

Or Not To Be

by Edward Mason McArdle©

Prologue.

Captain Jean-Luc Picard walked through the empty corridors of the Enterprise with Commander William Riker.

"Shore leave was enjoyable, Number One," he said, "but I have to admit I was champing at the bit to be back the last few days."

"I'm not sorry to be here," said Riker with a smile. "I enjoy the leave up to the last minute, but I always know I'm coming back here! It'll be good to fly again."

"This is actually one of the times I enjoy most," said Picard. "A new crew, another group to get to know over the coming months. Will there be another Geordi La Forge among them? Another William Riker?"

"One of me used to be plenty," said Riker with a smile. "I don't think we want any more! It's not really a new crew. About twenty new personnel. One or two look like they might be challenges."

"Oh?" said Picard. "How's that?"

"There's a new Ensign from some planet I don't know. Got very good scores from the academy, especially in gunnery, but supposed to be a bit antisocial."

"That can be a problem," said Picard with a frown. "That would be Ensign Arrg, from Tarkassia. I pride myself that the Enterprise is a friendly ship. No interpersonal antagonisms. Still, with Guinan and Deanna aboard, maybe they'll straighten him out."

Riker was not surprised to have Picard immediately

identify the possible troublemaker. The Captain had received the manifest, and always studied it before passing it on.

"He may not be unfriendly. He may just like to keep to himself."

"True."

"Have you received your orders yet?"

"Yes." Picard shrugged. "It looks like a fairly straightforward mission to start. One of the Cardassian ambassadors has been at some sort of conference near Starbase 44. The powers-that-be thought it would be a good idea if we offered to drive him home."

"A pretty expensive chauffeuring system!" This was a standard joke from Riker. The Enterprise had often carried out missions of this nature before.

They had arrived on the bridge by this time, and it was in a state of disarray. Panels were off, with wiring everywhere. People tested things all around.

"I don't know why they have to take everything to pieces," said Picard crossly. "You'd think they could check out all the systems without this mess!"

"I suppose they know what they're doing," said Riker, stifling his amusement. Picard liked the Enterprise to be always immaculate.

"Yes. Anyway, it was not entirely philanthropic. Starfleet wants us to investigate some stellar phenomena beyond the Cardassian system. They came to the party, and have offered us passage through their territory after we drop the ambassador. It will save us weeks of travel."

"They are a bit slow with these repairs," said Riker with a frown. "The crew will be shipping aboard in a few hours. They're already over on the starbase waiting."

Most of the crew waiting on starbase 6 were old hands. They had been there since leaving the Enterprise previously, and had simply sampled the pleasures of the starbase and the planet it orbited. Others were new. They had just flown in by smaller transports, and were nervously awaiting their new posts.

Mary-Anne Smith had arrived early in the waiting area, and had been reading a book to while away the time. She was one of those who arrive way ahead of time in case something goes wrong. There were shops, but she had resisted buying anything, although she spent some time browsing. As an ensign, she would be sharing a room, and had resolutely kept her luggage to a minimum. Most things, such as clothing and food, could be supplied from replicators, and only personal items or those with some sentimental attachment need be brought aboard.

Her posting was as a biologist, but she had impressive credentials from the academy in gunnery, Federation history, and astrophysics among others. She was skilled in a number of sports, but did not expect to have much time to practise those.

The number of those waiting grew gradually, and they spread around the waiting area somewhat randomly, until a new arrival changed the pattern.

It was one of the most ferocious-looking creatures Mary-Anne had ever seen. It looked like a cross between a

ravering wolf and one of those old classic monsters, a Giger alien. Its eyes were yellow, and narrowed menacingly. Its lips curled back in a menacing snarl as it looked around, and sat in a vacant seat.

Nobody got up straight away and moved off, but the natural comings and goings seemed to create a circle of empty seats around it. Even when most people had arrived, and room was running low, people stood off to the side rather than sit near the creature. The anomalous thing was that the creature was wearing the uniform of a Starfleet ensign.

"Well, I hope he's not working with me," thought Mary-Anne. "I wouldn't like to be left alone with him!"

These reactions were not the norm. Starfleet was populated with a variety of life-forms of varying degrees of repulsiveness, but it was bad form to show distaste. This creature, however, radiated a feeling of uneasiness and menace.

Her musings were interrupted by the arrival of a space shuttle at the doors of the transfer room. She put away her Romance novel, and thought with an inward grin, "Well, he's not the man on page three!"

In a tradition going back some hundreds of years, the hero of Romance novels always made his appearance on page three. Romances were not mysteries. If you didn't want to know how your novel was going to come out, you bought a murder mystery. in fact, it was not so much tradition as that a large percentage of novels still in print were very old. Stories were still written, but usually as holonovels these

days. Print books were expensive to produce now, and since the quality of paper had been improved a couple of centuries ago books tended to be very long-lived, and somewhat indestructible. Used-book stores existed in every large city.

