, which were always pure tones. It occurred to me to measure their light energy output as a function of the sound energy input. There was always a precise relationship. This implied a physical rather than a mental interaction. A brief check of memory indicated that the simplest explanation of the observed data was sonoluminescence.”

Dr. Tamma’s ready smile shone on Counselor Troi as she said, “Yes, that was my reaction to his so-called explanation. ‘Sono- what?’ Apparently, it’s just a matter of absorbing energy and re-radiating it in a different form.”

“Oh,” said Troi, disappointed. “So it’s sort of like hitting a metal gong with a hammer and converting mechanical energy to sound. Nothing to do with a contained soul.”

“That’s right,” said Dr. Tamma. “But we figure if that’s the case, then the references to the burial crystals ought to speak of them as purely ritual objects. The point is, we’ve deciphered the words for burial crystals, but we haven’t deciphered enough of the rest to be really sure of what they’re saying about them. It’s very frustrating.”

Watching her, bending patiently over the recalcitrant symbols, you wouldn’t have known she was frustrated. Slowly and steadily the trio kept building up new letters and new words based on the few already known.

“This,” pointed out Director T’pel to Counselor Troi, “is the symbol for tufty, and this is the word for them. Dr. Mills tells me you have a special affinity for the animals.”

Troi studied the indicated symbols carefully. “Oh! Here they are again. And here. And there.”

“Yes, there are a great many references to them. They were clearly a very important animal to the local civilization. Unfortunately, I cannot understand the context. I don’t know whether they were ritual animals, or whether they ate them, or made clothes of their pelts. It’s just not clear. They are

continually coupled with a word which means, as far as I can tell, something like 'one-who-dilutes', and sometimes with 'death'. Did they dilute something and use it to kill the animals? Or was it, perhaps, a special fluid used in rituals? I just can't seem to find the clue."

In a flash of insight that came out of nowhere, Deanna Troi knew the answer.

"It means 'one who shares'," she said with absolute certainty.

"Shares? What do you mean, 'shares'?"

So Deanna, at some length, told Director T'pel and Dr. Tamma about the events on the hillside. "That," she concluded, "is why I think it means Sharer."

"Well-l," murmured Dr. T'pel slowly, "that throws a new light on the question. And yes, look, if this means 'sharer', then this word here must mean 'division', and this one should be 'entirety'. Now that implies that these two letters together mean negation ... " She was off and running. The computers, given the basic data, started churning out probable grammars and etymologies, even as T'pel hunted down more words.

Dr. Crusher came in, looking tired, but Troi was hoping she wouldn't insist on beaming up immediately. There was still a critical question for T'Pel.

"Do you think you might have enough information now to read some of the passages concerning burial crystals?"

"Let's try it. Let's try it," said T'pel with positive eagerness, despite her Vulcan heritage. But then, curiosity was the one acceptable emotion.

Rapidly she looked at places where the crystal symbol was repeated. "This just discusses production of the actual crystal, I think. Nothing here. Or here. Wait. Here it says they 'got the plans from the sky'! Could they have had contact with a *katra*-using race?"

"Maybe they're real engrams after all," said Troi.

"Yes, definitely," T'pel said firmly, "this is a star pictograph followed by the star word, for emphasis perhaps, and the passage says the burial crystals came from the stars. Now then ... " she tinkered a bit with the computer, which was having some problems with the next passage. Suddenly it scrolled smoothly up.

"No. Look. This whole passage talks only about how far they have to go before they can ever hope to imitate the star people. The burial crystals, it says, never speak to them like the ones on the cases – no, that must be 'ships'."

The initial euphoria at being on the brink of enlightenment, turned to letdown. At least it did for Troi. For the scientists, it was enough that they'd cracked the language.

"See, here," said Tamma pointing, "it talks about the crystals emitting light. Sad, isn't it? Barking up the wrong tree, as they seem to have with their whole civilization."

"And here are further references to tufties and Sharers," said T'Pel, eagerly following another set of symbols. "Now here, they often appear in passages

concerning death —.”

Suddenly all three Starfleet communicators chimed. The doctor answered.

“Crusher here.”

The Captain’s voice could be heard. “If you and the others are ready, Doctor, please beam up. Lieutenant LaForge, with help from Ndaitur and T’zaak, has finally broken the interference of the cloaking device. We can clean up the prospectors’ camp as soon as your medical work allows.”

“We’re on our way,” said the doctor.

Chapter 16

Troi rematerialized all by herself in a cargo transporter room on the next to lowest level of the Enterprise. She glanced around, apprehensive, and was slowly moving to activate her comm pin and find out where everyone was. If they weren't anywhere, a large part of her didn't want to know. Before she'd forced herself to stop procrastinating, the Transporter Chief's voice came through, loud and clear.

"Counselor Troi? Respond pl—"

"Right here, Chief O'Brien. I'm in cargo hold three. What happened?"

"Damned if I know." He sounded frustrated and very unlike himself. "Dr. Crusher showed up near Ten Forward, and Lieutenant Commander Data materialized inside one of the yeast vats. He's getting cleaned up now."

"What! We're supposed to be beaming back down shortly."

"You may be taking shuttles, if I can't vouch for the equipment."

"Believe me," muttered Deanna, as she marched toward the turbolift, "I'd rather take the shuttle, in that case."

She met the Captain and Beverly outside transporter room three, where she should have been to begin with. The doctor was bringing the Captain up to date.

"—as in the simulation. Meanwhile, Jones is stabilized, as is Higgon. He's staying put on his own recognizance."

The Captain looked a bit surprised.

"Oh, he'll stay. I made it clear to him his only supply of the drug is from us, since the prospectors' side business is going to be closed down."

"Depending how long it takes to find a cure," Picard noted, "the small amount we have may not be enough for all the addicts we find. An important priority, once all the culprits are arrested, is to find out how the drug is made."

Dr. Crusher tossed her head.

"It took us, what? a week? to unravel this disease. A cure shouldn't take more than a few days, right? And I'm going to turn that prospectors' dome upside down the minute I'm there."

"No, Doctor," said the Captain gravely. "You will not. A doctor is not essential to arresting criminals. I doubt you've had a ten minute nap in thirty six hours. You will go to your quarters and sleep. Captain's orders."

Beverly Crusher opened her mouth to retort, but there was just the faintest glimmer of amusement in Picard's eyes. Deanna could feel the doctor's incorruptible sense of what was right agree with him.

"Yes, sir," was all Dr. Crusher said as she left the room.

"Any progress on the transporter problem?" the Captain asked O'Brien.

"I've done ten test transports in a row, and they've all been fine. Intermittent faults are the worst. And I don't understand it. I've done all the scheduled maintenance, system checks, everything."

"There have been several reports from around the ship of unexplained glitches. And when we were telling that latest Orion to back off, Lieutenant Worf reported a temporary problem in phaser targeting. Happily, they didn't know about it."

"Och, gonch," O'Brien muttered.

"However," continued the Captain, "if the equipment here has stabilized, we should proceed with beamdown. I want those perpetrators arrested as soon as possible. Unless, a shuttle is really necessary, I think speed is of the essence."

"Well, everything checks out at this point, sir."

Wonderful, thought Deanna. Not only was there that dome to worry about, she might also arrive minus potentially essential bits. The only good thing was the absence of any other empaths who would know she was in a funk.

The other good thing was that even the teleporter was a minor worry compared to the fear of losing her mind again at the dome. She'd taken some syndynine, as per Beverly's instructions, but not a lot. The whole point was for her to locate the source that the tufties were amplifying. She knew now that the burial crystals couldn't be the source. It had to be a being in agony somewhere in that dreadful dome.

Worf marched in with sixteen, sixteen!, security guards. None of them looked at all worried about losing their minds.

Deanna sighed. She didn't often regret being Betazoid, but there were times when it would be much easier to be more blind.

She tried to concentrate on the task at hand. She would be among the first to beam down, with Data, Worf, and the first set of guards. The next set would follow immediately, everyone targeted to specific life signs detected from the Enterprise. After she had found the source of the pain, she was to help search for any hidden people. Everyone who wasn't Conyer or Carlyle was to be beamed back to the Enterprise, straight to the brig, and then the Captain would sort the innocent from the arrested.

It sounded simple, but she would have bet her next home leave that it wasn't going to work that way.

Data arrived, without a fleck on him and yet exuding a very organic aroma. Troi hid a smile as she felt the transporter beam take effect.

