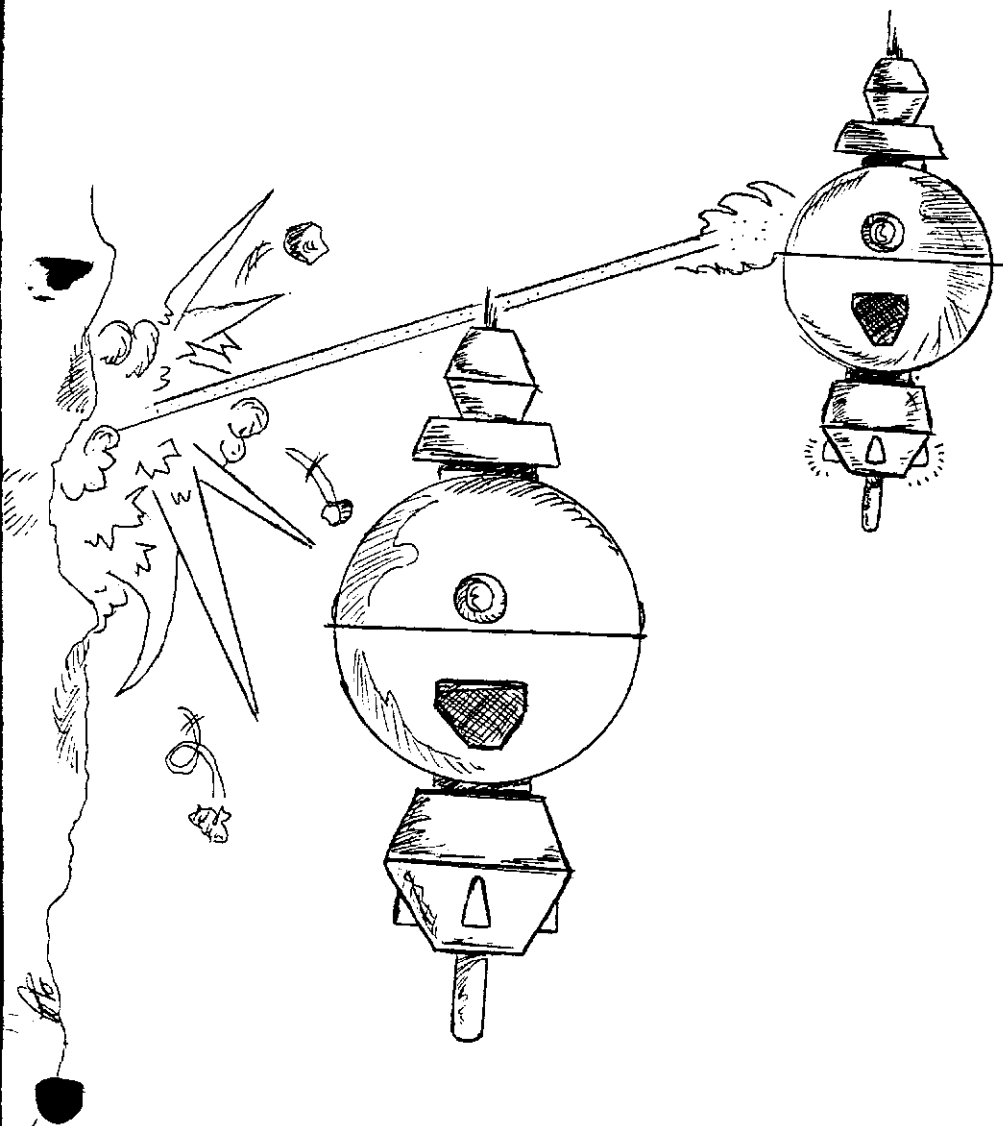




#24 Fall 1994



Legend

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An Important Message to All DSE Readers...

The issue you are currently holding (#24 Fall 1994) will be the last printed issue of the DSE for the time being. We are NOT ceasing publication. We are morphing to a slightly different format. Beginning with issue #25, the DSE will become an electronic fanzine.

There are a number of reasons behind this decision. The first being that we will very shortly lose access to the copy machine that we have been allowed to use for free by supplying our own paper. This leaves us with several options: we could buy our own copy machine or laser printer, we could go electronic, we could print it ourselves with the ink jet printer we currently have, or we could cease publication. We have looked into the first option before and found that laser printers print twice as many pages per ink cartridge as a copy machine does but for the kind of printing we have to do they just aren't very cost effective. We could use the current printer that we use now but the cartridges for this are \$24.00 a piece and it would take a cartridge per issue at least. so subscription prices would have to nearly quadruple to continue and the post office is threatening to make us raise the rates as it is. Which now leaves us with 2 options; stop altogether or go electronic.

There are a lot of plusses with going solely with computer transmission. No more subscription rates!!! (The DSE never broke even anyway.) We won't waste anymore trees. We will be able to reach many more readers and be able to accept contributions from many, many more contributors. The more ideas, and the more people that become involved, the better the DSE will become.

