

## Atax

Captain's Log, Stardate 44469.2:

We've been ordered by Starfleet Command to intercept the Ferengi Trader Avarice, commanded by a Daamon Mok. Our orders are to stop the Ferengi and search for Atax crystals. The Federation has gotten a tip from smugglers that the Ferengi may be carrying this highly illegal and addictive drug first found on renegade worlds within and without the Federation.

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"Atax," said Doctor Beverly Crusher, "is an illegal crystalline narcotic. It is taken by imbedding it into the fleshy part of the upper arm or thigh. Once imbedded, it begins to be dissolved by the body and releases a strong narcotic into the bloodstream. Depending upon the size of the crystal and the metabolism of the user, a single crystal can last up to six months. Like all narcotics it is addictive and some users must have several imbedded at once to get the desired result once they have built up a resistance to it."

Captain Jean-Luc Picard nodded his head and motioned for Commander Data, the android science officer, to pick up the lecture. "The Federation has found out through various channels," began Data, "that the Ferengi Alliance produces and smuggles Atax. We are currently enroute and should intercept the Ferengi ship Avarice in three hours and sixteen minutes. They are suspected of carrying a supply of Atax crystals. We are to search their ship and confiscate the drug if we find any. They will most likely not take kindly to this as Atax cost thousands of credits per crystal."

"Great," muttered Lieutenant Commander Geordi LaForge. "That's all we need; a ship full of Ferengi mad at us."

Data cocked his head and turned to his friend. "Why do we need a ship full of Ferengi, Geordi? And why is it great that they are mad at us?"

A soft chuckle ran around the conference room. Everybody except Lieutenant Worf, the Klingon security officer, and Data himself apparently found Data's occasional naivety endearing.

"That's called sarcasm, Data," remarked Deanna Troi. "He meant the opposite of what he said."

Picard, always serious, tried to steer the conversation back on track.

What can we expect from the Ferengi militarily?" he directed at Worf.

"Nothing we can't handle," Worf answered immediately with more than a trace of pride in his deep voice.

"How will the Ferengi react to our request, Counselor?"

The delicate half Betazoid considered before answering. "We don't really know much about the Ferengi, apart from their love of wealth and drive to get it. They will not be pleased, but I don't see what they can do to stop us. They will undoubtedly demand reimbursement, or want revenge."

"Something that we can't let them have," commented First Officer William Riker.

"Agreed," said Picard. "How should we approach them?" he asked the room at large.

"With a show of strength," answered Worf. "They will recognize that we mean business and we may not even have to fight." He seemed disappointed at his own suggestion.

"With caution," suggested Riker. "They will probably react better if we ask them and not demand anything, at least for the time being."

"A little bit of both?" thought LaForge. "If we have our shields up but make pleasant sounds they'll be thrown off balance. That can only help us."

Slow nods around the table told Picard that all of his senior officers seemed to accept that option as the best one, at least for the time being.

Picard nodded his head to dismiss them and bring the meeting to an end. As they filed past him and out the conference room door, he contemplated what to do. What he hadn't told his officers and friends was that the Starfleet dispatch he had received that morning gave him the authority to use any military force that he deemed necessary.

Picard was by nature a peaceful man, and so despite Worf's reassurances, he still felt uneasy fighting a Ferengi ship, no matter the reason.

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Will Riker and Deanna Troi left the conference room at the same time and rode the turbolift to the bridge at the same time. Ensign Wesley Crusher at Conn was very interested to find out what they had talked about at the meeting, but too tactful to ask.

Riker noticed the covert glances that Wesley was giving him and Deanna, and decided to tell Wesley a little something. He casually stood and walked toward the Conn. He leaned over Wesley's shoulder and said quietly, "We're going after smugglers, Wes. This may get rough. A word of advice, don't let them take you alive." He looked solemnly at Wesley, turned around, and walked

away. Will made his way back to Deanna and sat down in the captain's chair.

"You shouldn't have done that to him, Will," chided Deanna with a smile on her face. "He is still young and has an impressionable mind. Besides, do you really want that rumor floating around the ship?"

Will half smiled at her and responded, "He won't start any rumors, Deanna. He's too good an officer."

Riker was almost right. Wesley wouldn't start any rumors, but for a different reason. He was too confused by Riker's statements to start any.

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Since he was still technically off duty, Geordi LaForge wondered what to do with his next three hours before they caught up with the Ferengi. He could go to Ten-Forward, one of his personal favorite places to spend a little time, but he decided that he'd rather do something than just sit around and talk. The best place for that, he decided, was the holodeck.

He was headed in that direction when he heard his name called out behind him. Noticed that Data was coming up to him. He stopped and allowed his friend to join him. "I was just on my way to the holodeck for a little time off, Data," he said as the android caught up to him. "Would you care to join me?"

The question pleased Data immensely, Geordi noticed. Data had one of his half smiles on his face as he accepted the offer with a little nod of his head. The two friends entered the turbolift and made their way to Holodeck One.

As they arrived at the doors, Data turned to Geordi, "I believe that I have something that you would enjoy trying." He turned to the holodeck computer and started typing in instructions at a rate faster than Geordi could follow.

"What have you got in mind?" asked Geordi.

"I have been studying human interrelations," replied Data without turning. "I simply thought that attending a human social function will make me more able to fully understand humans."

"Which social function?" asked Geordi, mildly concerned.

"If you would care to step inside then you can see for yourself," answered Data as he finished his programming.

Geordi put a smile on his face, turned toward the holodeck doors, and walked into chaos. A large, well-dressed but very drunk man stumbled past them being hustled out the door by an even larger man wearing an old-fashioned suit, similar to the one the drunk was wearing. The second man firmly closed

the door behind the drunk, turned toward Data and LaForge, and apologized for this unseemly display. He then offered the two men free drinks for the evening if they would dismiss this entire affair from their minds.

Geordi had had a fleeting question in his mind about what Data considered to be a "human social function". Now he knew. He had just walked into a fancy restaurant that could have been found in any major spaceport in the Federation.

There were about a dozen couples on the floor doing some sort of slow dance step. Several more people, some singles, but mostly couples, were scattered among the tables and a bar over on one side of the room.

"What is this?" questioned Geordi.

"I believe that it was called a night club. I had thought that you would enjoy something like this," answered Data.

Geordi looked around again and noticed two gorgeous women at the bar were conspicuously without companions. A slow smile spread across his face. "You're right, Data. I will like this." They entered the scene and the doors closed behind them to completely enclose them within the illusion.

As the two men walked over toward the ladies, Data said to Geordi, "I programmed them into the scenario. Please do not be surprised at anything that happens."

"It's about time you showed up, Fredrick," scolded one of the girls as they arrived at the bar. They were both of medium height, but one, the girl who had spoken to Data, was brown eyed with auburn hair. The other, who eyed Geordi appreciatively, was a red haired beauty that left Geordi breathless.

"I am sorry, Grace," replied Data with perfect calm. "Thomas and I were detained." He turned to the red-head and pronounced politely, "Gloria, I would like to introduce you to Thomas," he indicated Geordi. "Thomas, this is Gloria, a friend of Grace."

Grace curled her arm around Data with perfect familiarity. Geordi tried not to stare at her and decided to become better acquainted with his escort for the evening. He offered his arm to her and led her off toward the dance floor.

Grace turned toward Data, "I'm glad that you two could come tonight. I had been wanting to set Gloria up with someone for some time now. Where did you find him anyway?"

"He has been a friend of mine for many years. He has been trying to help me understand humans better."

Grace laughed lightly and turned back toward her drink. "I think you understand humans just fine right now, Fredrick."

Picard's voice interrupted their conversation. "Mr. Data, can you and

Mr. LaForge report to the bridge please."

Data taped his communicator and responded, "Yes, sir."

Grace was looking around in confusion when he turned back to her. "I'll be back as soon as I can." He turned toward a seemingly blank wall and said, "Computer, pause, save, and discontinue."

Everything in the room except Geordi and Data immediately disappeared. They found themselves in the middle of a bare room with a golden grid over the walls and floor. Geordi was in a middle of a dance step and looked around in confusion when his partner vanished.

"Captain Picard requires our presence on the bridge," said Data by way of an explanation. Geordi nodded and they exited through the doors that appeared upon command.

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Data and Geordi emerged onto the bridge and moved toward their separate stations, Data at Ops and Geordi to the bridge Engineering station.

Picard turned at the sound of the turbolift doors. "Sorry to interrupt your fun, gentlemen, but the Ferengi had other plans. They started coming toward us when they picked us up on their sensors." He sounded relieved and mildly surprised even as he said it.

"Captain," said Worf from above Picard, "the Ferengi are hailing us."

"Very well, lieutenant. Put it on the viewscreen." He stood and advanced toward the viewscreen as Worf wordlessly complied.

A picture of a Ferengi appeared with a blank wall as background. Picard almost preferred to look at the wall. He had never enjoyed the looks of Ferengi and the specimen before him did nothing to change his mind. Ferengi in general have a pair of huge ears protruding straight out from their completely bald heads and two beady little black eyes. To add to their looks, their noses were slightly upturned and they all had mouths full of small, sharp teeth. This Ferengi had a slightly more pointed face than the average, but this did nothing to improve his looks. Picard privately thought that this Ferengi looked like an ugly version of a weasel.

However, he put his personal considerations aside and said calmly, "This is Jean-Luc Picard, captain of the USS Enterprise, representing the United Federation of Planets." He paused, waiting for the Ferengi response in order to know how to proceed.

"This is Daamon Mok of the Ferengi Trader Avarice. Why do you chase us,

human? Do you wish to buy something?" The greedy look on his face dissolved when he spied Counselor Troi sitting next to Riker. His eyes slowly got bigger around and his features took on the cast of someone who has just fallen in love.

"No, Daamon. We wish only to talk." replied Picard, trying to ignore the look on the Ferengi's face.

"Too bad," replied Mok. His attention was still focused on Troi, who shifted uncomfortably under the scrutiny.

"We understand that you may be transporting a quantity of Atax," said Picard carefully. No need in beating around the bush, thought Picard.

"Atax? We have no Atax here, Picard. Transporting it is against your own laws. Why do you ask? Do you wish to purchase some for your own uses?" Mok continued to stare at Deanna Troi and slowly licked his lips.

"No, Daamon. We have been ordered to check all ships in this sector for the smuggling of Atax."

"Scan my ship then, human. If you like you may even make a visual search, but be quick about it. I have better things to be doing than sitting and talking to you."

Picard signaled Worf to cut the transmission. Once the Ferengi disappeared from the viewscreen he ordered, "Mr. Worf, please conduct a sensor search of the Ferengi ship. Look for any indications of Atax." Worf nodded and bent over his controls. His long fingers efficiently carried out his orders, as any good warrior would.

"Counselor," Picard turned toward Troi, "did you get any impressions? Was he lying about the Atax?"

She considered the question before answering. "I'm not sure, Captain. I'm sorry," she continued as Picard started to frown, "but even a full Betazoid cannot read Ferengi. Their brains are just too different from ours. Therefore, I must make any of my assessments on body language, and I was," she hesitated, "reluctant to pay that much attention to the Daamon. He makes me personally uncomfortable."

Riker had no trouble understanding that. It was rumored that Ferengi treated their own females with so little respect and compassion that they were not given clothing to wear. Troi was a beautiful woman indeed in Riker's opinion, and he became angry just imagining what Mok may do to Deanna if the Ferengi captain got his hands on her.

"Captain," called Worf after completing a scan of the ship. "The Ferengi ship has had sensor blocks installed over their cargo hold. The sensors cannot

penetrate that block and can give us no indication as to what may be inside."

He was not happy with the report, but he had to give it.

"Sir," Riker addressed Picard, "request permission to lead an away team over to the Ferengi ship for a visual search. You will remember that they did invite us."

"I don't like it, Number One," returned Picard. "They're acting too docile and cooperative. Besides, how would we beam you back in case of an emergency?"

"Chief O'Brien can interconnect two transporter rooms to keep a lock on us even through the sensor block." He was clearly eager to inspect a Ferengi ship from the inside.

"We are now in transporter range," interjected Worf from above them.

Picard frowned. "I still don't like it, Number One. However, I can't think of any other way to do it. Very well. Assemble your away team."

Riker nodded, signaled to Geordi and Worf, and headed toward the turbolift doors.

"Will, be careful," called Deanna from behind him.

He stopped and gave her one of his famous smiles. "As always, Counselor." He turned and strode into the turbolift where Geordi and Worf were waiting for him.

Picard signaled to the officer who had just replaced Worf to reestablish the communications link to the Ferengi ship. He turned back just as Mok's face reformed.

"We will take you up on your offer of a visual search. Three of my officers are now beaming over to your ship."

"Very well," replied Mok. "We will take good care of them."

Now what did that mean? wondered Picard as the Ferengi abruptly cut off the image.

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The trio from the Enterprise materialized in what passed for a transporter room aboard the Ferengi ship. The room was built for Ferengi and Geordi barely had room to stand upright; Riker and Worf had to hunch over to keep from hitting their heads on the ceiling.