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She was supposed to be in the hallway outside the hidden lab, together with Data. She was in something that looked like a cafeteria. She was alone. Where, if anywhere, was everyone? The creeping fear of ordinary attack disappeared in a wave of pain as the spirit of the place hit her. She'd been expecting it, though, and she would have been able to stay on top of it if there wasn't also an awful panic. It was more than agony now. It was ... she didn't know what it was. It pressed on her like a curtain of supple lead, suffocating her ability to think.

The important thing was to get rid of it. To destroy it. To kill it.

Then Data appeared at the door.

"Oh, there you are," he said pleasantly, as if they were visiting museums together. The polite normality of his tone was like a cold shower. The world fell back into something comprehensible.

"Something must be wrong with transporter targeting," he was saying. "We are in one piece, but in the wrong place." He thumbed his comm badge. "Chief O'Brien?"

"O'Brien here."

"Where do you read our positions?"

There was a moment of shocked silence. "But my readings said it was a normal beamdown! Most of the security guards appear to have materialized outside the dome. They're headed in. Lieutenant Worf is 42 meters south-southeast of you. One other guard is in the vicinity. Lieutenant Worf appears headed for the lab."

"Do not proceed with further transportation. We will head for the lab too. Data out."

He walked unerringly in the direction of the lab. Troi followed as closely as she could. What she really wanted was to hold someone's hand, but Will wasn't here, and Data might not understand. She took a deep breath, swallowed at the same time, and choked. She fought down a cough. They had to be quiet! But she couldn't stop it. The small cough sounded like a muffled explosion in the echoing corridors.

Instantly someone leaped out of a partly opened door ahead. Her eyes were staring, her hair stuck out every which way, she held a phaser sample-taker in her hand, pointed straight at them.

In the moment it took Deanna to see this, Data had already fired his own phaser, and the figure crumpled to the floor.

"Search her, please," Data requested of Troi, having already removed everything she carried.

It took only a minute. "Nothing hidden," said Troi.

"We cannot leave her here," said Data, "especially since we have only a half-complement of personnel. We will have to risk beam-up." He thumbed his

comm badge. "Chief O'Brien?"

"O'Brien here."

"One to beam up, directly to the brig. She may need psychiatric attention once there." The figure at their feet dissolved and Data and Troi continued on their way. The corridors were strangely deserted.

As she walked, Deanna felt the panicked agony soak through her shielding again. The more it permeated her, the more she recognized it, until she knew it for what it was. Endless, overwhelming, pure rage. She gasped silently and clutched her head. Data did not see her, since she was behind him.

Wildly, Troi's eyes darted everywhere to find the person whose mind hated her so much. What was he, or she?, or it?, going to do to her? In her frenzy, she doubted Data. You could never feel him. The gods only knew what he was thinking. Maybe he was –

Then he turned to her. "It should be down that passageway there," he said as if he was finding his way through a library.

Once more, Deanna's world fell back into place. What had she been thinking of? This was yet another madness in this place. It wasn't just pain and fear anymore. Now it was attack, as well. She hurried to catch up to Data, to let him know about this added danger, when she caught a movement out of the corner of her eye. She wheeled and reached for her phaser. She couldn't help it.

But it was only Lieutenant Worf and the security guard. Troi removed her hand from her phaser and relaxed with difficulty.

"Counselor?" said Worf, puzzled.

Troi had never seen him surprised by an aggressive reaction before.

"It's – it's this place. In addition to pain, it now emanates fury. It could drive you mad. Be very careful of the people around here."

Worf looked at her significantly.

"Indeed. That may explain the difficult arrest we just completed back there. Even when we had him, he still tried to flail at us and beat us with his bare fists. I have ordered the other security guards to use their explosive charges on the main door. We should hear them entering soon. Meanwhile, let us get our business finished."

The trititanium door was closed, and it still showed the scorch marks of the earlier firefight. The plan had been to arrest the Perilloux first and have them open the door. So much for plans. They'd have to go through the wall. It couldn't all be trititanium.

After much interaction between Data and his tricorder, he found a seam in the reinforced wall material. The security guard shouldered his phaser cannon and burned holes where he was told to. A few shaped charges were inserted, they all drew back and Worf detonated the charges with his phaser. There was a gaping hole in the wall.

Everyone waited, Troi holding her breath. An eerie stillness emanated from the room, as if it was not empty.

Worf stood, barely moving a muscle, yet radiating disquiet. His frown grew deeper. Finally he said, very softly,

“There is someone in there. Tricorder, Data.”

Data tried it, but promptly shook his head. As quietly as Worf, he said,

“This still cannot read anything in the immediate proximity of the cloaking device, so it tells us nothing definite.”

“Counselor?” said Worf.

But she shook her head emphatically. *You expect me to feel one person in the midst of emotions that reach all the way to orbit? You must be joking.*

Worf squared his shoulders and stepped forward. He sprang through the opening with a bonechilling Klingon battle cry, deafening after the silence. He'd covered the whole room with his phaser before the echoes died away, but still nobody emerged. At least, nobody with weapons. Data stepped through the gap.

Then Troi.

Like a wall, it hit her. She'd known it would, but this time that didn't help, because this was it. This was the source. But there was nothing here. The nothing was going to kill her. She wondered whether anyone had ever died of madness. The ability to wonder anything began to slip.

No. She would not let it take her this time. She felt the security guard picking her up. Had she fallen?

She looked, blank with terror, at the strange lab. There were tubes everywhere. They had liquid in them. They led to things that looked like bassinets.

“What is this place?” she heard Worf say, disgusted. “Some sort of hospital for tufties?”

What was inside those bassinet things? She had to see what was inside them. The security guard was holding her arm. Why was he—finally he moved, so she could too. She looked inside.

The tubes went to a tufty. She saw its wide, staring eyes and drowned in all the terror in the world. Her own scream rang forever in her ears.

She heard Worf bellowing, “DOWN!” but it meant nothing.

A lanky white wraith of a man had been hiding somewhere. He had shot at someone, or perhaps it was everyone, or maybe it was just her. He'd reached the gap in the wall and disappeared through it.

“Disruptor!” she heard Worf growl. He barked instructions into his comm for the security guards outside to catch the man and avoid his lethal gun.

Data was telling O'Brien to beam T'ren down. “I am aware of the problems, Chief O'Brien, but it is essential to stabilize the Counselor's condition.”

“I'm all right,” she said. For some reason, she was sitting on the floor.

“There is also,” Data was continuing, “equipment here which connects to a number of animals via a tube at the back of the neck. I am not aware of major blood vessels in the region, so the tube connects to something else. Given the clearness of the fluid, it could be either lymph or spinal fluid. If the

latter, it will require medical training to disconnect them.”

“Do you want me to get Crusher?” she heard the tiny voice, so far away, on Data’s comm.

“Dr. Crusher should be sleeping. Please send Dr. T’reen.” Data removed his communicator and placed it on the floor. “Send the person to my communicator coordinates, without using the targeting system.”

Within moments Dr. T’reen had beamed into the room. Data nodded slightly in satisfaction and picked up his communicator.

“I’m *all right*, I tell you,” said Troi fiercely when the doctor approached her first. “That is what is not all right.” She nodded her head toward one of the bassinet-things, unable to look at it. “Deal with that first. That’s an order.”

She saw T’reen look around the room suddenly and quickly, in an un-Vulcan way.

“There is something very wrong here,” he said. He walked up to the first tufty and began to take readings. He reached out to turn the tufty to see where the tubes were attached.

He jumped back, as if he’d been burned.

“It is as the Counselor says. This is what is wrong.” He hesitated, almost as if he was struggling with feelings. “The equipment removes cerebrospinal fluid. The creatures are terrified and reduced fluid in the brain causes pain and delirium. They are in a nightmare psychosis. Counselor Troi’s reports noted that these creatures are in empathic contact with each other and amplify each other. You see the result.” He still held his hand away from himself, as if it actually hurt.

Into the stillness, Worf growled,

“They are sucking those creatures brains out to make their filthy drug. Now I wish we were in the Empire, so we could deal with those scum as they deserve.”

The Vulcan healer-in-training glanced at the enraged Klingon, but turned to Data.

“Could you handle the creatures for me, sir? Then we can see what we can do for them.”

Worf marched around the room, looking for other hidden people. There were none.

“The other guards should have been here long ago,” he muttered. “Something is wrong.” Then, after looking at Troi, he said in a very different voice, “Counselor, we must get you away from here. I will carry you.”

When she didn’t immediately object, he picked her up as easily as if she’d been one of the delirious tufties. They were all the way outside the dome before he set her down. She imagined this was how shipwrecked people must feel when they washed up somewhere, alive, of all things.

There was nobody there. Not a sign of any security guards, nor of anyone else. The whole atmosphere thrummed with danger.