Now how does this affect you, the subscriber? Well, if you have access to Compuserve you can pickup the DSE yourself. It will be located in the SciFi Forum. We haven't decided yet which section. I will send out postcards when we upload the first issue and let everyone know where to find it. If you don't have access to CServe. we can send you the file via internet. We just need your E-Mail address. The DSE will probably also be available on a couple of BBS'. If your local BBS is interested in carrying the DSE let me know and we'll work something out.

The DSE will not look any different than now. except that the art may eventually be in color. Once you have the file all you will need to view it is a

graphic viewer or program that will pull up TIFF files. There may also be an ASCII version available without pictures or art.

Many of our regular columns will continue in the new version. Critique-al Mass, Interstellar Molecules, Suggestions For the Spacefaring Insomniac. We're sure there will be many new exciting things to see and do as well.

We don't know how often we will publish. There are a lot of things that depends on. the least of which is the fact that the Enterprise Tardis Connection (the club that supports this fanzine) is in the planning stages of our own Convention. (See the last page of this issue.)

We also plan to release a DSE annual or something akin to an annual. This would be a printed issue that would contain the highlights of the on-line zine. Also the fiction that has always been a staple in the DSE may not be available in the on-line version so the fiction would be printed and available separately. Everyone on the current mailing list (if you received this in the mail you are on the list) will receive ads and flyers for any extra printed materials that we release (i.e.. The Evolution Dilemma and Doctor Who and the Lady of the Lake in one volume as well as the annuals).

No one need worry about current subscriptions. Everyone's subscriptions have expired except 2 people and one of them has moved and not bothered to inform us of his new address and the other has only one issue left and has the capability to pick up the DSE on line.

This has not been an easy decision and the idea hasn't been accepted by all the staff with the excitement I had hoped it would. The idea has had to take some time to settle in. I firmly believe that this is the best choice. Computers are the future. Someday they may well replace books and magazines and most all printed materials. Compuserve has already replaced the newspaper, except for the most local of news at my house. By transmitting the DSE via computer we may well be opening it up for the whole planet to read. We could never get that range of circulation through print.

I have been assured that the DSE's appearance need not change. That in fact it will probably look better than ever before.

I want to thank all the subscribers, and readers, and contributors who have been there for us over the last 5 years. Your support has not gone without notice or appreciation. We couldn't have done it without you. I hope that you continue to stay with us in the future. If you have any problems let me know both us post address and E-Mail address are inside the front cover.

Pamela Girard - Editor
and the Staff of *The Dune Sea Express*

The Evolution Dilemma Part 10

by Ted Foster

IN PREVIOUS PARTS: Captain Picard's riding lesson was interrupted by a distress call from Derallium II, a colony endangered by an asteroid on a collision course. The Enterprise crew along with assistance from the The Pegasus, a fighter-carrier commanded by Captain Marchall, and the Solstice, a Betazoid passenger ship, make several attempts to persuade the asteroid to take another course. All attempts fail, some because of a mysterious black ship that seems to be stalking the efforts.

Plans are enacted to evacuate the planet's inhabitants, however, Coordinator Effingham tells Picard that the colonists will not leave the native species behind. It seems the colonists have been doing genetic experimentation in an attempt to raise the local animals to sentiency.

With the impact of the asteroid imminent, Picard orders the final evacuation of the planet. Only a group of colonists refuse to leave, taking refuge in an old lead and molybdenum mine. An away team is sent to retrieve them. Riker, Marschall, Dr. Crusher and an away team descended into the mine. After considerable difficulties the away team persuades the colonists and the Tenarin to allow them to be beamed off the planet and to the safety of the Pegasus' bays after the fighters are launched. The interference of the approaching asteroid halts the process before the away team can beam away. The team survives the initial impact the the asteroid but find themselves trapped in a cave and are unable to escape and the air is running out....

XXVI

Riker rolled instinctively away from the disturbance even with his strength failing, and came to find himself lying ungracefully on top of Dr. Crusher. His dazed mind must be going, he told himself. He saw a rock....with a strange device and bag attached! He started to try to laugh only to have his lungs protest violently.

"Commander! Take a mask now!"

That came from the rock. And it was moving. He squeezed his eyes shut to try to clear his head. Enlahr. Yes, that name meant something to him. The Rock! He collapsed onto the Horta and fumbled in the bag. Inside were five oxygen masks and spare air canisters. Feeling as coordinated as a flounder on land, he struggled to get the mask into place. It finally snapped over his nose, and he inhaled deeply.

Sweet air filled his lungs, and freed from their struggle they proceeded to let him know of their displeasure at the last hour. He coughed and gripped his aching chest, but wasted no time in unfastening the bag and in distributing the remainder of the masks to the other inhabitants of the cave. Enlahr remained in the entrance tunnel he had carved to shield them from the outside atmosphere until they were ready.

Riker was pleased to see Beverly come around and regain her senses quickly. She flashed him a dreamy smile as if still remembering the oxygen-depravation fantasies she had experienced, but with a reassuring nod she got up and helped the others load the still-unconscious Romaine onto Enlahr's broad top. When they were formed up behind him Enlahr moved back up the circular sloping tunnel he had carved. He continued to enlarge it as he moved so that both he and his passenger could fit.