Geordi was looking around the room with great interest. As an engineer he was very interested in how other species built their ships. The first thing he noticed was that everything was made of shoddy material and poorly installed. Everything would work, he concluded after a few moments thought and

inspection, but with little reserve strength and no extra radiation protection.

He idly wondered if he could tear into a wall with his bare hands.

"Everything is made at bare minimum safety requirements here, Commander," commented LaForge to Riker.

"The Ferengi don't like to spend any more than absolutely necessary on building their ships," Riker replied. "As long as it gets them there, they're happy with it." Worf grunted agreement as LaForge smiled.

Two Ferengi walked into the room just as Riker finished speaking. One of them was immediately recognizable as Daamon Mok, and the other was introduced as his second in command, Blak.

Blak put up with the introductions to Riker and Worf, but took an immediate interest in Geordi's VISOR. "What is the price of this object?" he demanded of Geordi, even before they were introduced.

"It's not for sale," replied Geordi, surprised at the question. What would this Ferengi want with my VISOR? wondered Geordi.

"I'll give you your weight in gold for it," countered Blak.

"I said," replied Geordi with more force, bordering on annoyance, "that it is not for sale. I need it." Blak seemed disappointed in Geordi's refusal to even consider making a deal for it.

Riker headed off another attempt at purchase, "Daamon, please take us to your cargo holds immediately so you may resume your activities as soon as possible."

"Of course," Mok replied with a dismissive wave to Blak. Blak nodded politely to Riker and Worf, and with another envious look at Geordi's VISOR, walked off down the corridor.

Mok turned in the other direction and began to speed away. For all their size, thought Geordi a couple of minutes later as he tried to keep pace, they're fast little buggers.

Mok led them through a series of ladders, corridors, and doorways until all three officers from the Enterprise were thoroughly lost.

I don't like this, thought Riker. Well, I did ask the captain if I could go. I can hardly back down now. He continued to move on toward the retreating back of Daamon Mok.

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Transporter Chief O'Brien was nervous. Just interconnect two of the transporter rooms to keep track of us, Riker had suggested. That's dangerous, replied O'Brien. Riker gave a half smile and said that he trusted him. It's not that easy, O'Brien fumed to himself. Varying signals, interlocking

computer signals, setting priorities, controlling power fluctuations . . .

the list was almost endless. At least we can keep track of them through the sensor block this way, he thought with some glimmer of hope.

The transporter chief set to work on his self imposed list of things to do and kept a wary eye on the transporter lock.

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Mok continued to lead the Enterprise officers through a seemingly endless maze and eventually stopped, after what seemed like ten minutes, in front of a door that had odd scribblings on it. Geordi guessed correctly that this was Ferengi for something like Cargo Hold.

"We are here," announced Mok somewhat unnecessarily.

"Very well," said Riker pleasantly. "May we make a full inspection for any illegal materials?"

"That's what you're here for, isn't it?" Mok replied impatiently, almost exasperated with these dim-witted humans.

Riker nodded and turned toward the door. Mok politely opened it for him. Riker walked in, followed closely by Worf and Geordi. They didn't even notice that Mok hesitated at the threshold to the room.

Mok stopped just short of walking into the room and let the humans get in front of him. He spun to the computer terminal and quickly punched in a security code.

Riker whirled around at the sound of the door closing rapidly. His last view of Mok was an evil grin plastered all over the ugly Ferengi visage.

"Worf, open that door. It's a trap!" shouted Riker.

Worf lunged at the door as Riker hit his communicator and called for an emergency beam out. LaForge pulled his phaser, just as a precaution. Worf frantically tugged, hit, and cursed the door for a few moments before he pulled out his phaser and began to set it to cut through this khest door.

LaForge was watching him as he noticed two things simultaneously. One was that he felt the beginnings of a Federation transporter get a hold of him. The other thing was that the room was rapidly filling with a green gas. Those was the last two things that Geordi remembered before a mental lethargy overtook him and he lapsed into unconsciousness.

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O'Brien was very busy indeed. He received the emergency beam out signal from Riker and immediately engaged the two transporter rooms, bringing to bear a total of 12 pads. He was hoping that at least some of the pads would lock on

to his friends and then, and only then, would he worry about where he would rematerialize them.

Almost at once he noticed that he had five locks, on two different people. You're missing one, said the logical portion of his mind. I know, he shouted at himself. O'Brien put all of his considerable effort and experience into the next couple of minutes.

He first put the two captured patterns into stasis for temporary storage. He then told the computer to engage the remaining crew transporter room and also Transporter Pad D. It was the largest on the ship with the most power, but designed to move material, not people. At the moment he needed much more power to grab that other crew member.

He had no way of knowing who he had and who he didn't, but that didn't matter. They were all his friends.

Once Transporter Pad D and Transporter Room 3 were on line, he engaged all of the transporters on that area of the Ferengi ship, only to discover to his horror that there was nothing there. The Ferengi had moved since the initial beam out attempt. He re adjusted the transporters to the new coordinates. They are almost out of range, he thought frantically. Engaging all of the transporters on the ship at once, he hoped to get a hold of the last one. He cursed fluently in his native Irish accent when he realized that the sensor blocks were stopping him at this range.

That was a major problem, but he had two more urgent matters to contend with. He had two of the officers in the electronic innards of the transporter circuits. Careful now not to make any mistakes, he noticed that two of the locks on the same person were in the other transporter room, while two of the three locks on the other were here. From this, he determined that he should rematerialize one of them here and the other in Transporter Room 2. He called Room 2 on the intercom and told the technician on duty to beg in rematerialization of the one that was there. O'Brien then began to delicately reassemble the one he had here. The figure slowly began to rematerialize after what for O'Brien was a very trying and difficult two minutes working with the transporter controls. From within patterns of transporter energies, a figure began to form, much to Chief O'Brien's relief.

The first thing that he noticed was that the person was lying on his side, not standing as he should have been. As he called for medical aid to be sent down from Sickbay, O'Brien noticed that the first distinctive feature he could make out was a silver band a cross the person's face, covering his eyes. That would be Engineer LaForge's VISOR, reasoned O'Brien.

Picard burst into the room at a dead run just as Geordi gained full substance. He shot a look at O'Brien as if to ask, Where are they?

"Chief O'Brien," called the technician in Transporter Room 2, "I just got Lieutenant Worf."

"Where is Commander Riker?" shot Picard with barely contained fear.

Doctor Crusher came barreling in before O'Brien could answer and nearly knocked Picard off of his feet in an attempt to get to her patient. She did a quick tricorder scan over Geordi's body and immediately injected him with something from the kit at her side, shaking her head from side to side with a very concerned expression spread over her features. She then helped the nurses load LaForge onto the antigrav stretcher that they had brought in with them.

She tapped her communicator, "Dr. Selar, Engineer LaForge had taken a large dose of paralactin. What is Lieutenant Worf's condition?"

Crusher's communicator brought back the answer, "Lieutenant Worf has also ingested sufficient quantities of paralactin to render him unconscious. I have administered a general stimulant and am taking him to Sickbay as we speak. Selar out."

Crusher saw LaForge to the door and on the way to Sickbay before turning to Picard and O'Brien.

"Commander Riker is still on the Ferengi ship," reported O'Brien glumly as Crusher joined the group.

"If he is, he will need medical help immediately," said Crusher to Captain Picard. "LaForge has gotten a large dose of a very powerful paralysis drug. So powerful, in fact, that it would have stopped his heart and lungs in another couple of seconds. Odd, though, this drug affects humans and Klingons, but not Ferengi. It's as if they knew who they would be gassing. I got to it quickly though. He should be fine in a day or so." She turned and followed her patient to Sickbay.

"I'm sorry, sir," muttered O'Brien. He was remembering all of the wonderful games of poker he had had with Commander Riker. Then there was that bar on Alpha Centauri . . .

"That sensor block stopped me," he continued slowly. "Connecting all of those transporters at once, controlling them, getting a lock," he stopped. "What did I do wrong?"

O'Brien was very upset, realized Picard. "Don't blame yourself, Chief. That block threw you off. We are chasing the Ferengi right now. I promise you, we'll get Riker back, even if we have to chase them to the heart of the

Ferengi Alliance to catch them." Not only was he reassuring O'Brien, Picard realized, he was also making a personal vow, to himself and to his absent friend and first officer.

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Doctor Crusher had her hands full with her two patients. They both had the same drug in them, but Klingons responded to this particular one a little differently than humans did. On a human she could just inject a series of stimulants and he would be fine. A Klingon, however, would go into a coma from the reduced brain activity that resulted from the chemical interactions if she just indiscriminately began administering stimulants to his inert form. She was trying to keep Worf from slipping any deeper when she heard someone enter Sickbay behind her.

She didn't even turn around. She had to keep an eye on her patient's chemical balance. If she didn't keep him within a very specific range, then he would go into a coma that could last days until the body decided to wake up.

"How are they doing, Doctor?" Picard asked quietly from behind her.

"Worf will be fine if I can just keep him stable for the next couple of minutes," she replied without looking away from the readout.

"How is Mr. LaForge?"

"I'm fine, sir," replied Geordi from the other side of the room on his bed. He unsteadily began to sit up.

Crusher's head snapped around. "No you're not. Stay right there or I will have to forcefully keep you on that bed. You're a very sick man, Mr. LaForge. Do what I tell you and you may be able to leave tomorrow."

Geordi grinned and shook his head. "Sorry, Doc. I've got to get to my station and get after those animals."

"Report, Mr. LaForge," said Picard to cut off Crusher's retort. She frowned and turned back to Worf.

"They acted really nice and polite until they got us into the cargo hold. The last thing I remember was Worf trying to tear a door off of its hinges and a green smoke. I must have blacked out," he finished sheepishly.

Picard nodded and turned toward Crusher. "Do what you can for Worf, Doctor."

He turned around and headed out the door. Geordi seemed likely to follow him out before Doctor Selar, the Vulcan on Crusher's staff, stopped him. "You are still ill, Engineer LaForge," she said in that neutral tone that Vulcans used when discussing anything from the color of a bacteria culture to their probabilities of surviving another three minutes

during a Romulan attack.

"No I'm not," he retorted rather ineffectively. He was swaying on his feet. "Besides, we need to go after them."

"We are," answered Crusher without turning around. "Now lie down before I have Doctor Selar there carry you to bed."

Geordi looked at the Vulcan doctor and recalled that she was perfectly capable of doing just that. He re-crossed the room and lay down on his bed with a frown on his face. "Okay, but I don't have to like it," he muttered.

"No, you don't, but do it anyway." retorted Dr. Crusher.

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On the bridge Wesley Crusher sitting at Conn looked with hatred toward the Ferengi ship that had just kidnapped one of the men he most respected.

They were already at maximum warp, barely gaining on the Ferengi ship. At their present speed, he calculated, they would catch them in just about seven hours.

He almost unconsciously leaned forward as if to urge the great Galaxy class starship to greater speeds.

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Riker was in a dream like state where he couldn't feel anything. His mind felt free, without any problems or worries. That was just fine with him. His last coherent memory was of a green fog enveloping him and his friends. He didn't think that he wanted to wake up and find out what happened, so he waited.

After a time, (who knew how long?) he began to feel a pain in his right shoulder. That slowly dragged him back to reality, even against his will.

Once he was fully awake he realized that he had no hope of going back to sleep thanks to the pain in his shoulder. He lay still for a moment taking an assessment of his situation. His head was filled with cobwebs, he had a headache, and his right shoulder was aching, the kind of ache that promises to become full blown pain if you try to move it. He also heard something, a soft, almost subliminal hum coming from his right. He seemed to be lying on a flat surface that was none too comfortable.

He slowly opened his eyes to look around and figure out where he was. The hum to the right proved to be a glowing blue outline around an otherwise open door. He didn't want to try to go through, however, because he knew that the color and tone meant that there was a force field turned to full power covering the portal.

The rest of the room looked like any standard brig with one very important difference. He wasn't alone. Lying on a cot very similar to the one he was on was another human. Riker noticed that this human was rather normal in appearance save for a wicked looking scar that zigzagged down his left arm. He was just shy of two meters tall and had brown hair that was just a shade lighter than Riker's own hair. He was dressed in conservative colors in a modern style, but with very fine material.

Riker next felt around his chest to an attempt to find his communicator. It wasn't there. Well, he thought, the Enterprise won't be coming to my rescue quite that easily. He slowly tried to move into a sitting position only to be rewarded with a nauseating pain in his shoulder. That wasn't any good at all.

"Don't try to move that shoulder."

Riker looked over at the other human to discover that he was sitting up and looking at him. "Thanks for telling me. Hurts like hell."

"I'm not surprised. It's broken. Sorry, I've forgotten my manners. My name is Mark Krosby. And you are Commander . . ." He trailed off, waiting for Riker to answer.

"William Riker, USS Enterprise." He hesitated, "This may sound like a stupid question, but where am I?"

Mark laughed. "You are a guest on the illustrious Ferengi Trader Avarice. Since you're wearing a Starfleet uniform, I can assume that you're not here for the same reason I am."