Worf sensed it instantly, barked an order to the one guard with them, and

threw himself on the ground. Deanna was already there. She could feel the minds aiming for them. She just didn't know where they were.

Judging by the phaser beams that went through the spaces where their heads had been, they – whoever they were – were hiding behind the neatly parked flitters and shuttlecraft.

Worf and the guard pinned the hidden shooters immediately, and Worf gave an order to fall back, putting the dome between them and the crazy people with the phasers.

That's when they found out where all the security guards had gone. Now they were all stuck back there, unable to see the flitters or shoot without being seen, and needing only two crazies to keep them there while the rest did God-only-knew-what. Worf was cursing in a quiet grumble to himself. But even Troi knew there hadn't been anywhere else to take cover in the empty landscape. The clumps of bush grass or thorn scrub wouldn't do much for you once the phaser fire was flying.

Worf had thumbed his comm pin, but one of the security guards said,

“Can't reach them, sir. No way to beam in or –”

“LaForge here,” said a voice.

Worf just looked at the guard who'd spoken, but Troi knew it had been the truth.

“Beam down every available guard in a ring around the people hidden in those flitters,” he said to LaForge.

“Sorry, Worf. We've got intermittent faults all across the board right now. The problem affects all systems that need targeting. Data said if you have something to lock on to and then beam –.”

The signal vanished into static.

One of the guards trying to keep watch on the flitters shot her phaser suddenly, and someone sprinted back toward the vehicles.

Troi wondered whether this might be a time to use empathic amplification, if she could reach far enough into the ether to speak to, as well as feel, all the tufties' minds. She remembered how they had caught her anger –.

Suddenly, she knew where the violence all around her came from. It had been hers once. What would the animals learn if she used them, with intent, as weapons?

Besides, she thought, violent rage was the problem here, which meant it probably wasn't the solution.

“They are trying to drive us into a single point behind the dome,” said Worf, as another couple of shots whined near their hiding place. “No doubt, so they can kill us all at once, with the least resistance. We must spread as far around this side as we can.”

“Already done, sir,” said the guard. “Molino and Kobayashi are keeping watch on the other side.”

Worf nodded his approval, but kept scowling. “They only need two people to keep us busy, while the rest can try to surround us. Without

reinforcements, it is only a matter of time.”

Troi knew that for him it was a simple statement of fact. He had no qualms, and he expected his guards to have none. But she could feel his worry about her.

“It’s all right, Worf,” she said quietly, so that only he could hear as she crouched next to him. “The pain is going away.”

He gave her a significant glance. “The Lieutenant Commander and the doctor are being successful?”

She nodded. “That’s how it feels.” She gave him a faint smile as she quoted the Klingon battle saying. “It is a good day to die.”

He grinned in that hideously fierce Klingon way, until the points of his teeth showed.

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Jack and Betsy just barely reached her room and piled all the furniture against the door.

Now what?

They’d already tried calling the Enterprise. It was the first thing they’d done, and it got them nothing but static. Then they’d tried to find Ion Arvida, but he’d disappeared. After Pulvi changed from one of the boys to something else, it seemed stupid to assume co-workers would help.

“Everybody’s gone all strange,” Betsy had said, after they’d hidden from yet another wild-eyed former colleague with a phaser. “I vote we hole up till Starfleet has this mopped up. This is insane.”

“Insane is right,” Jack had muttered, as another phaser whined in the distance, coming closer. “If there was some way to help ..., but this just looks like a way of getting killed.”

Then, from inside Betsy’s room, they felt as well as heard the muffled thuds of big explosions right inside the dome somewhere.

“Christ,” said Jack.

“Not much point shoving the furniture against the door, if they blow the whole dome up,” said Betsy.

The explosions were followed by silence. Inside Betsy’s room, they couldn’t hear any phasers. There were no running feet outside the door. No shouts. Nothing.

“Want to try the comm?” asked Betsy. “See if anyone knows anything?”

“And get Lee pretending he’s the man in the moon and we should come out and see if he’s made of green cheese. I don’t think so.”

“I – I just wish we were safe,” said Betsy in a small voice.

“I know how you feel,” said Jack. “I wish I had something to suggest.”

“We could try to make it to the tornado shelter,” she said dubiously.

“I’ve never even been down there. What’s it like?”

“It’s actually pretty big, since all of us are supposed to be able to weather a catastrophe down there. It’s about the size of an ordinary living room back on Earth. Bunks along the walls, canned goods everywhere.”

“And no can opener, probably. Well, if you want to try it, let’s go ahead. I’m getting the heeby-jeebies, sitting here, listening to nothing.”

They pulled the furniture back from the door. There was still nothing going on when they cautiously stuck their heads outside. They ran down the corridor, stopped at the intersection, and looked. Nobody. They ran again, stopped, and looked. The whole dome seemed to be deserted. They ran down the last corridor, opened the door leading to the stairs down to the emergency shelter, and went down. The tunnel went for some distance underground, since the shelter had to be sited away from the dome. As they approached the reinforced door, they slowed down, and then stopped.

Someone inside was pounding on it.

Jack and Betsy looked at each other. How many crazies had the dome spawned?

“We gotta find out who it is,” whispered Jack. “If they sound like someone locked them up in there because they’re insane, I guess we just go back.” He took a deep breath, hesitated, and then shouted,

“Simmer down in there! Who is that?”

There was a whole cacophony of shouts and cries and poundings on the door in response.

“Christ. That sounds like half the camp.”

“Maybe it’s the sane half. Maybe that’s why we couldn’t find anyone.”

“Do they sound sane?” asked Jack, pointing his head toward the hooting and gibbering.

“Well,” said Betsy, “they seem to be locked in there. It should be safe enough to talk to them through the door.”

Jack repeated his shout to simmer down, this time right up against the door. “Who the hell is in there? One at a time!”

Betsy had her ear against the thick, ceramic carbon-fiber door. Her eyes grew wider.

“Ion! Sounds like him, what’s more. How do we get this door open?”

After a good bit more yelling back and forth across the dense door, it turned out that the mechanism had been fried shut with a phaser blast. It would have to be cut open.

“You just hang in there,” shouted Jack. “I’ll get every pickaxe, saw, and blaster out of the closest lab.”

“He says, ‘Where else does he think we’ll hang?’” said Betsy with a grin. “Definitely Ion in there.”

Jack sprinted away, and returned minutes later with an arsenal. The buzz saw took several minutes to cut the whole door mechanism away. The ponderous door finally swung open, the captives came piling out, and Jack

told them they could just pile right back in.

“We came here because it sounded like they’re blowing the dome up.”

“Why am I not surprised,” said Ion. “Probably destroying the evidence.”

“What evidence?”

“How should I know? But with Starfleet all over the place, they must be after some kind of evidence.”

“So what happened to you folks?” Betsy wanted to know.

Jack saw Joanne in there, his direct supervisor, holding a tissue to a cut on her face. Trillian was there, looking pink, blond, and as English as ever, not a hair out of place on his droopy mustache.

“It was my fault,” Ion Arvida was saying. “Everybody was so jumpy. I thought it would be a good idea to gather, try to keep our spirits up together. So there were several of us in the cafeteria, when Mike Reddle and about three other people with phasers came in saying the dome had to be evacuated. I asked what the problem was and he said the so-called spies had sabotaged it. Well, he had a phaser, so I didn’t argue, but, I mean to say, as if nobody would have noticed a pack of uniforms sneaking around planting mines. Anyway, it seemed to me best to play along until he had something else to do with his phaser. They started herding us off, and I said we should check the whole dome if it needed to be evacuated, but he seemed to be in a hurry. Apparently, stupid old Ion had collected enough of the people on his list into one place. So they made us come here, burned the door shut, and disappeared.”

“Whatever is going on, Ion, it’s not just paranoia,” said Jack. “There’s a warrant out for Ashley’s arrest.”

“Hells bells,” said Trillian. “What’s the old baggage done?”

“Interfered with Starfleet, at the very least. Why, I don’t know,” said Jack.

“Why didn’t you folks go out the other exit?” asked Betsy. “There’s supposed to be an exit straight out to the surface.” She looked around, and pointed at the rungs fastened quite visibly into the far wall.

Ion Arvida looked at her with an old and tired smile.

“*Prietena*,” he said, reverting to his native Romanian as he did sometimes when stirred, “we are not all as smart as you, but we are not totally stupid either. They phasered that shut too. And they obviously prepared this room before they trapped us, because there wasn’t one single thing in here we could use to cut our way out. So,” he smiled at Betsy’s red and embarrassed expression, “even though you ask silly questions, we are very glad to see you.”

“I should’ve know –” she began, when Jack interrupted.