The closer they got to the surface the more heat the away team could feel in the air. Noxious fumes occasionally penetrated the seals on their masks and more than once the gag reflex took over. But they managed to continue upward until breaking out onto the surface.

They stood there momentarily stunned by the transformation around them. The city, Paraiso, was gone beneath a coastline that had moved several kilometers inland. Very large waves continued to hammer the new shore, though bigger tsunami had come and would continue to rip much higher into the valley below. All of the vegetation around them was gone, and the trees around the hillsides were uniformly blown over like so many match sticks. Small remnants of the funicular and the surrounding buildings lay strewn about. Many areas were burning.

The mountain peaks were still there, but what was once a

dormant chain of volcanoes had come alive in the course of an hour. New calderas spewed forth smoke and gases all along the peaks and for as far as they could see vents had opened up along the many slopes. A dozen kilometers away a large stream of lava was flowing with glacier-like slowness toward sea, while within half a kilometer a vent had opened up to eject hot gases.

Will gazed around him in wonder. He had not seen destruction like this since surviving the attack by the Crystalline Entity, and it was just as total. As he gazed around he looked up at the peak over their heads and his blood chilled. A large vent had opened up to the left of the old peak. He could see movement; lava being ejected into a fountain. It had to be flowing into a reservoir of magma in the caldera. Already black, belching streams were beginning to creep out from the rim, and it was only a matter of time before it began its trip down the mountain towards them.

Amazingly, the shuttle was only a short walk away. It had been blown nearly a quarter kilometer up the slope, but appeared to be relatively intact. It sat at a cockeyed angle several dozen meters away from the nearest volcanic vent.

They all clamored over the rough ground following Enlahr who; like a small paving machine, simply moved over the ground like it was smooth as glass leaving a completely flat walkway in his wake. He was also noticeably bigger, and Riker thought about reminding him that he would have to fit in the pilot's couch eventually. But his attention quickly focused on the starboard and keel of the shuttle as they reached it. Gaping holes glared through twisted metal in both the nacelle and the underside.

They deposited Romaine and T'Pol in the vehicle while Marschall insisted on remaining outside. He noticeably cradled his hand over his injured ribs but other than that kept up with Riker and Enlahr as they surveyed the damage. Will noticed Beverly take a quick scan of him nevertheless.

"I managed to get the shields raised and to just lift off when the radiation and shock waves struck.", Enlahr began to relate. "The shields absorbed most of it but were thoroughly drained. Therefore the landing was little smoother than throwing a rock."

Riker laughed in spite of himself. "How appropriate! Now, what's the damage?"

"The front of the nacelles are damaged beyond immediate repair, so warp power is out. The impulse drives are intact but are useless." The ensign edged under the rear of the vehicle. "The main hydrogen reservoir was ruptured and totally drained. We have no fuel to go anywhere. Only batteries are left, and they're too weak to contact the ships in orbit."

"Can you repair the tank?", asked Marschall.

"Doing so now, Sir. Be just a minute..." Enlahr's synthetic voice seemed to trail off as he worked.

Riker watched him work. The Horta was fusing the tank together by secreting some kind of metallic/silicon solution from his own body! Not the titanium of the tank, but strong enough to hold.

Both he and the captain stood up and surveyed the surrounding area with the same thought in mind. "A shame, really.", said Marschall.

"How do you mean?", Riker asked.

"Here we are literally surrounded by various hydrogen compounds and we can't use them to get off this planet. They are neither concentrated enough to gather nor do the engines have the needed filters to screen out the impurities."

Will thought on that, and smiled.

"I know that look, Will.", Beverly said. "You save that face for your crazier bluffs in poker."

Will didn't answer her, but instead asked the Horta, "Ensign, is there enough power left to operate the replicator on board?"

"For some simple tasks, maybe. But if your looking for a last meal, probably not."

"Would extracting gaseous hydrogen from simple compounds be simple enough?"

This time Marschall answered, "Possibly. What do you have in mind, Commander?"

"A gamble, Sir. I need for you and Beverly to go through that mine wreckage. Find whatever pipes or hosing you can, and bring it back here."

"How much? Where does it need to go?", asked Crusher.

"From here...", Will answered, "...to there." He pointed to the volcanic vent loudly ejecting gases and ash into the blackened sky. "You'll need environmental suits to get close enough, but I'll bet there is enough pure hydrogen sulfide coming out of there to be of use to us."

"It's a long shot, but since I have no other plans...", Marschall said. He and Beverly hurried off to see what they could find.

A sudden burst of light caught Riker's attention, and he turned to see a tree far up-slope burst into flame like a match. A wall of black, smoking rock had slowly engulfed it, and was now moving downhill. The other two humans outside had noticed it too.

I am getting too old to keep working on these kinds of deadlines, Will thought.

XXVII

One could outrun the lava, Riker thought. It was only moving at a maybe 5-6 kilometers an hour at best. But it would either catch you in the end or drive you into a violent sea.

It had been half an hour since they had begun this crazy scheme. The searchers had indeed located 20 meters of 5 cm hosing made of metallic mesh and fabric used before to wash tailings into a sludge pit, but it took Enlahr to help move the heavy load into position. The tip of the hose now lay several meters over the edge of the smoking vent.