"I was sent by my captain to check the ship for Atax crystals," answered Riker. He was wondering whether or not to trust this man, but he figured that it didn't really matter one way or the other. Besides, he was a prisoner too. "We received a report that they may be carrying some. We were supposed to confiscate them and arrest Daamon Mok. Now why are you here?"

"I'm what you could call a free trader," a smuggler translated Riker to himself. "I came to this ship with the same Atax that you were searching for. I had a deal with the Ferengi, a thousand credits per crystal. But I got greedy and demanded fifteen hundred each. Needless to say, they were not amused. They simply hit me with one of their energy whips and tossed me in here. I have no idea what happened to my ship. Probably destroyed by those monsters. Anyway, now you know my story."

Riker tried to sit up again, this time being very gentle with his shoulder. He made it up and leaned back against the wall, gasping for breath. He spent the next five minutes fighting pain and dizziness.

Mark never moved during this time. He just sat and watched Riker fight

his own body.

Something suddenly occurred to Riker, "How did you know my rank?"

Mark smiled, "I quit Starfleet ten years ago. Not enough money in it.

Anyway I didn't like all of the rules. My commanding officers controlled my life. I don't like anybody who makes decisions for me. I need my freedom, and these Ferengi have taken it away from me. I intend to kill every one of them when I bust out of here."

Riker looked on him appreciatively. This was the kind of ally that he needed right now. Will looked around their cell once more, searching for a way to break out. The door was obviously out. Unless the ship had a power failure they didn't have a prayer of making it through there. He looked over the walls until he spied a panel that was flush with the wall. He considered his chances of walking over there, about two meters distant, without passing out on the way.

Before Riker could move, however, he heard a sound over by the door. He turned and saw Blak leering at him.

"I see that you are awake. Good. You'll be gratified to know that we gave you the antidote to the gas before any brain damage occurred."

"What do you want with me?" Riker demanded.

"And what will you do with me?" Krosby queried.

Blak turned to Krosby. "You will eventually be taken to one of our bases and tried for the crimes that you have committed against us."

"But I didn't do anything," protested Krosby.

"You reneged on a contract," thundered Blak. The way he said that made it sound as if it were a death warrant.

"And me?" asked Riker calmly.

"You will be taken to the Romulan Neutral Zone," answered Blak with a leer on his face, "and sold to the first Romulan ship that will buy you at our price. I should think that many would want to buy a Starfleet commander. You probably have all sorts of military secrets that the Romulans can use." The evil smile on Blak's face made Riker instantly nervous.

Blak's laughter could be heard all the way down the corridor.

\* \* \* \* \*

"But, Doc," protested Geordi to an exasperated Beverly Crusher, "I feel fine. Why do you have me cooped up in here when I could be doing some real work? Besides, you know that I will keep pestering you until you release me." Geordi gave her a crooked smile.

Beverly frowned back. "You're fine, Geordi. It's just that I want to

keep you here for some observation to make sure you don't suffer any long term effects."

"So I can observe myself," protested LaForge. "Listen, Doc, I'll try and take it easy for a while, okay? I promise to be a good little boy." He added solemnly, waiting for her response.

She looked at him with something resembling resignation. "Fine. Get out of here."

Geordi was halfway to the door before she said, "Just take it easy and don't hesitate to come back if you don't feel well."

He was in the corridor before she heard a distant, "Okay."

She turned around and grumbled something to herself about how all of the officers on this ship were stubborn.

\* \* \* \* \*

Geordi made straight for Engineering. Once there, he tracked down his assistant, Lieutenant Cohran. "What's the scoop?" he asked as soon as he found his subordinate.

"We're running at warp 9.7, chasing after the Ferengi who tried to turn your brains to pudding, sir," answered Cohran. Geordi winced. Cohran always had graphic, though odd, descriptions for everything.

Cohran himself was a little odd. He was a Horta, one of the many races that the legendary Admiral James T Kirk had discovered. Cohran himself appeared to be nothing more than an animated boulder. The Horta were a silicon-based life form that could move through solid rock as easily as humans moved through air. This was accomplished through the use of the strongest natural acid found anywhere in the galaxy. If they were moving through rock using this acid, then they would in essence be eating their way along.

The Horta were a very long lived race, measuring their life spans in the centuries. Despite his odd shape, Cohran was one of the best engineers that Geordi had ever seen. He managed this because he could plug his nervous system straight into the machine that he was working on and literally feel where the problem was.

"Have there been any problems with the engines or ship's integrity? This is a pretty fast speed to be holding for very long," commented Geordi.

"No problems. She's been behaving herself like a virgin, sir. There's nothing much for anybody to do right now. Why don't you go get some rest?"

"What, you too? Doctor Crusher just told me the same thing," exclaimed Geordi.

"I know." If it were possible for a rock to appear embarrassed, Cohran did. "She called down just before you arrived and threatened to turn me into an asteroid if I let you do any work." He trailed off, clearly scared at the threat.

Geordi sighed. "I should have known. Thanks, Cohran. If anything happens, give me a call. I'll probably be in Holodeck 1." Geordi turned to go.

"Don't you worry about anything, sir. We'll keep things ship shape around here, even if we have to clean the deck plates with our toothbrushes."

Geordi was smiling on his way out of Engineering. Nothing like a Horta telling jokes to lift your spirits, he mused.

\* \* \* \* \*

"We've got to get out of here," said Mark as soon as Blak was out of earshot.

"No kidding. If I can just get to that panel over there," he indicated the darker panel he had spotted earlier, "I'll see if I can do something about that."

Mark jerked his head around and smiled when he saw what Riker was talking about. Muttering something about being blind, he stood up and pulled off his cloth belt. He expertly folded it over and tied the end into a knot. Krosby then looped the knot over Riker's neck and then let the other half drop over his chest.

"This is going to hurt," he said just as he grabbed Riker's wrist and shoved it into the makeshift sling.

Riker didn't actually cry out, but he did break into a cold sweat. Imzadi, his mind cried. His arm was finally secured next to his body after what seemed like an eternity of raw pain. Once there, he found that it was much more comfortable this way than hanging down his side.

"Thanks," he grunted, sweat running down his face.

"Don't mention it," replied Krosby. "Now to that panel." He pulled Riker up by his good shoulder and then hung on to him as Will nearly fell over from the wave of dizziness that threatened to engulf him. Once the wave passed, however, he could stand up with out any help. Riker slowly made his way over to the panel and examined it carefully.

It was made of the same material as the rest of the wall, but was a slightly darker shade of gray. The most promising aspect that he noticed was a visible

crack where the panel met the rest of the wall. Riker tried to hook his fingernails in it and pull, but the crack was just barely too narrow for him to get a good grip on.

"Let me try," said Krosby.

Riker stood aside and looked over the room again as Krosby had a go at prying open the panel. Save for the panel, their bunks, and the two of them, the room was absolutely bare. Riker began to worry about how they would be fed and other necessities of life cared for.

"No good," grumbled Mark after a full minute of trying.

Riker went back over to his bunk and sat down. He slumped over as he ran through the options in his head. As far as he could see, there weren't any.

Krosby was probably thinking similar thoughts across the room. With a muttered, "Damn," he hit the bunk with his fist.

Riker saw the action and thought for a moment. Didn't Geordi say something about the ship? he thought.

"That's it," he said excitedly after a moment of thought.

"What's it?" grumbled Mark without looking up.

"This entire ship is made of cheap materials. I bet that we could just break that panel and be home free in no time."

"Just break it? Think that it could be that easy?" asked Krosby with skepticism, though he did look up.

"Worth a try," said Riker. He examined his bed more closely to see if he could pry a piece off to pound on the panel. No good. The bed was made of one piece and he sure as hell couldn't lift it up as a whole to use as a club.

Well, have to do it the hard way, he thought as he stood up. He went over to the panel again and thumped it a couple of times with the heel of his left hand.

Well, next step, he thought. He took a step back and pivoted on his left foot to ram the heel of his right boot into the panel. The first kick only succeeded in jarring his bad shoulder. His second try produced a sharp clang, but this third attempt brought a crack. Riker stopped and looked at the panel again. There was a barely visible hairline fracture down the middle of it. He smiled and stepped back again. Two more kicks later the entire panel cracked apart and parts of it fell into the cell and most of the rest fell into the wall. Riker peered in and got a good look at what was inside. After a moment he turned around to find a very interested look on Mark's face.

"The Ferengi never have been very smart have they?" asked Will.

"Why? What did you find?"

"Power circuits. I assume that at least one of them will be for the door."

"You know, this escape may be easier than I originally thought," said Krosby.

Riker smiled and got to work.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Captain," called Wesley Crusher from Conn.

"Yes, Ensign, what is it?"

"The Ferengi are changing course. They are no longer heading toward Ferengi Alliance space. They are now heading to," Wesley did a quick calculation and gulped when he saw the result, "the Romulan Neutral Zone."

It took a moment for that to sink in. "Follow them. How long until we reach the Neutral Zone?" Picard asked.

Wesley tapped the command into his computer and read out the result, "Five and a half hours at present speed. Sir, we won't catch the Ferengi for another five hours."

The meaning of that was clear to all on the bridge. They would only have a half an hour after they catch the Ferengi to free Commander Riker before they entered the Romulan Neutral Zone and possibly started interstellar war.

Picard turned to Counselor Troi seated on his left. "Counselor, why would the Ferengi," was all the further that he got before being cut short by Troi's scream.

"Imzadi," screamed Deanna, mentally and vocally.

Every head on the bridge snapped around at the noise to see that Troi had screamed, clutched at her shoulder, and collapsed onto Picard. Wesley jumped up and came back to them in order to lift her off of Captain Picard who was momentarily shocked into immobility. Worf, meanwhile, did the only sensible thing that he could under the circumstances. He called Doctor Crusher to the bridge. Wesley finally managed to lift Troi off of Picard by grabbing her around her waist and essentially lifting her straight up in a bear hug. This had the desired effect, but it made Wesley blush furiously. He laid her down flat in front of the command chairs.

Picard meanwhile had managed to get his muscles to respond to commands again. He knelt down beside Deanna and put two fingers on her throat to check her pulse. It was rapid and thready.

Crusher burst into the bridge at that moment and demanded, "What happened?" She began running her medical tricorder over Troi's body without

waiting for an answer.

"She just screamed and fainted," answered Picard.

"It was Will, Captain," said Deanna, barely audible. "He was in intense pain. We must help him." She struggled to get up.

"We'll get to him, Deanna," soothed Beverly. "Right now I need to get you to Sickbay. Can you walk or do I need to call for a stretcher?"

"I can make it," responded Troi, slightly embarrassed as she stood up under her own power.

Crusher smiled at her, "Good. Let's go then." They headed to the turbolift doors, Deanna holding her head and Crusher with her arm around Troi, offering support.

"Why are all of my senior officers getting themselves hurt?" asked Picard from no one in particular.

\* \* \* \* \*

Doctor Crusher had no sooner finished calling Engineering and threatening Cohran than she got an emergency summons to the bridge from Worf.

As she stood in the turbolift on her way to the bridge, she wondered if it could be Worf himself. She hadn't wanted to release him yet, but that stubborn Klingon just stood up and walked out. It was getting to the point that she couldn't keep her patients in Sickbay anymore.

As soon as the turbolift stopped, she jumped out onto the bridge and found that Deanna was the one who needed her help. She quickly learned what had happened and that there would be no long term effects. She finally coaxed Deanna into coming to Sickbay with her and maneuvered her into the turbolift.

"What happened?" asked Crusher as soon as the lift doors closed.

"I'm not sure," came the confused reply. "Captain Picard was asking me a question and the next thing that I knew I was receiving wave after wave of pain from Commander Riker. I don't know why, but I did."

"Are you sure that it was Will?" asked Beverly as the turbolift slowed to a stop and the doors opened.

A small smile played at the corners of Deanna's mouth. "Yes, Beverly, I'm sure it was Will. He is very identifiable, emotionally. At least to me he is." She added as the pair walked into Sickbay.

The smile on Crusher's face melted into a frown of concern and then shock as Deanna turned pale and passed out again.

Beverly's shock lasted less than a second, however. Her doctor's instincts took over and caught Deanna before she hit the deck. It took her only moments to lift Troi up and deposit her onto the nearest medical

diagnostic bed. The readout immediately began showing the patient's vital signs. They were wavering radically.

Crusher's face puckered into a frown as she tried to tell what was wrong. All of her medical experience seemed useless as she frantically searched her memory for what was causing her friend's condition. No matter. Treat the symptoms and then go after the cause, she thought.

She first injected a mild sedative to ease the wild heart rate and then began picking selective drugs to help the other major organs fight whatever it was.

"What was wrong with Counselor Troi, Doctor?" queried Picard from the bridge.

She slapped her communicator without slowing down her ministrations to Troi and began to speak rapidly, "She originally fainted from a wave of pain that Commander Riker was apparently broadcasting, Captain. However, that is not the problem right now. She has collapsed again."