“If there’s another way out, what are we waiting for?” He shouldered his trusty buzz saw, climbed up the rungs and disappeared into the man-sized vertical tunnel leading to the surface. A short while later there was cursing and muttering and a fine layer of dust filtering down as he cut through the cover.

“I’ll volunteer for first look,” said Trillian. “My kind of color blends in rather

well with the landscape.”

Jack didn't argue. All contributions gratefully accepted, he thought, especially when they involved the risk of getting your head blown off.

“Quite a bit of scrub around here, actually,” he called down. “It should be safe enough to come out. I don't see anyone around the dome. Or around the shuttles, for that matter. I wonder where they all went?”

Slowly, and more or less laboriously, everyone emerged from the underground bunker and hid behind thorn bushes. Jack couldn't help feeling like a cat hiding behind a blade of grass on the lawn. What he wanted was a bombproof concrete barricade.

“They're going to be around those flitters,” said Ion. “Have to be.”

“Why do you say that?” asked Joanne.

“Because that is where people go when they want to escape from the law.”

The next moment he was proved right. A shot of phaser fire erupted toward the dome, and an answering shot came back, both useless.

“The Starfleeters must be back there,” said Jack.

“Let's make sure, before we help one side over the other,” said Ion, the cautious.

Betsy slunk off, saying she was good at that sort of thing. It helped, Jack supposed, that it wouldn't take too big a blade of grass to hide her, but he still hated to see her go. She was back in minutes.

“All uniforms back there. It's Starfleet, all right.”

The next step was obvious. Circle around till they were on the outside of the crazies, and then start shooting, at which point Starfleet should come out of hiding and finish them off.

“Remember,” said Ion. “Shoot at an angle, like this.” He drew a diagram in the sand. “You don't want to be straight behind them when Starfleet starts firing.”

Jack wondered if Ion really had been in the Foreign Legion before he came to this even more God-forsaken outpost.

Carefully, the seven of them spread out and crept forward. He could see Betsy, a little ways ahead, drifting like smoke from grass thickets to thorn bushes. If she'd wanted to bag tufties, she would have been the top hunter as well as the best prospector. He'd have to ask her where she learned it, assuming this all ended well. Then, as he went back to thinking about what he was going to do next, he realized that they hadn't arranged for any way to coordinate their attack. It was going to be a mess and no mistake.

Crouched down behind an all-too-see-through thorn bush, he tried to make sure none of the “enemy” were in a position to spot him. These were people he'd been working with just a few days ago. He couldn't get over it. And that was when he noticed a couple of them, sneaking along, almost at the Starfleet side of the dome. Another few steps and they'd have a clear shot at the backs of several people wearing gold shirts. The guy in front was lifting a phaser drill into position. That would slag everyone at once.

Christ. No time to wait for signals. Jack sprayed a tight horizontal arc of fire from his phaser-sampler at the pair. He'd never shot the thing at a distance. He just hoped something hit those two. And that the lowest setting didn't kill them.

He saw one of the guys jerk, and then there was no time. Everyone was firing, yelling, hitting the ground, and firing again. Jack saw the Klingon come charging out from behind the dome, shrieking like a demon and looking nothing like any uncle he'd ever seen. Jack managed to wound two "enemies" in the microsecond of paralysis while they were transfixed by the apparition.

Suddenly he heard Betsy scream. His heart jumped into his throat, he whirled around to find her, to run to her —

She was racing for all she was worth, screaming and pointing at the medevac shuttle, arms flailing. Just in time, he realized she was screaming, "GET AWAY!"

The shuttle was going to lift off. If that was Ashley in there, it would lift off with maximum thrust and the ion exhaust would fry everyone to a crisp. He ran as fast as he could. Everywhere he looked, people were running.

The shuttle whooshed away with a huge whispering sound, as if a mountain-sized giant was telling them a secret. The swirling dust marked the passage of the superheated plasma.

And then, as they say, it was all over but the shouting. Starfleet rounded up the six prospectors who'd been giving them grief, only two of whom would have been in any position to offer resistance. One of those was Reddle, who, with his usual talent, had managed to keep himself safe. He was sitting on the ground under Worf's personal eye, and he was whining about the fact that the Perilloux would have turned him into a heap of cinders.

"I can't believe that. They just took off. They could have killed me. I don't think they even looked. I was —"

Jack boiled over. He'd had about as much from this pinhead as he could stand. He marched up to him, lifted him up by his sorry excuse for a shirt, and started shaking him like a rag doll.

"You goddamn ROACH!" he shouted in his face. "Everyone here could have been killed. They were probably *trying* to kill you. That's what I'd do. You —"

He felt a hand on his arm. It was the wild woman, except that she wasn't wild now. A silence flowed from her touch, a deep quiet. He put Reddle down. Well, to be honest, he dropped him, but he stopped shaking him.

"It's all right, Jack," she said, sounding like water on stone. "There are laws for people like him. The law will do more to him than you ever could."

It was true. He took a deep breath, swallowed, and saw Betsy coming up. He grabbed her in a hug, and tried to make sure he didn't break any ribs while he did it.

"You saved everyone's life," he whispered to her. "Everyone's."

"You probably didn't notice, Jack," she whispered back, "but so did you."

He felt the shock of the last few minutes ebbing away, and then the tension

of the last hours and days began to melt, too. He heard someone talking on Worf's communicator. There was something about how beaming up wouldn't be a problem, because everyone's signal would be locked to a comm on board ship.

"Data and T'ren came up that way half an hour ago. They were going to come out to help the rest of you, but the Captain ordered them up. We could see the *locos* had the door covered and they'd just get shot."

"If beam-up is a good risk, we are ready. Six guards will be accompanied by prisoners and should go directly to the brig. Four of them need medical attention, but provide that in the brig, unless Dr. Crusher objects."

Worf turned to Jack and the knot of prospectors clustered there. "If there is any sign of them coming back," he nodded toward the path the shuttle had followed, "let us know immediately. Or sooner."

"Never fear," said Ion Arvida. "We will need to talk with Captain Picard about —"

Just then, the Captain himself came on the air.

"I need all senior staff on the bridge. That new Orion ship is hanging off our starboard bow again."

"On our way," said Worf, as the transporter took them.

Chapter 17

Troi walked on to the bridge following Worf. The tension was thick enough to dig up with a spoon. It wasn't the tension of battle. It was the tension of frustration, of people who are going to start pounding their plastic consoles any minute.

Not Data, of course. He was sitting at his station, working at inhuman speed.

"What is happening, Captain?" she asked quietly, in a voice pitched to carry no further than his ears.

"The three captured Orions planted a virus that interferes with targeting. Data noticed those microbursts to the Orions, but even he didn't realize how important they were. He's trying to finish the decoding and neutralize the virus while there's still a ship left to save. Zeb there," he nodded toward the sleek Orion cruiser on the main screen, "said he'd destroy the former slaves' ship. We told him not to, so now he says he will destroy us first. Commander Riker's assessment is that it would take them two or three hundred hits to break through our shields. The former slave ship is hiding on the other side of the planet."

Troi nodded, and moved to sit at her station. It was the type of assignment she liked the least: staying hair-trigger ready to prevent blowouts, and yet doing nothing so that everyone's work proceeded without interruptions.

Lieutenant LaForge cursed at the Engineering station.

"*Goddamn* it! I missed that miserable shuttle *again*. I finally had the tractor beam locked on, and then it just slid off. Now it's out of range ... and headed toward our friend Zeb."

"I wonder if the Perilloux called these new Orions in to rescue them," said Riker suspiciously. "Seems like too much of a coincidence."

"No communication detected, sir," said one of the bridge personnel.

"Yeah," grumbled Riker. "There've been quite a few things we haven't detected lately. Starting with two crew triothened for hours before anyone noticed."

Don't do it, Will, thought Troi. *Not now*.

The shuttle, meanwhile, reached the Orion ship. The viewscreen showed the big ship's shuttle bay opening, and the little ship entering.

"They certainly know each other," said Riker.

“If we cannot use targeting,” said Worf at the weapons station, “we could use mass firing. Untargeted.”

The Captain nodded. “Hold that in reserve, Lieutenant.”

“Reserve, Captain? The pirates are arming everything they have. Phasers, photon torpedoes, and nuclear projectiles.”

“Maximum shields,” ordered the Captain. “Red alert.”

The Enterprise had enough firepower to destroy whole planets, but none of it could be aimed. The ship could outrun almost anything, but the navigation system might send them crashing into the planet. Troi would have given much, just then, to have her own plastic console to pound.

The Orions’ first shot shook the ship.

“Shields holding,” reported Worf.