The Horta had also used his own brand of "welding" to secure the foreign hose to the fuel supply system. No adapters or joints were needed, just patience while the Horta's compound cooled and solidified. The remaining humans had joined Riker in trying to adapt the source collectors and emitters of the replicator to the fuel system. The premise was simple enough - use the intake tanks as source points for hydrogen molecules to be beamed into the replicator while using the emitters to deposit pure hydrogen gas into the main tank. As fuel was created the impulse power units could be brought on line to further power the jury-rigged system.

But the race would be close. A black wall now closed to under a kilometer away. Second place in this race was not a

finish any of them wished to see. Everyone boarded the shuttle as the heat became too uncomfortable for everyone except Enlahr.

Enlahr moved onto his bench and engaged his computer control. "Processing continuing. 1.8 kilograms of H-2 collected. Engaging impulse power units. Transferring pump and replicator power to impulse engines."

"How much fuel do we need to achieve orbit?", Marschall asked.

"Minimum of 128 kilos, Sir. I am boosting the filter system. Now processing 5 kilos per minute."

Riker was monitoring the flow from the pipe. The violent pressures at the vent were causing large fluctuations in their intake tank pressures. "When you give the word I can engage the emergency fuel separation circuit.", he said. The system, used to protect re-fueling shuttles during a space emergency, would simply detach the intake system and eject it to the rear.

And so it went. They could see the lava flow inching toward them through the front screens. Finally its intense heat began to affect the shuttle itself. From here on out the crew in the shuttle were silent except for the pilots trying to watch all the monitors at once.

"Exterior temperature now 150 degrees and rising. Lava flow is 28 meters from hull."

"Not enough power to engage shields. Tank now full to 88 kilos."

"Temperature at 200 degrees. Hull integrity is holding. We have maybe a minute at most."

"Aye that...92 kilos."

Silence. Riker forced himself to be calm.

"Hull temperature now 350 degrees. Lift off now."

"Negative.", Enlahr said, "Only 98 kilos on board!"

"Go now or never!", Will ordered back, and he slammed his hand down on the emergency separation control.

Enlahr did as he was told and the engines burst to life with thrust. The shuttle quickly rose like a fast turbolift, and then began a rolling turn to clear the mountain while Enlahr brought the nose into a steep climb. For the first time the entire area was visible to Riker and he marveled for a quick second at the scene from Dante's "Inferno" below. In the distance deep craters could be seen while below the mountains had been

turned into a twisted chain of fire takes slowly marching to the sea. The scene quickly disappeared as the shuttle entered the turbulent cloud cover with a violent jolt.

"Not enough thrust to gain orbital velocity!" Enlahr called. He struggled to maintain his climb.

"Increase thrust to 9 g's.", ordered Riker.

"You can't stay conscious through that.", Enlahr shot back.

"No, but you can!", Riker yelled.

"We won't make orbit! It won't make any difference!!" Enlahr countered.

"DO IT!", Riker screamed.

The shuttle exploded forward in a burst of speed and their climb attitude increased to 90 degrees. Will had time to hear Marschall call out in pain and Enlahr say "Going ballistic..." before the blood drained from his head and he passed out.

XXVIII

Worf's voice crackled over the bridge speakers, "Shuttle Copernicus ready for launch, sir."

At last, Picard thought. All their work had hit one snag after another. If it wasn't the equipment acting up it was trying to organize the launch around several hundred refugees in the immediate area.

"Affirmative, Lieutenant. Assemble your team and launch when ready."

"Aye, Sir."

Picard looked at the science station monitors with dismay. The habitable pockets had shrunk and were now almost nonexistent. Anything that wasn't plant, insect, or very small down there had surely perished. But he was determined not to give up. He owed Will Riker that.

Deanna Troi's cry had startled everyone. When she had at last had a chance to regain control, she had explained in almost a whisper that she had 'heard' Will's death cry. It had been a powerful mental push, and so full of love and sorrow it had struck her opened mind like a club. Her own mental shields had instinctively snapped up and the Captain was fairly certain she had kept them up to help her mind settle. She had remained on the bridge, but had not said a word for the past hour.

Picard turned back to the main screen. Normally, destructive natural phenomena such as the asteroid collision fascinated him. He had seen stars go nova, had watched closely as a comet struck a gas giant, and had even seen an entire star being engulfed by a large black hole. It was difficult not to be transfixed as the black clouds engulfed a changed world of calderas and perpetual darkness. But this was different. He had lost people down there. It wasn't the first time he had lost people. It wasn't the first time he had asked the Cosmos "Why?"

His meditations were interrupted by Data.

"An object has appeared in the upper atmosphere, Sir." the android said.

"An object?", Picard said as he walked down to the main level. "Identify." Troi's face looked hopeful, then questioning?

"It is the shuttle Cerberus, Captain, but it is on a strange trajectory.", Data added.

"Confirmed.", said Ro. "Trajectory is a short distance ballistic arc - they will not be able to enter a stationary orbit with that heading."

The Captain's mind worked quickly with this new revelation.

"Ensign, lay in an orbital intercept course and engage. Data, scan for life forms and feed the coordinates to the transporter room."