"From what?" came the concerned reply.

"I'm sorry, Captain, but I have no idea. Crusher out." She slapped her communicator again to close the link to the bridge and set about saving Deanna Troi's life.

\* \* \* \* \*

Completely oblivious to what was happening to Counselor Troi, Geordi LaForge went looking for Data. While he was lying in Sickbay he had decided to go back to the Holodeck with his android friend and work on that program some more. He figured that Doctor Crusher would let him do something like that since it wasn't actually work.

Finding Data wasn't nearly as difficult as it sounds because the Enterprise's main computer could find anybody on the ship in a matter of seconds. Geordi asked the computer and learned that Data was in the Ten-Forward Lounge. Odd, thought Geordi, he usually doesn't go there. But who am I to tell him where he can and can't go? I'll just stop by and talk to him there, he concluded.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Guinan, could you help me with a problem?"

Guinan, the hostess of the Ten-Forward Lounge, looked up and saw Commander Data looking at her with a mixture of embarrassment and apprehension on a face that usually gave no emotional response at all. She was very surprised to see him in here at all. When he did come it was with a group of other officers and

even then he rarely talked to her.

Recovering her composure quickly, she said, "Sure, Data. Have a seat.

What can I do for you?"

Data sat down and considered the hostess. The first thing that he noticed was the outfit she was wearing. It consisted of a dark blue outfit that almost resembled a robe, with a hat of the same shade. The hat was so large that it was almost the same size as the robe itself. Data recalled that she preferred clothing of this type, so he dismissed the fact that the hat was several times the size of her head.

He then looked at her and realized, not for the first time, that it was hard to tell what species she came from. She exhibited a little bit of many diverse cultures and physical attributes. Data knew that Captain Picard had argued long and hard for her to be allowed to run the Ten-Fore Lounge on the Enterprise, but nobody else, including Data and the ship's computer, knew much else about her or why Captain Picard lobbied to Starfleet Command on her behalf.

However, she had the uncanny knack of knowing when people needed a drink refilled, a shoulder to cry on, or if they just wanted to be left alone. These things made her the perfect hostess for the social center of a moving city.

"Yesterday Geordi and I started a holodeck simulation," began Data with some hesitation. "In it I had programmed in a formal party scenario and gave each of us an escort for the evening. He seemed very happy with the setup, but I am confused as to what I should say to Grace, my escort. Should I ask her to dance, should I just talk to her, should I let her guide the conversation, should I . . ." He trailed off as he realized that Guinan was on the verge of laughing out loud at him. "What did I say that was humorous?"

"Nothing, Data," she managed, stifling another laugh. "It's just that some people have asked me some very odd questions since I came to the Enterprise, but this is the first time that I've had an android with women troubles. To answer your question, you should do whatever seems natural. Let her guide you a little if you must, but the computer will go along with just about anything you decide to do. Data, you're a unique individual and you should just be yourself." She spotted Geordi as he walked in and started to look around. "There's Geordi now. Why don't you two go back to that program right now and have some fun. From what I've heard, we won't be doing much for a few hours at least. Go on and have some fun."

"Thank you, Guinan," said Data as Geordi joined them.

"Hi, Guinan," greeted Geordi. "Data, do you want to go back to that

holodeck program we were in earlier? You know the one with Gloria and Grace?"

He seemed rather eager to be going.

Geordi could hear Guinan give a small laugh as she went to tend to some of her other customers. "What was that about?" he asked Data.

"Guinan and I were discussing just that program before you arrived. To answer your question, yes. I would like to go back and try that scenario some more."

"Great," said Geordi as he moved toward the doors.

\* \* \* \* \*

The program was quickly resumed once they arrived at the doors to Holodeck One. The only modification that they had to make was Grace's memory of Picard's voice. Other than that, they continued where they had left off, Data talking to Grace and Geordi dancing with Gloria.

"What were we talking about?" asked Grace.

"You were saying that I know humans very well right now," said Data with his usual accuracy.

Grace laughed lightly. "That's what I like about you, Fredrick, you make me laugh. It's just some of the little things you do and the serious way you say them." She paused and turned toward Geordi and his date on the dance floor. They were currently doing a slow waltz. "I'm glad that Gloria and Thomas are getting along so well."

Geordi seems to be very happy, thought Data to himself.

He continued watching them for a few more seconds. How can they be so close together without stepping on each other's feet? he wondered.

Grace turned back to him. "Anyway, I still say that you understand humans very well indeed. After all, how could we be engaged to be married if I didn't think that I understood you and you understood me?"

Data, who had programmed the simulation, knew that this was coming. It was a part of the learning experience for him. How better to understand humans than to experience their relationships in their full complexities? he reasoned.

Grace continued, "I love you, Fredrick, and I always will. I'm glad that you asked me to marry you. You made me the happiest girl alive." With that, she threw her arms around Data's neck and proceeded to give him a kiss that would have sent even Riker spinning.

He responded as well as he was able, but his lack of real experience detracted from the intended effect. Grace didn't seem to notice or if she did, she didn't care.

Once the kiss finished she leaned against him and sighed contentedly.

Data wondered what to do next. He had a woman who seemed to be in love with him practically lying on top of him and he felt that he really should do something.

Emulation seems to be in order, he thought. Therefore, what would Commander Riker do in this situation? He didn't know for sure. He had never quite figured out how Riker treated ladies in this kind of situation. Very well, what would Captain Picard do? That too drew a blank. How about Geordi? He looked over at his friend just in time to see them kissing in a manner that he himself had just experienced. Good start, he thought.

He leaned over and kissed Grace again. She responded just as enthusiastically as the last time and snuggled further into his shoulder. That was apparently pleasurable for her, but did not get us anywhere, he thought. I have to think of something else.

Who else could I emulate? What would Worf do? He did a quick search of Klingon mating rituals. Well, he thought, I could try that.

"bangwlj rur Doq," he started. He sounded as if his intestines and vocal cords were being sucked through the matter-antimatter engines.

Grace interrupted with, "What was that, Fredrick?"

"Klingon poetry. I started to say 'My love is like a red, red rose, newly sprung in June.'"

Grace giggled and looked up to him with an amused expression on her face.

"What am I supposed to do while you recite Klingon love poetry?"

"You are supposed to throw heavy objects at me until you can not find any more and then throw yourself at me and make love to me," he replied with a straight face.

Her face was stretching into a larger and larger smile until she heard that last line. Data then began to wonder how red her face could become before she began hemorrhaging.

"What kind of girl do you think I am, anyway? Just because you take me to a fancy party you think you can take advantage of me." Her voice was rising with every word. Several heads turned toward the sound.

"Well, buster, you've got it all wrong." She viciously tore a ring off of her finger and threw it at him. Data reflexively caught it and looked at it. It was a gold ring with a small diamond surrounded by rubies. By this time everybody in the room was staring at them.

Geordi, who was still out on the dance floor with Gloria, considered pausing the program, but he was genuinely interested in how his friend would

handle this display.

Grace, meanwhile, was continuing her tirade. "Get out of my life, Fredrick. I never want to see you again." With that, she buried her face in her hands and ran out the door. Much to Geordi's disappointment, Gloria followed without even a good-bye.

"Pause program," Geordi called out. Everybody except Data and himself immediately froze in their positions. Geordi slowly walked over to Data, shaking his head. Data had a very confused look on his face.

"What was that all about?" Geordi asked his friend.

"I began to recite Klingon love poetry to her in an attempt to emulate Lieutenant Worf. She did not understand Klingonaase, so I had to stop and explain what I was saying and what she should do in such a situation." Data's confused expression remained on his face throughout the synopsis of their conversation.

Geordi shook his head again. He knew this Klingon custom. He had heard about it in a Xenopsychology class in Starfleet Academy.

"That's a Klingon custom, Data. It doesn't work very well at all on humans. You just insulted her by doing that. You may not have meant to, but you did, just the same. See, girls want their dates to be tender and romantic. Klingon mating customs are anything but tender."

"I am sorry," said Data, genuinely apologetic. He knew how much fun Geordi was having with Gloria.

"I wonder how long we have before we catch the Ferengi," Geordi wondered, changing the subject. He wanted to spend more time in here before things really started to happen.

He tilted his head up and addressed the air, "Computer, how long until we catch the Ferengi ship?"

"Four hours, twenty-eight minutes at present speed," replied the pleasant female voice.

He turned back to Data, "Why don't we try this program again while we have some spare time? Besides, Doctor Crusher doesn't want me to do any real work for a while, and this is a good way for both of us to relax."

Data nodded his head and turned to the computer console to restart the program for the second time in as many hours.

Geordi wondered how many more times Data would need to restart the program. He hoped it would be quite a few. He was having a lot of fun getting to know Gloria.

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Riker had his back turned to the door when he heard footsteps running down the hall. "Damn," he hissed venomously. "They heard the kicks. Get ready to jump them," as he talked he left the shattered panel and moved to one of the corners next to the door. Mark positioned himself on the other side. Whoever came in was flanked even as they began the fight.

\*\*\*\*\*

Blak came running full tilt down the corridor toward the brig. Damn these humans, he thought savagely. I didn't even want to pick them up, but no. That bumbling Mok just had to take them and try to make a profit off of those two. I told him that they could cause trouble. At least he has the brains to be coming to back me up.

I wonder what those two meddlesome humans are up to? he thought as he slowed to stop at the door.

Blak stopped in front of the door and peered in, energy whip drawn. No sense in being jumped by those two. His hesitation vanished when he spotted the shattered panel. Those fools destroyed Ferengi property, thought Blak with a snarl. He jabbed in the security code to deactivate the force field and marched straight into the cell without another thought as to where Riker and Krosby were.

Blak's next impression was of the toe of a boot streaking toward his face.

His face was shortly making an impression on the floor.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Did you really have to do that?" asked Riker. "I could have knocked him out without trying to kill him."

"I told you that I have a grudge against these monsters. I just made my first payback for what they did to my ship and to my freedom." He considered Blak's bleeding lip and broken nose. "Besides, I think I improved his looks."

The look on Riker's face was indecipherable. Krosby couldn't tell if Will was upset or amused.

Will took the lead and walked out into the corridor. Mark paused only long enough to pick up Blak's energy whip and then followed.

As soon as Riker got outside of his cell, the first thing he noticed was that Mok was standing three meters in front of him with a drawn energy whip. The Ferengi captain did not look pleased. His face appeared as if it would explode at any moment.

Mok shrieked a truly hideous Ferengi curse (roughly translated as "May all of your contracts fall through and you die penniless") and flipped the energy

whip at Riker.

Will saw a blast of white paralyzing energy coming at him. His reaction was instinctive. He dodged to his right. The bolt sizzled past Riker's ear and slammed straight into Krosby's chest. Mark flew five meters down the corridor before he landed with a heavy thud and didn't move.

Riker noticed what had happened to his comrade, but he had his own problems coming his way. He didn't think that the hard floor and his bad shoulder would mix very well.

He quickly realized the veracity of his prediction as he landed in a roll and his shoulder exploded into liquid pain. His next coherent thought was that his roll didn't go as planned either. He had hit a wall.

Riker was now essentially standing on his head, leaned against the wall with a very hostile Ferengi standing over him holding a dangerous weapon.

What did fearless Starfleet commanders do in situations such as this? Riker didn't know either, so he didn't move until told to do so, not that he could very quickly even if he wanted to.

"Get up," snarled Mok.

Riker gingerly rolled into a sitting position. His head was still reeling from the pain in his shoulder and he felt as if he couldn't stand up without antigrav support.

"Move it," screamed Mok.

He was at the mouth, noticed Riker. Maybe I should move more quickly, he thought. He doesn't seem to be in a very forgiving mood right now. I just hope I don't pass out.

Riker gritted his teeth and tried to stand upright. A combination of the nauseating pain in his shoulder and the dizziness in his head from trying to stand up too fast stopped him. Deanna, his mind cried as he fell.

\* \* \* \* \*

Deanna Troi wondered where she was. The last thing she remembered was talking to Beverly in Sickbay. The next thing she knew, she was here, wherever here was. She couldn't exactly see or feel anything, but she could sense other beings around her. She called out to them, but no one answered.

Deciding that doing nothing was one of the worst things that she could do under the circumstances, she hesitantly touched one and found the mind of a Vulcan she knew. Dr. Selar, one of Crusher's staff. So these are the minds of everybody on the Enterprise, she reasoned.

At least I'm still on the ship, she thought, but what condition am I in?

I was in Beverly's office in Sickbay, so I'll try there first, she decided.

She mentally went back to the office, a trip of about ten meters. There was no one there. She next tried the diagnostic beds nearest the office and found Crusher's mind.

Deanna touched it and called out, "Beverly."

\* \* \* \* \*

Dr. Crusher whirled in a full circle looking around Sickbay to try to identify the voice that she had just heard. The only other person in Sickbay was Dr. Selar, running diagnostics on the Sickbay computer system. The voice sounded like Deanna's, but that was impossible. Deanna was right in front of her, unconscious. Not only that, but the voice seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once. Given how she had heard her name, and that Dr. Selar had not moved, Crusher decided that she had just been telepathically contacted. "Who's there?" she called mentally, as well as she was able.