“Try a spread of photon torpedoes,” ordered Picard.

None hit. The Orion ship danced around them like a mosquito, shooting at will.

“Another spread.”

One hit, and a faint cheer went up on the bridge.

“Their forward shield is at one third strength,” reported Worf.

Was that all they’d accomplished? The mood on the bridge sank again.

“Another salvo,” ordered the Captain. Troi could feel him thinking that it was important to have something to do.

More shots shook the bridge.

“Aft shield at 80%,” reported Worf.

Data suddenly stopped tapping his console at vision-blurring speed. He began to report.

“I have found a way of quarantining the virus from making new infections. I have recopied triangulation programs from deep backup. I have given navigation priority, followed by weapons systems. Navigation should be ready in 5.4 minutes.”

“Thank you, Data.”

The Orion ship was now pounding them from below, out of range of a weapons barrage, and simply hanging in one point in space, trying to destroy a section of shielding. Troi could feel everyone on the bridge, everyone on the whole ship except Data, think they probably didn’t have five minutes. Worf kept reading out continually decreasing shield strengths.

“Nuclear projectile firing mechanism being armed,” reported Worf.

Just one of those, on target, would terminally destroy the shield and the following missiles would explode the ship.

An ensign called out.

“Slaves’ ship emerging from behind the planet. Accelerating to full impulse. On an intercept course, sir. It will be here in ten seconds, sir.”

“Data,” said the Captain, “can you give me any weapons at all? Right now?”

“Slaves’ ship at a thousand kilometers and closing fast,” reported the ensign. “Ship has released a nuclear projectile. Oh my God!” he added,

unprofessionally. "There a person on it. A-a life sign, sir. An Orion life sign. Steering it."

On the screen, they could see a tiny dot like a bullet disappear into one of the warp nacelles of the Orion cruiser. For a surreal moment, nothing happened. Then the whole ship exploded in a fireball.

The Enterprise rocked with the impact, but the shields held.

"Shield strength at five percent," intoned Worf, but it no longer mattered.

The slaves' ship made a wide loop and returned to its usual station, in a lower orbit than the Enterprise, holding steady above the human camps.

There was silence on the bridge.

The silence broke when LaForge said,

"Shuttlecraft in the debris. Damaged but intact."

"Lifeforms?"

"Two humans."

"Get them."

"It's tumbling like crazy, but without power. It should just be a matter of time before we trap it." Indeed, about five minutes later, when the first targeting systems came back on line, he triumphantly cried, "Got it!"

"Message from Director T'pel," announced Worf.

Picard looked surprised, but said, "On screen."

"Ah, Captain. We saw falling fireballs in the sky and were concerned for your safety. I trust all is well?"

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The Captain, Riker, and Troi stopped by Data's quarters.

"We are going to question Leader Saranah," said the Captain. "I've thanked somebody named Donira on the former slaves' ship for their assistance, but neither of us mentioned their so-called Leader. We'll see how long it takes them to acknowledge her absence and her mission. Meanwhile, I would like you to accompany us, since you can provide real-time fact-checking."

"Certainly, sir," said Data. "I am just on the verge of deciphering the microbursts. Shall I finish that, or accompany you?"

"Finish, by all means," said the Captain. "I'm very curious to see what this tells us."

Data launched into a detailed lecture on randomness, frequency intervals, and statistical significance until the Captain said,

"Thank you, Data. And all this means ... what?"

Data condensed the rest down.

"Eventually, an obvious mathematical pattern presented itself. Signals are dispersed in reverse and inverse fibonacci intervals. Thus, the beginning of the message, which is usually the most thoroughly studied, has the least

information content.”

Troi managed to restrain herself from saying *Get on with it, Data*. He really did love puzzles.

“So you see,” he continued, “once I had the clue, it was a perfectly clear series of signals.”

Troi and Riker exchanged glances.

“If that mass of hen tracks on the screen is supposed to be a perfectly clear anything,” said Riker, “I’m a slimeworm’s uncle.”

“Well, yes, it is confusing because it is a reverse series,” agreed Data, though that was not what Riker had meant.

Meanwhile the computer, having been told where in the static the true message was hidden, deciphered the text in microseconds. “Completed” flashed up next to each of the microbursts in rapid succession.

“So-o, what have they been saying to each other,” said the Captain to himself, as he leaned in for a closer look. He loved puzzles too, especially when he won.

“I don’t know who’s stupider,” said Riker, scanning the messages as they scrolled up. “The one who thinks you can promise a planet to Orions and then not give it to them, or the one who thinks she’s actually going to get the planet. What a bunch of”

“I am not sure you are right, Commander,” said Data. “My assessment is that Ms. Perilloux’s intelligence must be quite high. She is an excellent programmer. My suggestion would be to make programming work part of her sentence.”

“You are quite right, Lieutenant,” said the Captain. Data acquired that slight extra stodginess, chin tucked in a tad, eyes even blanker, that meant everything computed perfectly. “But the Commander is right, too.”

Now Data looked puzzled, head cocked a bit to one side, as he did when something did not compute at all.

“It is true that she does not always operate with maximum efficiency. She did have a useless set of Orion control codes at the end of one message.”

“Is that what that gibberish is?” said Riker meditatively.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking, Number One?” asked Picard.

“I’m thinking Ms. Perilloux figured the virus would keep us occupied long enough for her to escape. And then when we deciphered it, we’d blame the Orions, thus getting us both out of her hair.”

“That’s how it looks to me, too,” said the Captain.

A final message scrolled up the screen. It was the same offer Ashley had made to Sarah, but this one was to Zeb, and the price was fighting the Enterprise rather than sabotaging the computers.

“An interesting couple, the Perillouxes,” said Riker. “Unfortunately, we won’t get to question them till we get medical clearance, after all the burn wounds and contusions they got.”

“I wonder what Leader Sarah will think of her allies’ tactics,” said Troi.

“Time to go and find out,” said the Captain, standing up. “Take hard copy with you, Lieutenant, in case the good Leader needs proof.”

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Leader Sarah sat on the bunk in her cell, one leg drawn up on the bed, the other stretched out. She tried to look careless, but her heart had despaired. She would be tortured, re-enslaved, or killed, or all three in sequence. To have come so far and then to end like this after all, it was a living hell worse than any other. At least she could comfort herself with the fact that it could not last long. She smiled slightly to herself at the irony of it all. So many years she had spent in terror of the *flierth* death ... and now she welcomed it. In its final act, the dread powder would be her friend instead of the enemy she had feared.

The monotony was briefly broken when a few more prisoners, humans, were brought in, allowing Sarah to occupy some time in studying them.

The guard, unfortunately female, had shown her the restricted access terminal in her cell so she could find information, entertainment and education programs. But Sarah had merely snarled. She was not about to debase herself by allowing these Federation swine to distract her from her anger and her despair.

Some more time went by and two new prisoners were brought in, requiring some of the earlier group to be moved elsewhere. The prison was the only thing on the Ship that was ridiculously tiny. She realized the woman was the useless Perilloux. And that ghost of a man must be her husband. Good, thought Sarah. When she grew tired of being bored, she could at least taunt them.

Then a group of people arrived whom Sarah recognized at once as the Picard, two of his lieutenants she had seen on the bridge and that dark-haired slave girl he must be in love with. Why else would he demand respect for her?

Suddenly, all the sound from the rest of the brig became silence. They must have a way of isolating sounds, so that others could not hear. She did not move. It was hardly going to matter to her whether others could hear her screams or not. She eyed them all with as much contempt as she could put into her face, and waited to see the effect of her cell's ventilation. She had set it to blow outward.

Ha, there, the big one's eyes widened. He was the youngest. It was to be expected.

But nothing happened. The Captain betrayed no interest at all, the big lieutenant took his tone from him, and as for the strange white-faced man, she didn't know what to make of him.

“Leader Sarah,” began Captain Picard, “you present us with a difficult

problem. You have sabotaged a Federation starship, and yet your ship has also helped us.”

They had? What no-good, two-bit, miserable doll had decided to lie down for this lot? She realized her anger was flaring in her eyes and did her best to remind herself nothing mattered anymore.

“You were willing to deal in a truly horrible drug,” he continued, “and yet you did not actually reach the point of dealing in it. You attacked Federation property and citizens, and yet, unlike most Orions of my experience, you did not leave a trail of death behind. I will be honest with you. We need as much information as you can give us about that drug. If you cooperate in providing it, together with the assistance from your ship, it will weigh heavily in your favor when Federation justice is applied in due course.”

In due course!, thought Saranah, pretending she looked at nothing but the wall. As if there was going to be any course, due or not.