Data worked quickly, "Aye, sir. I am picking up five human forms and one horta."

Ro's expression toward her board changed to a scowl. She said in a confused voice, "Captain, the shuttle is no longer accelerating. It appears to be powerless, sir, and is beginning to drop back into the ionosphere."

"If they descend too far we will lose them, sir.", Data added.

"I'm well aware of that, Mr. Data. Transporter room, lock on and transport as soon as possible."

"Aye-aye.", came the reply.

A visual of the shuttle appeared on the main screen. It was tumbling out of control as it fell through the upper atmosphere. Quickly, it disappeared into the thick clouds over the continent.

Picard forced himself to sit back and resisted a strong urge to demand information from the transporter room. He would find out soon enough if they were successful.

Will Riker's eyes cracked open. Another gamble had paid off. His mind focused on that thought about the same time he focused on the faces of Captain Picard and Deanna Troi. Both were smiling.

"Permission to come aboard, sir?", he asked with a grin.

"Granted.", Picard said cheerily, "and welcome back."

"The away team?", Riker asked. He couldn't see much lying in the bed.

"All should be fine, though it will be a week or so before the members from Pegasus are fully healed.", said Troi. There was an expression on her face that Riker had never seen before. Joy mixed with...what? He would have to ask her later.

"I will be looking forward to you returning to duty as well, Commander.", Picard said as he got up to leave. "After all, it should take you some time to work off the cost of that shuttle."

Riker looked up, and to his relief saw that Picard was indeed kidding. The captain telling jokes....what was the world coming to.

+ + + + +

Jean Luc Picard was once again marveling at the stars. Standing at the long, vertical window in his ready room he gazed at the variety in the stars within his view. Visible from space, the universe was a multicolored spectacle. Stars which took on a monochrome tone when viewed from a planet instead became a rainbow of hues from blue through red. Nebulas and the distant specter of the Milky Way were no longer lost in haze but shown like soft curtains of light. He silently repeated a prayer of thanks that he had said many times since he had first ventured into space.

The prayer amused him. Did he believe in God? He was a man who liked to have facts set before him; who loved to solve mysteries by presenting indisputable proof to witnesses at the end. God, at least the Judeo-Christian God worshipped when he had grown up in France, did not fit into that mindset very well. He could certainly accept the premise that there were

other dimensions, other states of consciousness, other versions of reality. Indeed, he had visited a few in his day.

But it was hard for him, without being introduced to the Almighty, to form a hard belief that the Creator existed. Q and the rest of his continuum might be omnipotent, but they certainly did not fit the requirements when it came to either creating or compassion.

And yet, when he looked out and saw his small form floating free in a tremendous emptiness filled with billions of spectacular flares, he couldn't help but wonder. Is there a God? He didn't know, but he would leave the question open for now.

One thing he knew for certain was that he didn't like playing God. They had tried to do that in many ways on this mission, and had been thwarted many times. The colonist's experiments continued to bother him as did the "mystery ship" which had declined to return. He reached for his cup of tea and continued to meditate at the window. After a moment, he spoke to the computer.

"Captain's Log; supplemental. We are proceeding to Starbase 133 for class 3 repairs and to off-load the remainder of the refugees from Durallium II. Rendezvous has been made with the Potemkin, the Rak'Mhar, and the Aegean, and we are now down to a much more comfortable level of passengers on board. The Pegasus and the Solstice will accompany us to the base for similar repairs and offloading. The colony on Durallium has been officially logged as destroyed and the planet is not under consideration for future colonization, though a science vessel is being dispatched to study the immediate effects of the impact.

"I am somewhat troubled by the fate of the gamma-Tenarins. Is the Federation and its many races ready to begin the unnatural advancement of non-sentients? Is our noninterference directive only to be applied to sentient species that we encounter? I fear we may have attempted too much. We have yet to be able to engineer an improved human, but now we appear to be trying to work on other species first. What fate, then, will be waiting for the transplanted Tenarins."

"They will find their way, Captain Picard, as have humans to date."

Picard whirled at the voice. He had not heard a sound and found himself completely startled.

Standing next to the couch was the same alien that Picard had seen in engineering. His skin appeared more a copper color in this light, but it was certainly him. The Captain considered reaching for his comm badge to call security, then thought better of it.

The figure waited for a moment as if to allow him to catch his breath, then continued, "They are still primitive at this point, and will remain so for many centuries. Your Federation has made a contribution to their development, but most of that task will remain with them."

"Who are you?", Picard demanded. He was surprised at the vehemence in his voice. "Why did you interfere with our mission? Did you have no regard for the lives that were at stake; at the injuries that were caused?"

The face looked down with a sad look. "Indeed we did Captain. We had no choice in coming here, no choice in what was required. Our regrets are deep, but we must live with them."

Picard was about to retort when his door chimed. "Come!", he said.

The door opened, and Beverly Crusher marched in with long strides, red hair flowing behind her. She was smiling and was so excited she began to talk to the Captain while almost oblivious to her surroundings.

"Jean Luc, we were finally able to do a proper genetic analysis of that alien tissue from engineering. It had many strange quirks to it, but the baseline comparisons show that it is almost certainly.."