"It's me, Deanna Troi. You know me, Beverly," came the calm reply.

Crusher turned back to Deanna's body. It hadn't moved. In fact, the monitors on the diagnostic bed were the only things that kept her from thinking that Troi's body was dead. "Where are you?" she asked hesitantly.

"I'm not sure. I can move through the Enterprise without trying, and I see everybody's mind as if it were a little star," answered Deanna's voice from somewhere within Beverly's mind.

"How do you feel?" queried Crusher.

"Fine. I have an incredible amount of freedom right now, Beverly. It's like being released from my body. It's very interesting, and a little bit scary too," she added.

"Okay. I think I've finally figured out what happened to you. Your body is right here in front of me, but your mind appears to be free from it. Your body is showing symptoms of a Ryboxian virus. They're very unpredictable illnesses. Not only that, but you could have gotten it anywhere and at anytime. The bioscreens on the air circulators can't detect them. Anyway, sometimes they act just like a normal flu and sometimes they attack each person's individual traits. It seems that this time it has attacked your psionic abilities and enhanced them in some way. Anyway, I have no way of curing you immediately. I'll just have to treat the symptoms and let your body fight the virus itself." She paused to let Deanna say something if she wanted to. There was no comment so she continued.

"Meanwhile, since you seem to be mentally free and coherent, I suggest that you take advantage of it. When was the last time that you actually down

sat and meditated for more than ten minutes? I think that you could use this time to get some mental rest. I've no idea how long you'll be in this condition, so make the best of it, okay?"

"I'll try, Beverly, but I'm getting lonely already," came back Deanna's soft response.

Beverly smiled. "Just think of me as the neighbor that you can stop by and visit anytime you feel like it," urged Beverly mentally.

Crusher could almost feel Troi's answering smile. "Thank you Beverly. Another thing, please don't tell anybody this, okay?"

"Fine, Deanna. Now get some rest while I take care of you."

"Yes, Doctor," came the amused reply. "I'll leave you alone so you can work on me."

\* \* \* \* \*

Deanna pulled herself away from Dr. Crusher and looked around her changed world. The people on the Enterprise were clustered around her. She could look into any mind she chose, but she didn't want to do that. Being an empath, she knew her powers and didn't want to invade the mental privacy of anybody. Besides, that kind of move would justify the fears of many people around her. Most people just don't understand me, she thought sadly. A few people do though. Captain Picard, Beverly, . . . Will. They understand what I go through.

Will. Now why didn't I think of him sooner? I'd better find him and make sure he's all right.

"Deanna," it was so quiet that she could barely hear it, but she knew immediately what it meant. She turned toward the sound and sped to Riker.

\* \* \* \* \*

Deanna wondered what she would find when she got to Will Riker. Would he be fine, or would she find him dying, or would she find him at all, or . . .

Stop it, Deanna, she scolded herself. Thinking that way won't get you anywhere. Now stop thinking morbid thoughts and get going to find him! She almost smiled in spite of what was going on around her.

Since she was free of a physical body, she could travel even faster than the incredible speeds of the Enterprise. She was, quite literally, traveling at the speed of thought. She quickly overtook the Ferengi ship and searched it for the image of minds. Betazoids never could read Ferengi, so to her the Avarice seemed to be a ship with only one person in it, Riker. She sped to him and touched his mind.

"Will."

"What? Who is it?" came the frightened reply.

"It's okay, Will. It's me, Deanna."

"Deanna?" his relieved tone gave way to confusion. "You're on the

Enterprise, aren't you?"

"No, Will. My body has a Ryboxian virus and my mind is free. I heard my name and I came. What happened?"

"I was in the brig trying to escape," he began, talking quickly. "Blak showed up and we knocked him out and tried to get out. Mok was right there and he knocked Mark out. He then told me to get up, but the pain in my shoulder knocked me out again."

Deanna was very confused. "Us? Mark? Blak? Your shoulder? I'm sorry, Will, but I don't understand. Could you please start from the beginning?"

"What? Oh, sorry," He's still talking quickly, almost incoherently, she noticed. "When I woke up my shoulder hurt and I met Mark. He was being held by the Ferengi for smuggling the crystals that I was looking for. I saw a panel and wanted to open it, but first Blak, Mok's second in command, came and threatened to sell me to the Romulans. I then found the panel and kicked it in. No, Mark gave me a sling out of his belt first. Anyway, the panel had power circuits in it. I was trying to open the door when Blak came to the door. Mark kicked him in the face and then stole his whip. I walked out the door, and rolled into the wall to avoid Mok's energy whip. Mark got hit. What happened to him?" he paused, waiting for her to answer.

He's asleep and babbling, concluded Counselor Troi. He's been speaking rapidly and his thoughts are disjointed. Deanna, on the other hand, not the professional psychiatrist but the very good friend, thought that his actions were kind of cute. She didn't want to do this to him, but he did ask her a direct question.

"I'm sorry, Will, but I didn't see any other humans on board." She tried to be sympathetic because she knew that his mind was working on a child-like level since he was asleep and his subconscious was in control.

He was silent for a moment and then asked quietly, "You mean that Mok killed him?"

"I'm afraid so, Will. I know that he was a friend of yours. Could you please tell me what happened next?" This was rather cruel to his emotions, she thought. Well, if he thinks about something else then he may not let Mark's death affect him too much.

"I was rolled up by the wall," continued Riker incoherently. "Mok told me

to get down, but I couldn't move very fast, so I got down slowly. He was frothing at the mouth so I tried to move faster. I guess I passed out again, and then you showed up," he concluded.

Definitely asleep, said the clinical portion of her mind. Oh, shut up, replied the other, more sensitive portion of her personality. "Are you okay, Will? Everybody on the Enterprise is worried about you."

"I'm fine. Just my shoulder is broken. You know, I've been thinking." He has calmed down somewhat. He's actually coherent now, remarked Deanna to herself, but he's probably still asleep. "Since I've gotten over to this ship I've been threatened, gassed, and shot at. Things like that tend to make you rethink your entire previous life. I know that I've made some mistakes over the years. Most of them I can't do anything about, but there is one that I can change. I did love you before and I still do love you."

Don't do it, Will, thought Deanna to herself. "If I have anything to say about it," continued Riker, "I want you to marry me so that I can make up for some of the mistakes that I have made in the past." He stopped and waited for her answer.

How do I answer that? asked Deanna of herself. I do love him and I want to marry him, but he doesn't know what he's saying. Besides he's asleep, and not responsible for what he's saying. He could never marry and settle down. He's just not that type of person. He's also delirious from pain, and that's why he's saying these things. But what if he's serious? Do I take him up on the offer?

"We could have a big wedding," continued Riker as she wrestled with her emotions. "Captain Picard could perform the service, Dr. Crusher could be the bridesmaid . . . who would be the best man? Data, Worf, Wes? Data would probably try to analyze the situation, so he's out. Worf, well I don't know if he'd want to do it, but if I asked him in the right way, he might. Wesley sounds like a good choice. This ought to be an exciting experience for him. We'll have to figure out a way to convince your mother that it shouldn't be a completely traditional Betazoid wedding. Sorry, but I can't see myself getting married stark naked. We could invite all of the crew and their families. Where would you want to go for our honeymoon? Earth? Betazed?"

"That all sounds lovely, Will, but I think we'd better discuss this later. Right now you are in a lot of trouble. What will the Ferengi do with you?" She reminded herself that he was consciously asleep and not responsible for what he just said.

"Blak threatened to sell me to the Romulans," Riker answered, temporarily

setting aside the wedding plans.

"You're heading into Romulan space. We should be able to catch up to you about a half hour before you make it. We should catch you in about three hours. Remember, sometime during that half an hour we will do something to try to help you. Just be ready for anything, okay?"

"Okay, Deanna," he replied obediently.

"Good. Now get some sleep. I've got to go now. I'll see you in a couple of hours, Will. Bye."

"Bye, Imzadi," said Riker softly.

Deanna pulled away from him and made her way slowly back to the Enterprise, thinking furiously all the way. With any luck, she thought, he won't remember any of this entire conversation when he wakes up. Or do I want him to remember and be serious? She didn't know the answers to her own questions.

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Captain's Log: Supplemental.

The Ferengi have changed course; they are now heading toward the Romulan Neutral Zone. We should be able to catch them before they make it, but just barely.

Meanwhile, Counselor Troi is in Sickbay with what Dr. Crusher says is a Ryboxian virus. Apparently Deanna could have gotten it anytime in the past couple of years and it hasn't shown up until now. They are very unpredictable and long lived viruses.

Since both Troi and Riker are gone, I won't be able to use them as sounding boards. I've got to figure out how to stop the Ferengi on my own. Do I dare fire on them for what they may do to Riker? Do I just talk to them?

Where is Number One when I need him?

\* \* \* \* \*

Once again, Data told the holodeck computer, "Resume program Data One." The computer responded by putting the illusions of Grace sitting by Data and Gloria dancing with Geordi out on the dance floor. Thanks to the good offices of the computer, Grace was once again in a good mood.

"bangwjl rur Doq," said Data, just like the last time.

"I'm sorry, Fredrick, what was that?" asked Grace.

"That was Klingon poetry. I thought that you would like to listen to some," replied Data. He wasn't about to tell her what Klingons did while listening to poetry. He had just found out that doing that would upset her a

great deal.

Grace smiled. Data found that that simple gesture was oddly pleasing.

"Sorry to disappoint you Fredrick, but I don't speak Klingonese. How about we just talk instead of reciting poetry?"

"Okay," he paused. "What would you like to talk about?"

She laughed. "I don't care. Anytime I'm with you, I just love to talk.

It doesn't matter what we talk about, just as long as we're together."

He considered that for a moment. What should he talk about? Didn't Guinan say that he could let her lead the conversation if he had to? Well, he reasoned, the best way to do that is to ask her something. "What plans have you made for our wedding?" he asked.

She smiled. "Thank you for reminding me. I've got something to show you." She pulled open her handbag and started rummaging around in it.

While she was otherwise occupied, Data looked around the room for Geordi. He was still on the dance floor, apparently deep in conversation with Gloria. Even as he watched, she laughed, and Geordi smiled at her. He still seems to be having fun, thought Data to himself.

"Who are you watching?" asked Grace from beside him.

"Thomas and Gloria. They make a very nice couple, do they not?"

"Yes they do. Thank you for bringing Thomas to meet her. I feel guilty going on so many dates with you and my roommate gets stuck at our apartment with nothing to do. This is good for her.

"Here is what I wanted to show you," she continued. She held up a piece of cloth for Data's inspection.

Data took it, looked at it, and asked, "What is it?" As far as he could tell, it was simply a piece of white cotton cloth, suitable for almost anything. He did notice, however, that it was real cotton, not synthetic.

"Part of my wedding dress, silly. What else would it be? I'm going to have a full dress made of this material. It'll have puffed sleeves with little red flowers on them and I'll wear a golden necklace with our names enclosed within a heart on it."

"That sounds like an appropriate dress for the occasion," Data commented. He stopped. What else to talk about? "Who are you going to invite?"

"Well, let's see," she paused in thought. "Gloria and my parents of course. Who else? Oh, yes, Kimberly, Anna, Kathleen, and probably a couple of others. Who will you invite?"

Data hadn't thought about it. Who would I invite to my wedding? he

wondered. "Well, Captain Picard, Commander Riker, Thomas," he indicated Geordi, "Lieutenant Worf, Dr and Wesley Crusher, Chief O'Brien, Counselor Troi -"

She interrupted him with, "Sounds like you have more guests coming than I do. I'll just have to invite more people to keep up with you." She laughed and smiled at him, her eyes full of love.

Data was about to respond when he felt a heavy tap on his shoulder. He had heard someone come up behind him, but he had assumed that they would go on by or sit at the bar beside him, not interrupt him. He turned to look at a large, unshaven man wearing a creased suit. His nose appeared to be cherry red. Data's sensitive olfactory sensors immediately detected a large increase in the concentration of alcohol fumes in the air. Data correlated these facts in his mind and came to the conclusion that the man was intoxicated.

"May I help you?" asked Data politely.

"Yesh," the man slurred. "That girl of yoursh ish bery pretty. If you don't wants any troubles, you could letsh me dance with her." The man stared at Data blearily and clenched his right fist.

Grace had grabbed Data's arm from behind, and was whispering, "Please make him go away, Fredrick."

Data was surprised at the man's audacity. He was clearly incapable of walking in a straight line, let alone dancing. Data turned toward Grace in an effort to ignore the man in the hopes that he would go away.

Before he got all of the way around, however, his shoulder was jerked backward and he found himself once again face to face with the drunk. What should I do? he wondered. This man was clearly not going to leave us alone, so I must do something about him.

He considered his options. Grace obviously didn't want to dance with him. She was still grabbing his arm with all of her strength. He could try to just walk away with her, but the man probably wouldn't let them go. He could pause the holodeck program, but he was too curious about what the man may do to do something like that. The history of literature was replete with characters who would not hesitate to fight for the honor of a lady. He thought that his present situation called for this, so he stood up to face the man.