The dark-haired woman spoke.

“You expect to die,” she stated. She seemed surprised.

How did she know that? The Leader couldn’t stop herself.

“How do you know?” she spat out.

The woman flinched before she could stop herself, as if Saranah had hit her.

“I am from Betazed.”

Saranah glared. Betazed, Alphazed, who cared?

“And I am from Skarron. So?”

“Leader Saranah, we do not execute people in the Federation,” said the Picard. “Generally we rehabilitate people and confine them if necessary. With foreign nationals we sometimes use deportation, which in your case would probably be our worst punishment.”

Saranah turned her glare on him. He was right about that. Were they all mind readers here? And why was he totally uninterested in her? She was neither old nor ugly yet. Was she?

“No,” Saranah heard the slavegirl saying, “that is not what she fears. She simply expects death.” Saranah turned back on the woman, feeling like a cornered animal.

She reminded herself she was a Leader. She must not let them see her like this. She forced herself to look bored and to stare at the wall. They could mind-read her, they could torture her; that was not her fault. But she would not give the swine anything.

“Leader Saranah,” Captain Picard began again, beginning to sound exasperated. “There is nothing to be gained and much to be lost from being uncooperative. The production of elatine has been stopped. We have impounded all the remaining stores—”

Ha! thought Saranah. I wanted to control all the *flierth* in the galaxy and now I do. The little jars we stole are all that’s left. A wild and crazy laugh bubbled in her, but died before reaching her voice. No, rightly speaking, Patra controlled it.

“— and it will never be possible to establish the distribution business you were arranging with Ms. Perilloux.”

So, they knew about that.

“The only possible advantage you can gain now is by telling us what you know about elatine.”

She continued to stare at the wall.

The tall, young officer began to speak.

“Yes,” he said smoothly, “neither you nor Barth Zeb will be able to take Ms. Perilloux up on her offer.”

Saranah looked at him. She couldn’t help it. She had to find out what he meant. Who was Barth Zeb?

“Oh? Didn’t you know Ms. Perilloux made the same offer to the other Orion ship here? She won’t be able to keep either promise now, will she?”

“She WHAT?” shouted Saranah, and leaped toward her jailers so violently she hit the force field.

“Sure. Probably decided on second thought that a bit of competition is healthy for business. On the whole, a sound decision, I’d say. In keeping with the best economic theories.”

Saranah could see his enjoyment in needling her.

“That was an interesting series of control codes she sent you, by the way,” he continued. “Always a good idea to check code before you enter it.”

What did the tall, pink human mean? What had happened? She was consumed with dread and curiosity, but refused to ask.

“You just entered it without knowing what it meant, didn’t you?” He smiled that odious little-boy smile of his. “Well, Ms. Perilloux, no doubt wanting to be sure you got full credit where it was due, inserted some very characteristic Orion control codes. It wasn’t that hard to reconstruct and I suspect she knew it wouldn’t be. And then, of course, we’d be sure to come looking for you.”

Saranah seethed with volcanic anger. Had Ashley been in the cell with her, she would have torn her limb from limb with her bare hands. The foul, treacherous wretch! She, Saranah, had been nothing but a pawn in the woman’s schemes. In a heartbeat, she drowned the memory of her own willing greed in a flood of fury.

“Tell me,” Saranah spat, “what will hurt the Ashley-pig the most, and I will give it to you.”

The Captain looked taken aback at her violent cooperation, but the dark-haired girl answered.

“If you can tell us what types of harm the drug can do and if you know that Ms. Perilloux was aware of it even while she was producing the drug, it would count heavily against her.”

Saranah glared. This dark-haired one was not stupid. She was going to get what she wanted by giving her, Saranah, the revenge she thirsted for. She must be a truly fearsome torturer if she could be this effective without even using pain.

“What harm? What *harm*?” jeered Sarah. “What is there that it cannot do? It makes life bearable, but it takes it away. Its dreams are pure magic, but it prevents you from ever reaching them.” Her voice fell. “From the first time, it makes you a slave of death.”

“That is why you expect death,” said the woman, guessing right, as she apparently always did.

Sarah gave one, brief nod.

“When did you start taking it?”

“Hra-anh, you fool,” snarled Sarah. “I did not start taking it. Who would be idiot enough to start, unless they were so rich they could afford the drug their whole lives? It was put in my blood, five years and six months ago.” Great Mothers, would she ever forget that day? The man holding her arm. The other one ... Would it be the last thing she remembered as she died?

“Why did they give it to you?”

“Were you born so stupid?” hissed Sarah, “Or did your brain rot? I was a *slave*, you idiot. A slave.”

She remembered the days and nights of pleading. The way she had done anything to get it. Anything. The way it had put an end to all her useless escape attempts. She felt the years of smiling acquiescence covering a hell-pit of rage and helplessness. What a joy it had been, at long last, to hear the old Captain scream and scream and scream.

She caught sight of the dark-haired girl’s horrified face. It was a horror of understanding, and Sarah smiled at her slowly and unpleasantly.

“Yes,” said the dark woman, as if she could hardly make the words. “I see.” Then, “Are you sure it takes only one dose for fatal effect?”

Was she sure? Gods, was she sure. Kartha, Ragna, Silra, and she didn’t even remember all the others.

“It is one way of killing bad slaves. Yes, I am sure.”

The white-faced man spoke. “Do you know whether the drug has the same effect after one dose in humans and other species in addition to Orions?”

Sarah just stared at him. No feeling came from him at all. It was something different from the Captain’s lack of interest. There was an element of control there. She could understand that, although she couldn’t understand why he bothered to be so good at it. But this one showed nothing at all. He stood there and waited for her answer as if he could wait for a thousand years.

“What are you?” she finally said.

“I am an android,” he replied.

A machine! A walking, talking machine! They were said to be impossibly strong, and to drink blood. They never slept. If he was the one who was going to torture her, he would never grow tired.

“I do not know about other races,” she said, not wanting to speak to him, but too afraid not to. “I have never heard of such deaths, but I don’t think they would have wasted the drug on them.”

“Wasted? Why would it be more wasted on them than on you?” asked the machine evenly.

“Nobody’s going to bother having sex with a Vulcan, are they?”

“Are you saying,” it asked without any expression, “that the drug has a sexual effect? And that even though it is a death sentence, the time until death is taken up with the relevant physical activities?”

The people, but not the machine, were looking sick. What had these idiots thought the drug was for?

“How long does it take to die?” asked the woman softly.

“After one dose, or many?”

“How big is the difference?”

“Big. After only one dose, it can take as much as a year. A year on Skarron, I mean. You can feel it coming the whole time.” She would never get Rajna’s pleading screams out of her head, and the dark-haired woman’s expression became even more horrified, as if she heard them, too. “When you have had it for years,” Sarah continued, “it is usually a matter of weeks.” She surveyed her questioners with impatience. “How can you not know all these things if the drug was made here?”

“Beverly needs to hear this,” said the woman to the Picard. “If there are thousands of Orion addicts, and if one dose is fatal”

Picard nodded. “Dr. Crusher to the brig, please.”

The fire-woman with red hair arrived. Sarah had seen her on the bridge, standing next to the Picard. She was a *doctor*? A slave-doctor was not something she had seen before.

They were talking to the fire-woman, telling her all the obvious things everyone knew.

She then said, “Symptoms are starting to show up everywhere bordering Orion space. Answers have been coming in to my queries about that suite of symptoms. So there’s another few thousand. And it gets worse. I heard from the Vulcan Academy of Sciences. In their simulations, they say the drug could probably cure some of the incurable neurological diseases, like Bendai Syndrome, but if there’s no way to control the drug itself, then there’s no way to use it. It’s maddening. Just maddening.”

The woman certainly talked like a doctor. Impossible to understand.

“What is maddening?” Sarah asked.

The fire-woman turned on her with a blue glare that was almost like an Orion’s in its intensity.

“Hundreds of people dying because a drug can’t be used doesn’t strike you as maddening? Thousands condemned to death for no reason doesn’t strike you as maddening?”

People died all the time, and nobody went mad. The fire-woman must mean something else. She must mean *she* was going to die. Then everything would make sense. And yet it still didn’t, because there was no way they could have run through all the *flierth* in Ashley’s dome that fast.

“You have enough for yourself, don’t you? For many years. I do not understand.”

The blue glare intensified, and then the slave-doctor asked,

“Was Ashley Perilloux aware of the long-term effects of this drug and of the Orion methods of using it?”

“How could she not have been?” hissed Sarah. “Look at that man of hers. Thin and white as an unstuffed cloth. He has been taking it for years. And there were two of our men and two of her women in that hidden room of hers. They were not drinking herbwater.”