"Human.", came a voice behind her.

Beverly stopped in mid-sentence, and Picard almost laughed out loud at the expression on her face. He pointed over her shoulder, and she slowly turned to face the figure as well.

"But we were at loss to explain the anomalies until we began to run mutation studies and make comparisons with existing evolutionary data.", she slowly continued. "It is human DNA, but from far in the future. I'd say on the order of at least 10,000 years."

"At least.", agreed the figure. He smiled at her then. "Please, I am Pa'eshta. I command the 'mystery ship', as you have delightfully named it. You have my word, no more interference will be made by me or my crew."

"So you've finally explained the who. You have not, as yet, made a mention of why.", the Captain repeated.

"You are already caught by the same two-edged sword that we are, Captain.", Pa'eshta answered. "The minute that humans discovered that time travel was possible by time warp and by the Guardian of Forever, the course was set. You see, Captain, it is inevitable that when time travel begins that you will eventually find evidence of those travelers in the historical records. The more advanced the age visited, the more likely of being recorded even with sophisticated cloaking and disguises. Such was the case here."

"Are you telling me that you time-travelled here simply because of historical evidence that interference had occurred?", Picard asked.

"There is truth in that. It was not a hint of evidence, I assure you, but a precise record that I was in your engineering section and later spoke with Jean Luc Picard. I have known of this day for sixty years prior to my mission beginning, and knew what choices had to be made. My actions could have been changed, but the future I would have returned to would not have been the one I'd have left if I indeed continued to exist at all. By not returning to the past and doing what had been recorded, my own future was in jeopardy."

"You still had no right, Pa'eshta, to play God in your past.", the Captain replied, "You found evidence of tampering with your timeline but rather than trying to correct it you allowed a world to be destroyed and thousands of neo-sentients to die!"

Pa'eshta shrugged. "But that was not the only reason. The other was the Kantaur."

"The original uplift experiments?", asked Picard

"That is correct. They were, as of 24 hours ago, in an evolutionary cul-de-sac. They were inhibited from advancing further until they could safely claim the land of Durallium as well as the sea. Those inhibiting factors have now been removed as they would have been if the Federation had never shown up here. Only now the Tenarin will have a fighting chance to live as well.

"In many centuries the Kantaur will be in a position to also join with humans and other races in space. And the debt will be repaid. For though much destruction was caused today, one day humans on a galactic scale will come to be saved by the Kantaur. By saving them, we are saving ourselves. We regret making this evolutionary dilemma yours, but it was necessary."

Picard did not look convinced, but Beverly's gaze was a thoughtful one. After a moment, she asked, "So, humans will be around for much time to come?"

"I have only one past, Beverly Crusher. You, however, have a near infinite number of possible futures of which I am only one. It is a strong possibility, but you must make it happen."

The being turned as if to walk through the bulkhead. In response, a doorway of light appeared behind him. The brightness made the doctor and the captain squint, yet behind Pa'eshta they could see figures moving. Some appeared human, some not. Two stood out - one like a giant crustacean, the other like a large ferret.

Pa'eshta turned to regard them once more, "I regret that I will be unable to continue our talks, Captain. We shall have no further contact. Farewell, and clear skies."

And then the trio; Human, Tenarin, and Kantaur; turned and the white doorway closed to the nothingness from which it had come.

XXX

Will moved fluidly, crossing the floor in a graceful dance. Defensive position 3 to a fourth quadrant attack. Move to an overhead parry, reposition the feet to a balanced stance, drop and sweep to the right. Gleaming in his red combat armor, he continued his exercises while the sonic hum of his staff flowed in a counter-melody to his footsteps.

His muscles were stiff and his lungs gave him a dull ache from the punishment of the away team's time planetside, but Will was thankful that the Tai Chi he had done earlier and the stretching exercises he was completing now were working out the kinks without problems. He kept gently pushing; a slightly higher jump, a quicker punch of the forearm. In each case his body responded well. He would be ready.

"You are sure you're not also interested in ballet?" an alto female voice said off to one side.

Riker did not respond immediately but instead moved his staff in a twirling motion over his shoulder in a traditional salute and then bowed, ending his practice. When that was completed, he raised his visor and shot a wide grin over to Deanna Troi.

"I could never match the jumps, and they won't let you wear the armor.", he said as he sat next to her on the side of the ambo-jytsu circle.

She put her arm around him and leaned close. "You were convinced you were about to die, weren't you?", she asked.

Leave it to Deanna to cut to the quick. Riker paused, remembering "Yes, I really was. My only thought at the time was an overwhelming urge to be with you...to give you everything I should have in the past, and everything I wouldn't be able to in the future. I'm.....sorry.....that I put you through that, Deanna. Even after all that you've taught me, my control still leaves a lot to be desired."

She smiled at his humor, "Your control was more than adequate, Imzadi. It was a bit overwhelming, and nothing like I would have expected. I have felt your fear, even terror before, but this was different. This time there was fear there, but it was almost hidden."

"I didn't have time to fear...there was suddenly very little time at all.", he said.