"No," was the simple declaration.

The large man laughed loudly and then abruptly let loose with a punch toward Data's face.

He had no chance against Data's android reflexes and strength. Data

caught the man's hand in his own and just stood there waiting to see what the man would try next.

When he realized that his punch had not landed, the drunk grunted and really leaned against Data's hand. It wouldn't move. Out of a mixture of frustration and desperation the man then tried to hit Data with his other hand. Data simply stepped aside and pushed the man forward, adding to his own momentum. Data was careful, however, to steer him away from Grace. It would not do at all for him to let get her hurt by this ruffian.

The man stumbled forward and went face first into a table full of people. Drinks, chairs, and people went flying everywhere. One of the men that was on the bottom started fighting against what was lying on top of him, namely the drunk. The two men ended up on top of each other pummeling one another's faces with poorly aimed blows.

They were the least of Data's worries. Some of the other men from the overturned table were advancing on him. They did not look pleased. One of the men accidentally bumped another and they started trading blows. The scene was quickly turning into an old fashioned barroom brawl. Data was fascinated.

Geordi's first indication of a problem was when the couple next to Gloria and himself fell over, with somebody large and clearly intoxicated lying on top of them. LaForge looked up from his entertaining conversation with Gloria to find a full blown fight going on. What has Data gotten himself into now? he wondered.

"Please excuse me a moment," he said politely to Gloria. "Computer, pause program."

The noises in the room abruptly stopped. Geordi disengaged himself from the now motionless Gloria and walked over toward where he had left Data, which incidentally was the center of the fight, he noticed with some worry.

"Data, what happened this time?" he asked when he found his android friend surrounded by motionless people.

"That man," he indicated the man that Geordi had seen, "came over to us and demanded to dance with Grace. She did not want to dance with him, so I told him no. He did not seem to accept that answer. He tried to hit me, but I stopped him from hurting me or Grace."

"What?" asked Geordi in obvious confusion. "The simulation shouldn't be able to do something that may allow anybody to get hurt."

"I programmed it to be absolutely precise with every detail, unfortunately

it also included the intoxication levels of the patrons."

"Right," answered Geordi with a shake of his head. "Why don't we get back up to the bridge and try this some other time. You seem to be getting into all sorts of trouble on this date, Data."

"I am sorry, Geordi, but I did want to learn more about humans. I have been gathering a great deal of fascinating information." He turned his head toward a blank wall. "Computer, save and discontinue."

The two men walked out of the now empty holodeck and headed toward the bridge.

\* \* \* \* \*

Riker became conscious again with a start. Now, what woke me up? he thought. He tried to remember what had happened to him over the last couple of minutes before he fell asleep. Let's see, he thought, I got out into the hall and rolled into the wall in an effort to avoid Mok's whip. Mark got hit and killed.

Now why do I believe that? he wondered. I've no way of knowing unless one of the Ferengi tell me. Anyway, Mok told me to get down and I tried to do it slowly, but he seemed upset so I went faster and passed out. If that's the last thing that I remember, then why do I think that the Enterprise will try to rescue me in the next couple of hours? And then they will have only half an hour to do it. Did I dream it? And why do I think that I asked Deanna an important question? If I did, what was it? The more that Riker thought, the more questions were piling up in his mind, so he tried not to think along those lines any more.

He opened his eyes in order to figure out where the Ferengi had put him this time. The more that he looked around, the more he became convinced that he was in the same cell that he had just broken out of.

Good news, he thought. He looked over to where the panel should be, to find that someone had put a very crude patch over it. The patch was made of durranium, welded to the wall. Crude, but effective. Not much chance I could kick my way through that stuff, he thought ruefully.

Escape plans over for the moment, he took stock of his body. His shoulder was still aching. Great, thought Riker. Dr. Crusher had finally finished patching me up after my run in with the Wild Thing on Paradise, and I had to come over to this ship and mess it up again. Beverly will never let me live this down, he thought, thoroughly chagrined. Other than his shoulder, he felt fine.

He looked over to the other bunk in the cell, half hoping to find Mark

lying there. He wasn't. Maybe my dream really wasn't a dream after all, he thought.

Since he couldn't think of anything else to do short of throwing himself at the force field, he decided to wait for the Enterprise to try to rescue him. He fervently hoped that they would make an attempt at it. He didn't fancy being sold to the Romulan Empire so that they could pry military secrets from him.

Riker sat, waited, and conserved his strength for when he would need it the most. He was sure that he would need all of his energy in a couple of hours, one way or another.

\* \* \* \* \*

Deanna made her way back to the Enterprise, thinking about her conversation with Will. Once she got there, however, she knew that she needed to report what Riker had told her to Captain Picard. She made her way to the bridge and tried to find the mind of her captain.

\* \* \* \* \*

Picard tabbed the button on his armchair to close the log entry and sat back with a sigh. How will I handle the Ferengi? he wondered. If only I knew what they were doing.

"Captain," he heard.

That's odd, he thought. Did I just hear Counselor Troi call me?

"Yes you did, sir," came back a reply that he wasn't sure whether he heard or only thought.

"Well, well," he thought aloud to Deanna. "And where are you, Counselor?"

"I'm mentally here with you, Captain, but my body is probably still in Sickbay."

"And how are you managing that?" he thought mentally, very interested in the answer.

"The Ryboxian virus attacked and enhanced my psionic abilities. It's really very interesting, Captain. I'm more free now than I've ever been. This is interesting, but I prefer to have a body around me."

"I see. Did you just stop by to chat? Or do you think that you could help me with a problem?"

"I think that I can help you with some information, sir. I just talked to Will. He was unconscious at the time, so I'm not sure how reasonable his answers are. He said that he had hurt his shoulder when the Ferengi gassed him. He woke up and found that there was a smuggler in the brig with him,

apparently the same smuggler that had brought the Atax crystals to the Ferengi.

They made an escape attempt, but Daamon Mok stopped them, killing the smuggler in the process. They also apparently have threatened to sell Will to the Romulans. I warned him that we will try to help him in the next couple of hours, and he should be ready for anything. His conscious mind was asleep, so I'm not sure whether he remembers that or not."

"Thank you, Counselor. You've answered a great many questions," remarked Picard, vastly relieved.

"Sir, could you please not tell Will that I talked to him? I don't think that I want him to remember all of what was said."

Picard raised an eyebrow at the request, but agreed. She had just brought him the very kind of information that he needed to plan out the next couple of hours.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Thank you, sir," said Deanna before she left Picard.

She made her way back to Sickbay to find out what had happened to her physical body. She found Beverly in the same place that Troi had left her, about an hour ago.

"Beverly," called Deanna.

"Yes, Deanna, I'm here. I've got some good news for you. I'm helping your body fight the virus, and I think that it's working. You should be up and around in another day or so."

"We don't have a day, Beverly. We have maybe three hours before we lose Will."

"I'm sorry, Deanna, but I can't speed up the process. It'll take that long just for your body to get itself well again." She paused and waited for the argument to continue.

Deanna sighed. "Very well, Beverly. I'll just run around for a while. I'll probably be around Captain Picard later if you want to talk to me."

"Okay, Deanna." She paused. "Are you sure that you're fine?"

"Yes, Mother, I feel fine," joked Deanna.

Beverly smiled. At least she can joke about this, thought Crusher to herself.

\* \* \* \* \*

Deanna pulled away from Dr. Crusher and took a longer look around the Enterprise. I can go anywhere I wanted to, she realized. Well, she asked herself, now that I can go anywhere in the entire galaxy, where to? She drew a complete blank. She realized that everywhere she ever wanted to go was right

here on the ship, easy access anytime. That blew that time killer, she thought ruefully. I could go off ship, she thought, but to where? And even then, how would I know when to get back?

Who do I want to talk to? Nobody came to mind immediately except Riker and he was out for various reasons. She sighed in resignation. She was absolutely free and had nothing to do. It was at that point that she realized how truly lonely she felt.

Who would I talk to if I had felt this way yesterday? she thought. The answer was immediate, Guinan. The Ten-Forward hostess was always willing to listen and knew how to fix almost any problem. She sped off to the Ten-Forward.

On the way, she happened to pass Geordi LaForge in the Holodeck. Without trying, she read the emotion that he was strongly broadcasting, love. Deanna was tempted to stop and find out what was going on, but her professional ethics prevented her from doing so. She went on to the Ten-Fore.

As soon as she got there, she started searching for Guinan. Almost immediately she got a strong sense of seeing somebody. What was almost as scary was that Deanna thought that whoever it was, was looking at her, too. The closer she got to this person, the more she became convinced that it was Q returning for one of his all too frequent visits.

She heard soft laughter. "No, Deanna, don't be scared. It's just little old me, Guinan. And I'm NOT a member of the Q," she added forcefully.

Deanna sighed in relief. "I was worried there for a moment, Guinan. The last time I sensed a mind like yours, it was the first time that we ran into Q, just before Farpoint. Since then I've tried to avoid his mind whenever possible." She chuckled and then something occurred to her. "Why haven't I ever gotten that kind of impression from you before?"

Deanna could feel Guinan's smile. "Deanna, just between you and me, I've got powers that the Captain doesn't even suspect.

"I've been following you for a while, now," she said, changing the subject abruptly. "I haven't heard everything, so you can relax. Anyway, you are wondering what to do for the next couple of hours. I would suggest that you just sit and relax somewhere in here. You can't do anything for a while, so just wait. If you want, I can keep you company. I'm very good at lending someone an ear for a couple of hours. And this way," she continued, "I can keep working while you calm down somewhat."

Deanna smiled and began to tell Guinan about her talk with Will.

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"We're within phaser range of the Ferengi," announced Worf from over Picard's head some two hours later.

"Thank you, Mr. Worf. Open hailing frequency." As he said this, he stood up and advanced on the forward viewscreen.

"Channel open," said Worf as the view of Daamon Mok appeared on the viewscreen in front of Picard.

"What do you want, human?" questioned Mok.

"We want Commander Riker," responded Picard with perfect calm, "and we're prepared to use force if necessary to get him back."

The Ferengi did not appear impressed. "Oh really now? I don't suppose that you would want to buy him back rather than firing on us and possibly killing him in the process?"

"We won't discuss terms. Give us Commander Riker and we will let you go, unharmed."

The Ferengi captain smiled evilly, turned to one of his crew and started snarling at him in what passed for the Ferengi tongue. Once finished, he turned back to Picard and just stared at him. He seemed to be waiting for something.

"Captain," called Worf from his tactical station, "I'm picking up strange energy readings from the Ferengi ship. I can't isolate location or cause." Chief Engineer LaForge was watching the same sensor readings. "The power curve reminds me of something that I saw in Engineering school, Captain. It appears to be an old fashioned trans-warp field that is being directed through their phaser banks." He frowned at his console. "No, it's similar, but not the same thing. I don't know precisely what it is. Sorry, sir."

Picard frowned. He could fire now, at extreme range, or wait. And then there was the matter of their mystery weapon. A directed trans-warp field used as a weapon? Well, it was rumored to have happened to Admiral James T Kirk, but Picard had trouble imagining it. After due consideration, he decided to wait a little while longer and then aim for their phaser mounts in the hope that he could render their mystery weapon useless.

"Cut transmission," he said eventually. "Close on them further, Mr. Worf, and inform me when we are within optimum phaser range. Lock phasers and photon torpedoes on their phaser mounts."

"Aye, sir," responded Worf a gleam in his eye.

The next fifteen minutes were spent uneventfully, though they were very hard on Picard. Finally, when he thought that he could stand no more, he

turned to Worf to order him to open fire.

"Within optimum phaser range, Captain," said Worf just before Picard could say anything.

"Open fire with phaser mountings and engines as targets, Mr. Worf," replied Picard. His fatigue seemed to dissolve just as soon as he had something to do.

"Firing," called Worf. He seems to be positively enjoying firing at the Ferengi, noticed Picard.

Everyone on the Enterprise bridge watched the phaser beams lancing toward the Ferengi trader only to be stopped and dissipated by the aft shields.

"Continue firing until further notice," ordered Picard.

Worf had a very Klingon grin on his face as he turned back to his board to carry out the order. His hands danced over the phaser controls and the phasers continued to mercilessly eat away at the Ferengi shields.

"They're firing back," called Ensign Crusher from Conn even as he implemented minor evasive maneuvers. The Enterprise rocked around them, indicating a Ferengi hit.

"Forward shields drained twenty percent," called Worf. "That was standard phasers, not their trans-warp weapon. Firing continuing." He sent another barrage against the Ferengi shields.

At these speeds, neither ship could maneuver very much at all; Enterprise because they didn't want to get further away from the Ferengi and the Avarice because they wanted to get away from the Enterprise as fast as possible.

"They're slowing," reported Data at Ops. "Warp seven, six, five." He paused. "Holding at warp four point seven. It appears that we have damaged their engines, Captain."