All the humans and the machine glanced toward Roger Perilloux’s cell. The big one said,

“So that’s why he has that faded-plant look.”

“If anyone knows anything about a cure, he must,” said the fire-woman, her lips thinned to lines. “I don’t care if they’re ready to talk or not. They’re talking.”

They aren’t going to torture *me*? thought Sarah. They will torture the Perilloux instead? This was going to be fun. The Picard had turned toward her.

“I will be sending one of our legal officers to you to take a full deposition,” said the Captain. “The Perilloux could not be convicted under our laws simply for selling an unknown substance outside the Federation. But if they knew what the Orions did with it, the judge will throw the book at them.”

“A book?” muttered Sarah, full of dubious wonder. “You torture people with *books*?”

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Troi knew the Captain was moving on to the next item on the agenda. Troi knew she needed to be there, since the Perilloux seemed to be even bigger liars than the average Orion. But she could barely force herself to move. The sounds of the brig came back, as she dragged herself past the cone of silence, and then she felt Beverly take her arm.

“Are you up for this, Deanna?”

She nodded, but leant on her supporting hand anyway.

“She has such an awful mind,” she whispered. “Awful. And so many horrible things in her life. ... It’ll take me a minute. Those two will probably be worse, if anything. I just need a minute.”

She felt Beverly steer her over to one of the guard’s stations, where she sat down. Beverly brought her a hot drink – hot chocolate, her favorite – from the dispenser. She drank it gratefully, and then stood up.

“Okay. Next.”

The Captain had started with Ashley since Roger Perilloux had a dreamy expression that was not encouraging.

Ashley was more aware, no question about that, but she was aware of all the wrong things.

"I know my rights," she was saying in answer to something the Captain had said. "I don't have to talk to you at all until I have a lawyer. You know that."

"Yes, Ms. Perilloux, I know that. But there are lives that need to be saved now, not two weeks or two months from now. Lack of cooperation in saving lives that are endangered because of your actions will count heavily against you."

"I don't think so. I didn't give anyone any drugs. Drugs are defined quite explicitly in the legal code. All I was trying to do was run a business, and dealing with Orions isn't illegal. Even squeaky clean Starfleet seems to do it." She gave a small nod in the direction of Saranah's cell.

"Ah, now we're Starfleet, are we?" said Troi coolly.

Ashley shot her an icy glare, but said nothing.

Riker took up the questioning. "Your problem," he said with his best smile, "is that you keep forgetting you weren't the only one in the business. You had plenty of people working with you. Some of them, notably Mr. Reddle, aren't too happy that you took off to your green friends when the going got tough. And that you tried to take off over the top of him. He's been ready to talk ever since, so, believe me, you need all the leniency answering the Captain's questions can give you."

"I will be perfectly happy," said Ashley, "to talk with any duly constituted authorities under any conditions where my legal rights are respected. The fact that Reddle knows how to take care of himself doesn't change that. They're all big boys and girls who know how to take care of themselves. Look at Conyer and Carlyle."

Troi remembered Conyer shaking Reddle till his teeth rattled, and wondered what he would have done to Ashley – if he could have got at her – if he heard her say he'd sold her down the river to save his own skin.

The Captain made one last try to appeal to her better feelings, and Troi had no appropriate way to remind him that she didn't have any. The woman felt like leather with a lawyer.

"The lives that need to be saved include Roger's. He is one of those who is most in danger because he has been taking the drug for so long."

"It's against the law to let Federation citizens die when the means to prevent it is readily available," she stated. "If you've destroyed all our stores of elatine, you'll just have to do what's necessary to get it."

"There's not enough anywhere to maintain all the addicts you've created," said Dr. Crusher tightly.

"The law only stipulates actions between Federation citizens," said Ashley matter-of-factly. "And if there's not enough for them, you'll have to make more."

"Ms. Perilloux," the Captain began.

"I've told you once already that I know my rights. If you insist on badgering

me, I'll make sure that point is brought up at trial."

The Captain gave up. He moved on to Roger Perilloux's cell.

Roger's dreamy expression didn't change. It seemed to be all the same to him whether he faced the rest of his life in rehab or not. He didn't seem to mind whether he talked or not. Unfortunately, he had nothing useful to say. He told them, at length, how the drug was made, but any of the ship's biochemists could have figured that out just by looking through the lab. He told them how much his knowledge of geochemistry had been useful in learning the biochemical processes and how valuable this had been for his struggling company. But none of that told them anything they didn't already know.

Riker asked, "How did you expect to continue your ... work ... among the Orions, without any animals and without any lab?"

"Oh, I don't know," answered Roger dreamily, as if it had never mattered. "Things have a way of working out. We were still negotiating when you guys, uh, liberated us. We were inside our shuttle, and Ashley said we were going to stay there for weeks if necessary. They couldn't do anything to us, since we controlled the resources. Knowledge is power, and all that, you know. It's always best to deal with Orions from a position of strength." He smiled vacuously.

"Yes," said Data, "most extractive processes have simpler protocols and are easier for third parties to duplicate. I have been curious, while we're on that subject, how you worked out that particular method. What gave you the idea to try those particular animals and specifically their cerebrospinal fluid? It is not the first action that would occur to me on an alien planet." Data said it so neutrally, it sounded like it could well be the first thing to occur to someone else.

"We arrived here about eleven or twelve years ago." Another fact they already knew. "There was a lot of setup involved, sometimes supply shipments would come late, and we didn't have our own ship yet. Sometimes we shot tufties to supplement our diet since they checked out as safe. While we hunted them, we sometimes saw pterodactyls hunting them as well. They hardly ever get one, but one day one of them beat us to a distant group of tufties. Well the first thing it did was crack open its skull and start sort of slurping. I thought it would be interesting to find out what it was after, so I analyzed the fluid, and then I tried it too. I found out what they were after. Boy, did I find out."

"Why did Ashley never try it?" inquired Picard.

That was clearly a way of discovering how early on the two of them had been aware of the lethal effects. But Roger didn't really answer.

"Said she'd manage the business. Smart kid, Ashley."

Dr. Crusher was suddenly obviously hopping to go, so Captain Picard ended the questioning.

"Yes, Doctor?" he asked patiently once they were outside the brig.

“Don’t you see! The pterodactyls don’t die! They eat that stuff and don’t die. We’ve got to get down there and find one immediately!”

“It’s approaching night in this hemisphere,” Riker pointed out.

“So we’ll do half an orbit,” Crusher said over her shoulder, on her way to assemble her equipment.

“You heard her, Commander,” said Picard. “We’ll do half an orbit.”

Riker grinned a bit. “Yes, sir.”

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Except for the Orion slave ship, and the three Orions still taking up space in the brig, everything was, as Roger Perilloux might have said, working out. Dr. Crusher had not one, but three, pterodactyls within hours of expressing a need for them, and for the last two days had been sending up excited reports about how close she was to the answer. The fact that she wasn’t sleeping or, probably, eating was not something even Captain Picard cared to comment on.

He was much less happy about his own problems. He had spent hours closeted with Counselor Troi in his ready room, trying to find a solution he could live with for the former slaves.

“They sabotaged my ship. My ship! But then they also saved it. I’ve put in a recommendation, by the way, for a posthumous Order of Merit. That’s the only Orion who has ever received anything from the Federation except money or a jail sentence.”

“In some ways, she’s the same kind of problem,” Troi said, thinking out loud. “She didn’t do it for us. You heard Patra gloating about how they’d ‘blown the slime off their territory.’ And yet, I know what you mean. It was selfless heroism, nonetheless, even if it wasn’t for us.”

The Captain stood at the window, watching the dry, ochre planet below, and the tiny Orion “rustbucket,” diminished by distance, floating in between.

“The other problem is that, no matter what they’ve done, none of it is bad enough to justify re-enslavement. How can I do that to them? But the Federation certainly won’t waste money keeping them in jail. They’ll be deported. There’s no other possible outcome. I still haven’t charged them with anything, because once I do, there’s no going back. I don’t know which course to follow, Counselor. I truly do not.”

His desk communicator chimed.

“Director T’pel says she has an urgent message for Counselor Troi.”

“Put her through.” He waved Troi to take his seat, and returned to the window, hands clasped behind his back.

“Troi here.”

“Ah, Counselor. We have deciphered enough of the script to understand the

connection between Sharers, tufties and death. The animals were bred to be empathic. You were quite right that there are no naturally empathic animals, but in this case it was not natural. Apparently, they were so highly bred, in the end they couldn't survive without priestly feelings to project."

"That explains why they die in captivity," exclaimed Troi. "But then how did they survive with no priests for all these millenia?"