"I know. I think that's what frightened me - the certainty that at that point you had resigned yourself to the end." She held his arm tightly. "You have always been such a fighter, Will. I had never felt you give up before."

"I thought I had finally run out of options." He smiled warmly. "And that famous Riker luck. To be honest much of it is fuzzy. I wasn't thinking clearly, and was very disoriented. I hope nothing I...uh...thought then hurt you."

"I am.." Deanna stumbled for a moment, searching for the right words. "I am very moved by the thoughts you sent. Strong love. And something else that I didn't know you felt even after all these years."

Will had no trouble following. Though much of his memories still were full of holes, the recent times below the planet's surface were coming back strong.

"Regrets.", he said, "Much stronger than I had realized, too. You showed me years ago a much larger world than I had seen before. This experience did the same thing."

Deanna raised her head to look into his eyes. She was careful not to probe him - he would have to sort much of this out for himself and even now she might have to maintain an air of detachment. "So what do you feel we should do?"

"I really don't know. I don't even know if a person should allow himself to be affected by decisions made at times of duress like that. All I do know is I would like to take a lot of time and look at us, a solid future for us, again."

Troi smiled, and moved closer. "I would be more than willing to discuss it with you at length.", she said. Then she kissed him with a joy and exuberance that reminded him of their first kiss in a wooded glen on Betazed.

When she stopped, they sat there for a moment enjoying each others eyes. The she softly spoke, "You know, I was afraid when we first met on board that our friendship would suffer in the voyage to come. But now I know, no matter what we do, no matter if we end up loving others, you William Riker will always be my friend, my lover, my Imzadi. I am so glad to be able to welcome you back home."

She stood to go, and then held out her hand, "And, I would recommend that we start our discussions with a walk in the arboretum." Her eyes said that walking was only part of what she wished.

Will smiled sheepishly, and the said, "Actually, how about and hour from now?"

She looked at him questioningly and raised an eyebrow. "Certainly, but why?"

"Captain Picard is supposed to join me in just a few minutes, and I have been looking forward to our match for a long time."

"The Captain? You're going to teach the Captain?" Troi said with surprise. Her face said she suspected more behind this than simply a self-defense lesson.

"I do believe that turnabout is fair play.", Will said. "The Captain is teaching me to ride, but in the process I have so far been knocked off my horse and nearly eaten. Before then I had been shishkabobbed at fencing and nearly brained at racquetball. I thought it might be fun to meet him on familiar ground this afternoon. Think of it as a..."

"Grudge match.", answered Deanna with a disapproving look.

"...chance to expand both our horizons.", Will finished.

The gymnasium door opened and Jean Luc walked in dressed in white ambo-lytsu armor. He smiled, and walked over to the couple. "I trust I'm not late, Number One?"

"Right on time, Captain.", Will said.

"I'll see you at midwatch, Commander, and I suggest you come equipped with a picnic basket.", Troi said. "If you will both excuse me." She smiled and walked out the door. Both of the men moved up onto the challenge circle.

"I appreciate your teaching me some of this, Will.", the Captain said. "I am familiar with the basics, but would like to learn more."

"Well, why don't we start with a warm-up match. Just remember to stop trusting in your eyes. See with your other senses; turn your vision inward.", Will said. He decided that he would pull his punches at first until Jean Luc was familiar with the routines. But an introductory match like this was a good start to show a novice exactly what methods and senses couldn't be trusted to win.

The saluted each other and then lowered their visors. Riker assumed defensive stance one with his staff held horizontally over his head. He would let Picard make the first attack, and this position would allow him to defend or move into the traditional "falling water" attack at the torso or upper legs with ease. The proximity seekers began to buzz and wane as the combatants began to circle each other. Will forced himself to relax and began to build the mental vision in his mind. The combat circle was centered before him, and Jean Luc was to his left. From the position of Picard's seeker head he estimated that the Captain was probing to that side, and had nearly turned completely around.

Will began to move in the stagger-step fashion that kept his balance to approach the Captain from behind. Suddenly Picard whirled around with his staff moving in a good approximation for a primary torso attack, and Will barely parried the blow from his raised position. He shifted his position and swept his staff under Picard's. Pushing Picard's staff to the mat he spun himself over to try to strike the Captain's

midsection. The seeker head sung loudly but rather than connecting with torso armor he felt it lightly glance off Jean Luc's shoulder.

Both combatants separated as they recovered their bearings. Will was stunned - he hadn't put maximum effort into that attack, but the fact the Picard had managed to duck under it was impressive. And the captain's attack - no novice move there. So much for pulling punches, Riker thought.

His mind quickly shifted gears. He needed to assess just what the Captain did know, and look for weaknesses. He probed quickly and found Picard off to his right.

But the Captain wasn't going to allow a long assessment. Another sweeping attack nearly took Will's feet out from under him. He jumped in time, but was unable regain a balanced footing. Stepping back, Riker was caught completely unaware of the frontal jab of the seeker head of Picard's staff directly to his chin. His jaw rung with the blow, and his eyes were flooded with light as his helmet flew off. He landed hard on his back. Picard finished the move by bringing the end of his staff to rest an inch above the stunned first officer's sternum.