"Good," replied Picard. "Mr. Crusher, get us between them and the Romulan Neutral Zone. Continue firing, Mr. Worf."

"Aye, sir," both officers replied. Picard hoped to force the Ferengi back toward Federation space and give him some breathing room.

"Sound strategy," commented Counselor Troi from nowhere.

"It's nice to see you're back, Counselor," thought Picard. "How have you been?"

"I've been talking to Guinan and I feel better now, Captain. Thank you. If you don't mind, I feel that I should go to Will now. You don't seem to need me here."

"Good idea." He paused. "What would happen to you if one of the phaser

shots went through you?" He didn't think he wanted to know the answer, but he was worried for her.

"I'll try to avoid them," she replied and was gone.

Picard sighed. He noticed that Ensign Crusher had managed to get the Enterprise between the Ferengi and the Neutral Zone already. Picard made a quick decision in his head and came to the conclusion that he could maneuver freely now to avoid phaser shots. "Continue firing and implement evasion tactic gamma, Mr. Crusher."

\* \* \* \* \*

Riker was startled to feel the ship lurch around him. What's going on? he wondered. Of course! The Enterprise is trying to stop the Ferengi. I need to be ready to get out if the opportunity presents itself. He stood by the door to wait, hoping that the power would fail.

He didn't have to wait long. After another hit by the Enterprise, the power to the door flickered and went out for a moment. So did the lights, plunging him into complete darkness. He lunged toward where the door should be and prayed that he'd make it before the power came back on.

He didn't. Just as he got most of the way through, the power flickered back on and caught his leg in its force.

Riker's next conscious memory was of lying on the floor in the hallway. His left leg felt as if somebody with a cruel streak had run Klingon pain sticks up and down its length. He doubted that he could stand for a couple of minutes, so he looked around to pass the time. As he expected, he was on the other side of the force field, piled up against the wall. The power must have come on and got my leg but spit me out in this direction, he reasoned. He couldn't see anybody in either direction down the corridor, so he felt rather safe for the moment.

I wonder if the Enterprise is still out there trying to help me? he thought. A sudden lurch to the floor answered that question rather forcefully. He no longer felt safe just sitting there, so he gingerly stood up and tried to move down the corridor without hurting his leg or shoulder.

Halfway down the corridor he suddenly sensed another presence and froze, trying to pinpoint the location.

"It's okay, Will. It's only me, Deanna," he heard inside of his head.

He relaxed. "Where are you?" He didn't have to make sure that it was her. His hyperactive senses had already identified it as her voice.

"Right here. I'm here in the corridor with you."

Riker looked around, but couldn't see anyone except himself. "What are

you talking about? You're not here. Come to think of it, how can I hear you if you're not here?"

"I'm really here, Will, just not physically. Don't ask how I got here, just accept it." She was relieved that he didn't seem to remember their previous conversation.

"Whatever," answered Will. "I'm glad you're here, Deanna, even if not really here. By the way, what's going on?"

"You're near the Romulan Neutral Zone. The Enterprise is firing on the Ferengi in an effort to stop them from crossing into the Zone. You're free so I suggest that you try to cut power from the inside. We can't beam you out until their shields are down, right?"

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

He continued down the corridor and peeked around the corner before crossing. He was immediately glad that he did. A Ferengi was standing guard about five meters down the cross hall. He appeared to be very frightened, but determined to guard the door at his back.

"Damn," muttered Riker. He stopped and leaned against the wall. This one would require some thinking.

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"Could you please help me, Deanna?" asked Will.

"I'm sorry, Will, but no," she responded, correctly anticipating the next question. "I can't do anything to Ferengi. Even a full Betazoid couldn't touch the mind of a Ferengi, even if she wanted to. Sorry."

"Damn. I was hoping for a distraction. Do you any suggestions?"

"No. Not unless you want to wait for one."

"That's not my first choice, but I don't seem to have any other options right now. I can't just jump out there and get him, at least not with this leg I can't." He paused uncertainly, "While we're waiting, I feel like I recently asked you an important question, but I can't remember what it was I asked or what your answer was. Do you have any idea what the question was?" His voice was a mixture of curiosity and dread.

Deanna thought about it very carefully. She didn't want to tell him what was actually said, but she did want to answer truthfully. He apparently did remember some of it, though, she thought. Well, I'll just have to answer without telling the whole truth.

She was suddenly spared an answer by the end of their wait for a distraction. The ship abruptly lurched around them as yet another phaser shot

hit the Avarice and rattled everybody aboard.

Riker peeked around the corner just in time to see a panel on the wall fall down and startle the Ferengi. The guard jumped at the sound and reflexively pulled out his energy whip. Once he identified the source of the sound, he nervously made what passed for a Ferengi chuckle at his jumpiness and turned to the comm panel to call a technician to fix the panel.

After speaking for a few seconds, he turned back around just in time to catch a fleeting glimpse of a maroon uniform before his knees were kicked out from under him and he landed face first into the floor with his energy whip flying down the hall.

Riker spotted the flying whip and seized the opportunity it offered. He ran over to where the it had fallen and grabbed it just as the guard got to his feet and started coming at him. For the moment not caring what power level the whip was set to, he simply flicked it at the Ferengi and prayed that it would be enough to stop the obviously very upset Ferengi bearing down on him.

It did. The bolt slammed into the Ferengi's shoulder and spun him into a full circle before he stopped. The guard fell over like a felled oak tree Will had once seen in his native Alaska.

Once the excitement was over, Will looked down at the whip and was relieved to note that it was set on heavy stun, not kill. He didn't want any more blood on his hands than was necessary.

Will turned toward the door that the Ferengi had been guarding and tried to make sense of the markings that were stenciled there. He couldn't decipher what it said, so he decided to walk in and look.

Riker stepped into an open room that was approximately one hundred by eighty by ten meters high. It was only partially filled with small crates off in one corner.

"Cargo Hold" supplied his mind. He frowned in annoyance. Of course it is, dummy, he chided himself.

Deanna's light laughter in his mind told him that she was still with him. This knowledge filled him with a sense of calm for no reason that he could identify. Whatever goes on, he thought, at least I'm not alone.

Well, he continued, as long as I'm free I might as well try to mess them up. He already knew what was in the crates. It was the Atax crystals that he was supposed to search for. The ones that cost Mark his life.

Quickly, he went over to the crates and started to open them and pull the crystals out. Atax crystals were very fragile things his mind had told him.

So fragile in fact, that rolling around on the floor was probably enough to shatter them into several pieces. He couldn't break them with his bare hands for fear that some of the shards of the drug would enter his system, but he could remove them from their protective cases and let the Enterprise's phaser shots do the work for him.

Upon pulling open the first crate that fell under his hand, he noticed that they were packed three to a crate and were very padded so as to avoid breaking.

Too bad, he thought as he pulled them out of the packing material and dropped them to the floor. His rough handling only broke two of the crystals. It was an accident, he consoled himself with an evil grin on his face.

Once he was through the twenty or so crates, he crept back to the door and peeked outside to check to see if the coast was clear.

It wasn't. He was infuriated with himself to see another Ferengi carrying a tricorder and wearing a belt full of electrical tools checking the guard he had knocked out only a few moments ago. That's the tech that the guard called, he thought viciously. I should have pulled him into the room and closed the door behind us. Well, too late now. He hefted the whip and jumped into the corridor, startling the Ferengi technician. One quick flick of the wrist and the second Ferengi fell to the corridor floor.

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?" asked Deanna.

Riker half grinned, "Does it show that much?"

"You don't have to do all of this on my account." She was referring to the time that she, Riker, and her mother, Lwaxana, were kidnapped by a mad Ferengi captain who was in love with Lwaxana. The enamored Ferengi never did anything to Deanna, but Riker still held a grudge against all Ferengi as if he did.

"I know," he thought back, "but I do need to get out of here."

Riker paused a moment and tried to get his bearings. He had once seen the schematics of the Ferengi Trader class starships and he tried to pull that knowledge out of his memory in order to get an idea of where he was. After some careful consideration, he turned to the right and started toward the access ladder.

"Where are you going?" asked Troi's voice.

"To Engineering. I need to disrupt their power to give Chief O'Brien a chance to beam me out."

"Good point. Do you want me to stay with you, or go back to the

Enterprise and tell them to be ready?"

Riker thought a moment. He wanted her to stay, but the Enterprise needed to be warned. "Why don't you go back and warn them, and then come back to keep me company?" His mental tone was of humor, but Deanna heard a real need in his voice.

Forcing a brightness into her own voice that she didn't feel, she said, "Good idea. I'll be right back." Deanna paused. "Don't go anywhere," she added jokingly.

"Don't you worry about that. I'll still be onboard when you get back." He was vastly relieved to hear that she would be back. He really didn't want to spend too much time over here without someone to help him, and Deanna was the best choice he could think of.

He practically felt Deanna leave him and he was half tempted to call her back, but decided that it wouldn't be a good idea. Besides, he needed to have all of his mind on what he was doing if he was going to pull off what he was planning.

Energy whip in hand, he crept away from the two unconscious Ferengi and toward the nearest service tunnel.

Behind him, he could hear the Atax crystals that he had taken out of their containers rolling around on the floor as the Ferengi ship continued to absorb a pounding from the Enterprise's phaser banks. Even as he listened, he heard several of the fragile crystals shatter.

They really must get better security measures around here, he thought with a grin on his face. Anybody could just walk in and start destroying their cargo.

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Deanna pulled away from Will and hesitated as she turned to make her way back to the Enterprise. Should I stay here with Will, she wondered to herself, or should I warn the Captain?

Deciding that she really should tell the Captain that Will was free and making his way to Engineering, she sped off toward where she saw a group human minds apparently floating in free space. She recognized this as the Enterprise from the last time that she had left the ship.

It's odd, she thought, that I can see only minds right now. I wonder if the Q see us in this way when they travel? I could ask Guinan, I suppose, but she wouldn't necessarily know for sure, either. Oh, well, she sighed and continued on to her destination.

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"Captain."

Picard almost turned toward his left, Troi's usual seat, before he

remembered where she was. "Hello, again, Counselor," he replied, mentally.

"What have you been up to?"

"I've been over with Will, Captain. He has broken out of the brig and is making his way over to Engineering. He plans to disrupt the power flow so that Chief O'Brien can beam him out. I think he's planning something else too, Captain, but I can't be sure. He can be very secretive if he really wants to."

"Thank you, Counselor."

He turned to Worf behind him, "Mr. Worf, please instruct Chief O'Brien to be ready to beam Commander Riker off of the Ferengi ship at the next opportunity. We may not have many more chances like that power failure. I want him to be on his toes for any chance."

"Aye, sir," replied Worf. He sent the message to the transporter room without slowing down the barrage against the Ferengi ship.

"Counselor," continued Picard mentally, "perhaps you should return to the Ferengi ship and keep Riker company."

"Thank you, Captain. I believe that I'll do that."

"Keep in touch," said Picard before he felt her leave.

"Mr. Crusher, please keep us between the Ferengi ship and the Romulan Neutral Zone. I don't want them escaping."

"Yes, sir." The teenage ensign turned back to his station in order to comply with Picard's order. He kept the great ship in a spiraling course that forced the Ferengi ship to steer a course almost directly away from the Neutral Zone.

"Captain," called Worf, "a Romulan Bird of Prey is decloaking on the other side of the Neutral Zone. They wish communications." His tone indicated what he thought of Romulans in general.

"Open hailing frequency. Please continue the pursuit and the prosecution of the Ferengi, but with a little less diligence please, Mr. Worf. We don't want to destroy them, just get Commander Riker back." Worf appeared to be very disappointed in the order, but complied without comment.

The screen in front of Picard changed from the view of a battered Ferengi starship to that of the bridge of a Romulan Bird of Prey. Captain Picard stood up and advanced on the viewscreen in a habit that he had had ever since commanding the old Stargazer. He thought that he recognized the commander of the Romulan ship, but he couldn't be sure.

"This is Jean-Luc Picard, captain of the USS Enterprise, representing the United Federation of Planets. We bring greetings to the Romulan Empire. How may I help you?" He knew that all of this rhetoric wasn't helping, but he had to say it on the off chance that it would keep the Romulans from becoming too upset with his battle just on the other side of their territory.

"This is Commander Tomolok of the Revenge. So we meet once again, Captain. What are you doing destroying a Ferengi ship this close to the Neutral Zone?"

Picard nearly groaned out loud when he heard who he was facing. Picard had faced Commander Tomolok several times before, usually not on friendly terms. Tomolok seemed to bear a permanent grudge against the Enterprise and would be difficult to deal with. In fact, Tomolok had promised on various occasions to take the Enterprise's hull home as a war trophy. He had nearly succeeded.

"Hello again, Commander. The Ferengi in question have kidnapped one of my officers and we are currently trying to get him back. Please believe that this is of no concern to the Romulan Empire and we will be leaving shortly. Thank you for your concern, but we have the situation well in hand. Good day, Commander." Picard motioned to Worf to cut the transmission and returned to his seat.

This was turning into a bad day.