"I can only assume that once their Sharers died out, some of the animals were able to survive by sharing feelings with other animals. The ones with that capability are the ones we see today. The unique breeding program might also explain their unique brain chemistry.

"But the main reason for my call is to warn you about them. The scripts indicate the animals could learn to project any feelings, not just religious ones. They became a sacred animal that could only be contacted by specific, trained priests. Otherwise, it says, the animals could start projecting anything – lust, greed, fear, envy, anything – and create social havoc. So you, as a modern-day Sharer, will need to be very careful how you feel when you are near the tufties, or they could make this world uninhabitable."

"Ah. Yes," Troi said. "I thought there might be something like that.... I wonder if some problem along those lines is what killed that civilization?"

"The scripts –."

The communicator chimed again. It was Crusher reporting to the Captain, so Troi quickly thanked the Director and said she'd talk later.

"I've got it," she heard Beverly crowing. "I would have had it hours ago, but even in the pterodactyls, disassociation takes forever. Thirty six point four hours plus or minus six hours to be exact. So, they just kept lying in the diagnostic cribs, even after the sedative wore off, clacking their beaks and dreaming pterodactyl dreams. Once I finally had the disassociating molecule, it turned out to be a simple analog of an acetylcholinesterase stereoisomer with an extra hydroxyl group at the active site. Can you imagine?"

Captain Picard didn't quite roll his eyes to Troi, but he gave her a very significant look.

"We can synthesize that standing on our heads." Beverly was still crowing.

"I am glad to hear it," said the Captain. "If the cure is easily available, then I think I know what to do with those Orions, too."

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Leader Saranah spotted the Picard and his two loyal females, the fire-woman and the dark-haired girl, the moment they entered the brig, but she made sure as she lay on her bunk that they didn't think they were any concern of hers. The fourth time the Captain addressed her she lazily turned her head, dropped one shapely leg – for all the good it did – over the side of

her bunk and slouched to a sit.

“Leader,” the Captain began again, “I am sure it is no surprise to you that much of Federation space bordering Orion space suffers from repeated, unprovoked and malicious raids.”

“You would rather have kindhearted raids?” she asked sarcastically.

The man had incredible control. His gaze didn’t even flicker.

“Yes,” he said. “You catch my meaning very quickly.”

Now he was taunting her, but try as she might, she couldn’t even figure out what the insult was. She knew her anger was blazing out of her eyes, unlike him, who could do anything with himself that he wanted. It made her even angrier.

“In addition,” Captain Picard was saying while she scarcely listened, “in view of the particular nature of your former condition and the circumstances surrounding your drug dependence, and in view of the fact that the crimes you undertook directly against the Federation in sabotaging the Enterprise were undertaken at the instigation of others—”

Saranah started listening again, wondering what he was rambling on about.

“—and furthermore, in view of the fact that your ship recently saved all our lives by destroying an attacking Orion ship—”

Patra! She must have run the competition off! Good for her. A worthy lieutenant. Then Saranah remembered that the territory was worth nothing now and that she herself was never going to be a Leader again. Well, maybe Patra could at least sell those men and make enough to carry on somehow that way.

“—I, as the ranking Federation authority on this planet, feel justified in offering you immunity from prosecution, in this case, in return for your acceptance of certain conditions.”

“I understand now,” said Saranah. “You talk people to death in this Federation of yours. Talk, talk, —.”

“No!” said the dark woman. She turned to her Captain. “She did not understand.”

He looked annoyed. He breathed in, and he pulled his shirt straight, even though it needed no straightening.

“I will let you go,” he said, “under certain conditions.”

Saranah’s eyes widened in disbelief and incomprehension.

“You mean you will let me go back to my ship?”

“Under certain conditions.”

“And what are they?”

“You agree to abide by Federation laws. First, you will not deal in slaves—”

Saranah interrupted him with another snarl. Men! They all stuck together. It was the source of their power. Well, she was going to sell that scum in her brig to the worst possible bidders.

“No, no, no,” cried the dark-haired woman. “It’s not that at all. He is more disgusted by those felons in your brig than you are. But they’re *people*. You

can't do that to people, not to any people. Or you become even less than they are."

It was as if that weird, dark woman could read her mind. But she herself couldn't even understand her plainly spoken words. The Federation aliens, with their tiny prisons and their strange restraint, had some bizarre ideas. Well, everyone always said that you couldn't understand aliens. In any case, there were more important problems.

"How can I agree to such ... stuff?" She'd almost said "such garbage" to the Picard. She tried to be placating. He'd said he was going to let her go, which was impossible, but, just in case, she wouldn't want him to change his mind. "We have nothing, now that the *flierth* is gone. There is nothing to sell but those dregs. Without money we will soon be destroyed. Or, or made slaves again."

Captain Picard shook his head.

"If you agree to my terms, I will give you something beyond price. I will give you the cure against the *flierth* death."

Saranah stood up slowly. She walked to the force field and took a closer look at this man. He had an unreadable face, but he looked back at her steadily. There was no triumph, no lurking slyness. He meant what he said.

"You –. Can you cure it?" She could barely say the words.

He nodded.

This man, Saranah realized, held her in the palm of his hand as no other ever had. He held everything that mattered. She would do anything he asked – but she had been at that point many times before. What frightened her now was that she would do it gladly.

"Name your price," she said.

"Do not trade in slaves," he said again. "Do not trade in drugs, or any other goods that are illegal in the Federation, and abide by those laws even in Orion space. Do everything you can to prevent Orion raids along the Federation border. And finally, see to it that the cure actually gets to the slaves who need it, and does not become another means to manipulate them."

Some of that was the usual Federation-weirdness, but some of it Saranah understood. The restrictions on slave- or drug-trading were incomprehensible, but protecting her territory would be a pleasure. She started planning it out on the spot. She would use a slave network to collect information. Her raids would be sudden, anonymous and overwhelming. Gradually it would become known that you did not cross Saranah. As for making sure the cure reached the slaves, that would be a pleasure too, in addition to helping her get loyal informants to defend her territory. Eagerly, she agreed to his terms.

"Good." said the Captain. "Then I will inform Starfleet that your ship can be allowed passage for legitimate trading purposes. And note: I will personally see to it that permission is instantly revoked if there are any problems."

Problems? What problems? Merely the monopoly on the cure for *flierth*, now that hundreds of rich addicts would die without it, would make her the

richest Orion on fifty planets.

“Further,” Picard continued, “in order to ensure that you are effective in this venture, I will provide you with technical assistance in learning how to run your ship.”

“Including weapons?” asked Sarah greedily.

“Enough to defend yourself,” said the Captain turning to leave. “You will be given all the details of our arrangement and then you will be transported back to your ship. You will be given a communicator to inform your crew.” He signed to the guard on duty.

Sarah stared at the retreating backs of the three Starfleet officers.

That was all. They left. That Captain, he left, demanding nothing.

They were strange people. Very strange people.

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LaForge stepped out of the turbolift and onto the bridge. “Well, that’s that. We’re all done on the Ilna.”

“The Ilna?”

“Yeah. Their Leader decided to name the ship after her mother, I think. They know all about life support, navigation, ship management, everything. And we taught them enough about weapons to keep them from blowing themselves up. Eager students, most of them.” Geordi turned to begin programming his own control board for their coming departure. “Oh yes, they also gave us all that elatine they stole. Never wanted to see the stuff again, Sarah said.”

“Message from Arvida,” announced Worf.

He was calling to say goodbye and wish everyone a good voyage. The seven remaining prospectors had almost all of the horrible lab cleaned up and had managed to get rid of most of the debris left over from the “escapade,” as he called it. “Clare Prospecting is off to a good start. Come visit us if you’re in this neighborhood again.”

“I’ll certainly come,” said Troi, “and visit the tufties too.”

Then Director T’pel called, also wishing them well, and informing them Clarence Jones had improved to the point of sneaking off to his dig, against Crusher’s orders. She spent a while talking to Bart Higgon on a private line in the Enterprise brig and then signed off just in time for Worf to announce,

“Message from Starfleet, sir.”

Captain Picard sighed. They were never going to get to Starbase Fifteen at this rate.

“On screen.”

In view of your most recent report on the situation at Clare 4,
Judiciary has granted full search authority for the premises of

Perilloux Prospecting. We reiterate that no illegal activities traceable to this place of business have been reported, but should evidence of such be found, you are also hereby empowered to make the necessary arrests, and to suspend the activities of said business.

Captain Picard carefully kept his expression neutral, though not everyone on the bridge was as successful.

“Course laid in for Starbase Fifteen, Ensign?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Engage.”