Raising his visor, Picard said in a cheerful voice, "Very good, Number One. This afternoon should be informative for both of us!"

Will managed a weak smile, chuckled, and reached for his helmet.

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On a windward beachhead far below, a black/grey shape moved among the churning sea. Its motion was a stop-start affair toward what could only modestly be called a beach. Pounded by weeks of driving rain and surf, this newly formed shore line was barely visible in the dim light of the midday sun. Yet the creature emerging from the ocean's froth was not at this time worried at all with the beach's aesthetics. Rather, it stopped often to sense. To its astonishment, it could sense....no danger at all.

No large predators around. None. And no smaller ones either. Astonishment! Food? Yes, food was here. Food plants were close by. A trap? Yes! But where was the predator's scent?! Confusion....

It continued a few steps farther. Not a trap. Air is different. Changed, but breathable. All gone. No large flesh eaters nearby. They must have left. When Sky God's sent their...gigantic...landslide into the sea. If they were gone, then this one would not wait. The land held food, the land held promise.

For the first time, a Kantaur stepped boldly onto the shore.

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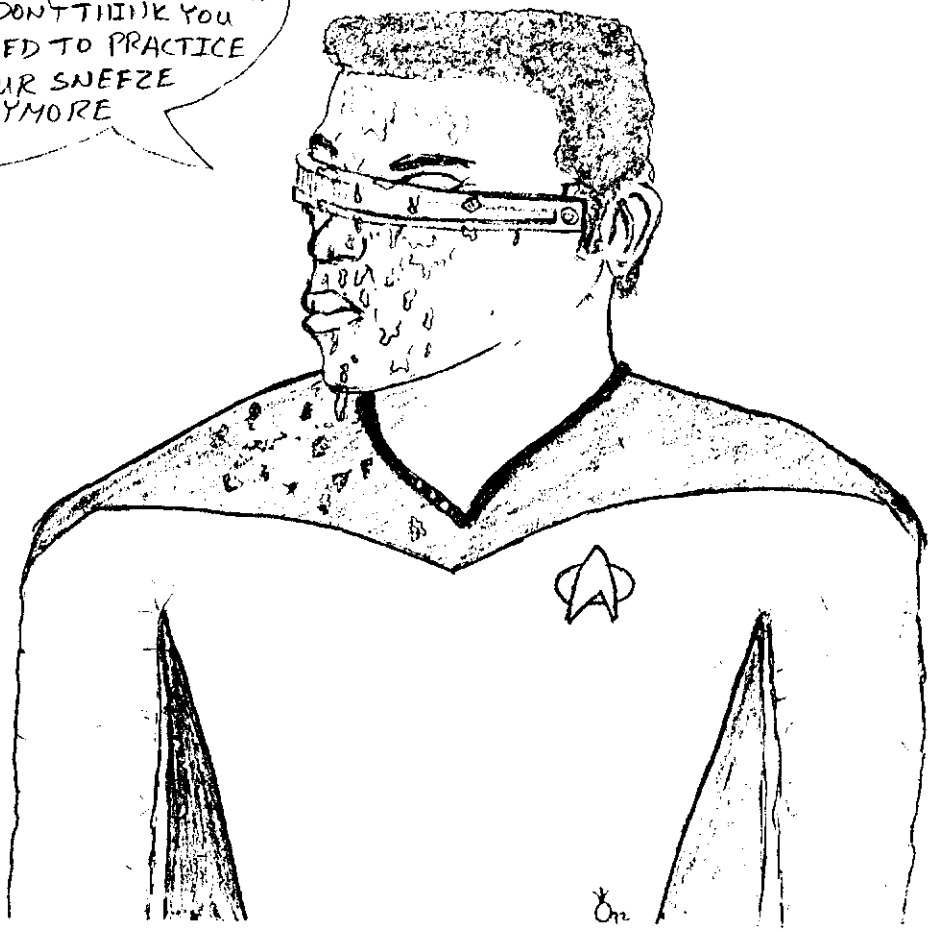
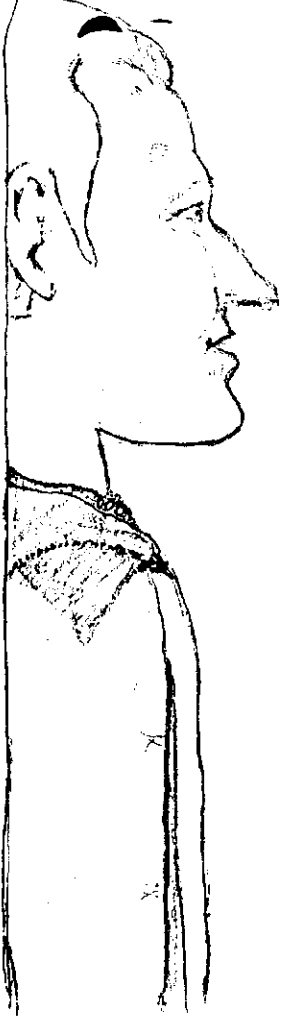
I hate it when he needs a jumpstart



The worm monitor



PERSONALLY DATA,
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NEED TO PRACTICE
YOUR SNEEZE
ANYMORE



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