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Riker crept down the service ladder as best he could. Between a broken shoulder and a fried leg, he couldn't creep very well. Regardless, he did his best as he approached the Engineering spaces.

About half way between decks, he heard voices approach his crouched position. They slowly came toward his hiding place and he looked down the accessway just in time to observe two Ferengi guards walk under him apparently deep in discussion. Riker breathed a silent sigh of relief as they walked away.

"Will."

Riker nearly cried aloud and fell down when he heard his name called. He swore that his heart rate was at three hundred before he recognized the voice as Deanna's.

"Sorry, Will. I didn't realize that you were quite so jumpy. I didn't mean to startle you. Anyway, the Enterprise knows you're free and are trying to help, if they can."

"Thank you," he said feeling his heart rate return to something

approaching normal. "Now if I can just get to the engine controls I can cut

their power and leave them a surprise in the bargain."

Deanna was very curious but kept quiet as Riker gingerly lowered himself down the last couple of meters of hiding space that he had. He paused and listened for any sounds that would alert him to the presence of any Ferengi in the area. Hearing none, he poked his head out of the space for a quick look around.

Nobody home, he was pleased to discover. He climbed down the last two meters to the floor and started around the corridor to his right, whip at the ready.

He turned the corner and came face to face with a very ugly guard armed with an even uglier whip. They both stopped in astonishment and stared at one another for a moment, as if neither could accept the other's presence.

"Will!"

Deanna's inaudible scream was all that it took to jerk Riker into action. He immediately brought his own whip up and snapped it at the guard. For his own part, the Ferengi got his own weapon almost to bear on Riker before the energy bolt hit him and sent him spinning into unconsciousness.

The excitement over, Riker paused and listened for anybody coming. Satisfied that he was safe for the moment, he turned to the door that the Ferengi had been guarding and once again was baffled by the Ferengi written language. Deciding just to walk in and hope for the best, he did precisely that.

He was lucky. The Ferengi, in an attempt to save money, had computerized the Engineering spaces. Sighing in relief, he returned to the hall and drug the unconscious guard into the room with him.

Once the guard was hidden from casual inspection, Riker surveyed the room. He immediately noticed that it was smaller than the Enterprise's Engineering Room. Whereas he was used to two decks and several hundred cubic meters of space, this room was only one deck tall and with about fifty square meters of floor space. The warp core itself was nowhere to be seen, but several banks of old computer terminals lined three of the walls. Apparently this room was used to do maintenance checks on the engineering computer system, he thought as he surveyed the cramped quarters.

"The Ferengi certainly don't spend a lot of money or people on their Engineering spaces, do they?" he asked Deanna.

"Fortunately not. I suggest that you get to work. No telling how long

before that guard is missed."

"Good idea," he replied even as he made his way to the nearest computer terminal.

It turned out to have absolutely no safety or security restrictions on it.

Sloppy, he thought as he asked the computer to switch output to Federation Standard. Being the obedient but stupid machine that it was, it simply started working in Standard without asking him for any type of authorization codes to do so.

Riker quickly familiarized himself with the system and set to work in a manner that completely baffled Troi.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Don't worry. This will only take a minute and then I can cut their power to give O'Brien a chance to get me out of here," he replied with a mischievous grin on his face.

Deanna mentally sighed and waited patiently while Riker worked on whatever he was planning.

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Riker was busily trying to bypass what passed for Ferengi security measures. It wasn't that the computer wouldn't allow him to do what he wanted, but it did want to inform the bridge of what was going on. He really didn't want that to happen, because he was sure that the Ferengi wouldn't be pleased with what he was doing.

There, thought Riker as he finally got the right combination of orders into the computer's electronic innards. Now he could do anything he wanted to down here and the bridge would never know it. It was simply a matter of telling the computer to send the warning signals to a different location. Instead of the bridge, they would now go to a null circuit here in this room. The computer would still try to scream at the top of its electronic voice in order to warn the bridge, but would really spend its time warning nobody.

Once that was accomplished, Riker accessed the navigational computer subsystem and plotted a new course, subject to execution upon command from another program. To get this course just right, he had to access sensor input to see where he was, and was amazed to discover the presence of a Romulan Bird of Prey on the other side of the Neutral Zone.

Now where did that come from? he wondered. No matter. They won't change anything.

Once he knew where he was, he finished the navigational program and stored it in an unlikely spot within the computer's memory banks. It was next to the

requisition order for more of what Ferengi used as toilet paper. He figured that no one would look there for a navigational command.

"What are you doing?" Troi asked him again. She had taken few technical courses in Starfleet Academy and was completely baffled by what Riker was doing.

"Just a little surprise for our Ferengi friends, Deanna. Trust me."

Once he had the navigational command finished, he began another program. This one would redirect all of the energy output on the ship to the engines, and then it would execute the navigational program that he had just finished. Since this was the most powerful computer on the ship, Riker had no problems with setting an override command on the bridge controls for as long as the navigational program was running.

As he worked, he asked Deanna to return to the Enterprise and warn them that the shields would be lowering soon and not to fire on the Ferengi ship, no matter what happens.

"Why, Will? What will happen?" She was clearly worried for his safety.

"Please, Deanna. I'll be just fine. Besides, I don't know what will happen to you if I get beamed back to the Enterprise and you're mentally linked to me. I'll be done in a minute."

"Okay. I guess you're right." She pulled away from him and sped off toward the Enterprise.

He breathed a sigh of relief and got back to work on the second program. He added just a little something for the Romulan Bird of Prey that was behind them.

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"Are you serious, Counselor?" asked Picard with extreme mental skepticism.

"I'm afraid so, Captain. He said specifically that we weren't to do anything to the Ferengi once they lower their shields. He should get them down soon, so you could ask him then, sir. Frankly, most of what he did might as well have been in Deltan for all I understood."

"Sir," called Worf, "the Ferengi are lowering their shields and seem to be powering up their engines for something."

"Cease fire, Lieutenant," snapped Picard. He thumbed a button on his chair, "Transporter Room, beam Commander Riker aboard, immediately." He turned to Ensign Crusher at the Conn, "Follow them, Ensign, but don't violate the Neutral Zone without my direct order."

After his series of quick orders, Picard turned toward the viewscreen to

see what was going on. The Avarice swung in a graceful arc around the

Enterprise and jumped back into warp going toward the Neutral Zone.

"The Romulans are requesting communications," said Worf from over Picard's shoulder.

Picard sighed. "Very well, Lieutenant. Put them on."

The viewscreen changed to an intership communication channel showing the Romulan bridge once again. "Why are you allowing the Ferengi scum to escape, Picard?" demanded Commander Tomolok.

Summoning his thoughts together, Picard announced calmly, "They have released my officer. Therefore we are letting them go about their business. Good day." Once again Picard signaled to Worf to cut communications with the Romulan ship.

What did Number One do this time? wondered Picard.

All of this time the Ferengi ship had been accelerating toward the Neutral Zone and incidentally almost straight toward the Revenge. The stunned Romulans didn't even move as the Ferengi hurled toward them at close to warp eight and fired four photon torpedoes straight into the Romulan shields. Once clear of the Romulan ship, the Ferengi made a hard turn to port and started traveling along the Neutral Zone border toward a star that was just outside of Federation space.

Once over their initial shock, the Romulans turned and started chasing the Ferengi. The Avarice had too much of a head start, however, and was soon approaching the star at warp eight point five. As they got closer, Picard noticed that they weren't heading straight into the star, but rather slightly off to one side. It was as if they wanted to slingshot around in order to gain some speed in an old maneuver that lost most of its use when warp travel was perfected.

The Ferengi ship soon disappeared behind the star with the Romulan speeding along behind. Moments later, the Romulan reappeared, but the Ferengi didn't.

"Mr. Data, where did the Ferengi ship go?"

"Unknown, sir," replied the android at Ops. "They seem to have simply disappeared from our sensors. They did not go into the star, but rather were going around it at close to warp ten when they simply vanished from our sensors. It is possible, though unlikely, that they managed to cloak the ship, but if that were the case, then the Romulans would surely know where they are, since the cloak is a Romulan invention and could therefore penetrate the cloaking field."

"Very well. Mr. Crusher, plot a course to Starbase 147, warp six. Mr.

Data, you have the bridge. I'll be in Sickbay looking in on Commander Riker."

Picard got up from his seat and headed to the turbolift as his officers moved to obey his orders.

\* \* \* \* \*

"He has a broken right shoulder and his left leg is severely burned, but he should be fine in a couple of days," reported Dr. Crusher.

"And how is Counselor Troi?" asked Picard.

"Glad you mentioned her. She, excuse me, her body," she corrected herself, "will be recovered from the Ryboxian virus in another couple of hours. Mentally, she has had quite a workout. She told me how you and Will had her running errands for a while. You really shouldn't have done that to her, Jean-Luc. Anyway, she should regain consciousness about a half hour after Riker does."

"Good. Please contact me when Commander Riker wakes up, Doctor. I have more than a few questions for him." With that, he turned and strode out of Sickbay.

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Well, thought Geordi, maybe this time we can spend some more time together. I really have gotten attached to Gloria, he admitted to himself.

"Are you ready, Geordi?" asked Data from beside the computer terminal.

"Let 'er rip, Data," he replied enthusiastically.

"Let who rip?"

"It's an expression, Data. It means go ahead," answered Geordi with a smile.

"Ah, I understand now. Thank you." He turned back to the terminal and tapped a last series of buttons.

The room around the two was once again filled with couples dancing, drinking, and laughing. Geordi was still out on the dance floor with Gloria, and Data was at the bar with Grace. She was leaning against his shoulder and looking very content with the world.

Thanks to Dr. Crusher, Data had recently learned how to dance. He hadn't thought about it before, but he could ask Grace to dance. It couldn't backfire any worse than his previous attempts at spending time with her.

"Grace, would you like to dance?"

"I was hoping you would say that. Yes, I would love to, Fredrick." She stood up in a fluid motion and held Data's hand as they made their way to a

spot near Geordi and Gloria. Geordi caught sight of them out of the corner of his eye as they started to dance. He turned back to Gloria with a smile on his face. Way to go, my friend, he thought to Data.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Doctor."

Doctor Crusher turned at the sound of her name. She had been going over Deanna's medical charts when she heard her name from an unlikely source, Will Riker. But he should be asleep for another half an hour, she thought. But he obviously isn't, she scolded herself as she made her way to his side.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

"Not bad, considering what I know is wrong with me," he returned with a brave, though pain filled smile. "How's Deanna?" he asked, trying to change the topic.

"She's fine. If you wait about another hour, you can be there when she wakes up. Meanwhile, Captain Picard has more than a few questions for you."

"I can imagine. Well, might as well get it over with."

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"And then I felt a transporter get a hold of me. That's the last thing that I remember before waking up in Sickbay," concluded Riker some forty-five minutes later.

"And what did you do to the Ferengi, again?" asked Picard.

"I remembered a theoretical experiment from my Starfleet Academy class on warp technology. It postulated that if you slingshot around a star at the precise angle and speed, then you could enter time warp and go forward or backwards in time. I later learned that Admiral Kirk did that on several occasions, so I knew it was possible. I just sent the Ferengi through time, Captain," deadpanned Riker.

"Just sent them through time?" Picard said incredulously. "And precisely where and more to the point when did you send them, Number One?"

"To the same star in about forty years, Captain," responded Riker, perfectly calm.

Crusher could no longer contain herself and burst out laughing.

Picard turned to her in annoyance. "Please tell me what is so funny, Doctor. I see nothing humorous about this entire affair."

"I'm sorry, Jean-Luc, but can you imagine what the Ferengi will think of Will when they realize what he did to their Atax and what decade they're in?" She had managed to contain her mirth, if only for a few moments.

Picard's mouth quirked slightly upward as he imagined what the Ferengi

would think, and said, "I think I see your point, Beverly." His eyes glittered with barely contained laughter.

Seeing his expression sent Crusher back into laughter, this time joined by Riker and finally Picard.

"What's so funny?" asked Deanna in a small, tired voice.

Crusher hurried over to her and checked her out as Riker once again explained what he had done to the Ferengi. By the end of the story, Deanna too was laughing.

"Get well, you two," said Picard to Deanna and Will on his way out of Sickbay.

"Yes, sir," replied Riker. He turned to Troi, "You never answered my question, Deanna."

"Which question, Will?" she asked, though she thought she knew the answer.

"What question did I ask and what was your answer?"

"Well, do you remember mentioning Wes, Beverly, and Captain Picard performing a ceremony?" she asked.

Riker frowned and began to say that he didn't, but then his memory of those five minutes returned with shocking clarity. He turned to Deanna and asked, "Did I really do that?"

"Yes, I'm afraid you did, Will. But don't worry. You were asleep and I won't hold you to any promises you may have made."

"What are you two talking about?" asked Dr. Crusher, thoroughly confused.

"Nothing," answered Riker hastily. He turned to Deanna to see her smiling at him sweetly.

"Thank you, Imzadi," he heard in his mind.

The Enterprise sailed on.