As they lined up she was amused to note that the strange ensign, who was some distance in front, stood in a little gap, with nobody close either in front or behind. He looked around, his lip curling in a menacing way. When they were on the shuttle he took his little personal space with him. He sat alone, while the others mostly stared out at the approaching side of the Enterprise. Mary-Anne stared at it too. It was impossible to see too much from so close-up, but the gleaming... cleanness of the exterior impressed her. Her logical mind told her that the outside of a starship is unlikely to get dirty, but a first impression is a first impression.

Near her a child stared through the window in awe.

"Mummy, she asked, "why doesn't it bang into the walls next to it? It's just hanging there."

"It's gravity, darling," replied her father, after a look from mother. "Both the ship and the station are moving in a solar orbit at exactly the same speed, so they stay the same distance apart."

"Oh," said the child, happy to have had her question answered, but none the wiser. Just as well, thought Mary Anne, since the answer was wrong. Two large masses like that would be quite difficult to settle into exactly the same orbit. The Enterprise was held in place by tractor beams.

They did not have to be strong, as the ship had no acceleration, but they had to be there.

The shuttle drew in perfectly and joined hatches without a jar. Good driving, she thought, even if it is driven by a computer. As the hatch slid open the passengers moved into a spacious docking bay. If a docking bay is this big, she thought, how big is the ship?

Her main luggage was stowed away somewhere, and all she had was accessories and her novel. "But will there be a 'man on page three' waiting for me here?" she thought in amusement. "I'm going to be aboard here a long time!"

Her musings were not something new. Fantasy amused her, and she was aware that whenever Sir Galahad appeared, she bolted (metaphorically) like a startled faun, back to her books and hobbies.

All of the members of the crew going aboard were quickly 'processed', having to identify themselves, show iris identification, collect a docket and pass inside. A speaker repeated its message, "Welcome aboard. All of you have been allocated a room. The first digit on you docket corresponds to the deck and your room will be there. If you wish, take time to freshen up, and deposit your hand luggage. There will be a general welcome in hangar 17 in forty minutes, at 1100 hours. All crew must attend."

"All crew except those phantoms who deliver the luggage," she thought. She was wrong. The luggage was delivered to the rooms by personnel from starbase, who then left the Enterprise.

She wondered whether someone was watching them, or

simply reciting a message elsewhere on the ship. Below the entrance deck, the luggage was being loaded, and going through a security check. Malcolm French, a dark young man whose face reflected his Australian aborigine heritage, and Chr' Gyr', a female avian from Bontarr', watched the scans of the suitcases as they drifted by. It passed the time to try to identify the shapes that passed their eyes.

"This one seems to have blocks of wood in it," Gyr' remarked, and Malcolm glanced over.

"Don't you recognise books?" he said with a smile. "They were used, on earth anyway, to record stories and information before padds and information chips."

"Why would someone bring them on a starship?" asked Gyr' curiously. Each crewman had a good living space, but would not need many possessions. Things which were to be used were made in the replicators, and then recycled. That included food and clothing.

"Some people have sentimental attachments to them," said Malcolm. "They like to keep them forever."

"Information tablets?" said Gyr' in surprise.

"Stories, more usually," he replied, and she nodded in understanding. In any race, stories were fundamental.

"In any case," he added, "one of the crew who possesses hard copy books is the captain."

"You've been in Captain Picard's room?" she said in surprise. The captain's luggage did not go through security scans.

"I had to fix his replicator one time," he said. "His tea was

out of flavor. I was looking at the books on his shelf, and he showed them to me. I'd say they are real sentimental favorites!"

"Which implies that you like books, too," she observed.

"Yeah," he agreed.

"Well, that's the last of them," she said eventually. "We're to go up to the welcoming with the rest. Somebody else can deliver all these."

They stood up, a little stiffly after sitting and staring for so long, and walked together up to hangar 17. They had become good friends, even though they worked together only occasionally. Malcolm usually worked in Engineering, and Gyr' in Navigation and general repairs. Upstairs they mingled with the new arrivals. As it was a short meeting no chairs were organised, and people stood.

"Do you see any interesting 'birds'?" Gyr' asked him. "I am a bird, but you never seem to chase me."

"No doubt your mate would object," he grinned. "I'll stick to looking for now. If you are as fast as the emus back home, I'd never catch you anyway. There are a couple of nice-looking birds in the new arrivals actually."

Gyr' smiled, as much as an avian is able. "You are all talk. If one of them came and talked to you you'd probably faint. And if she didn't know anything about starship engines, you'd have nothing to talk about."

He grinned.

"I do have other interests," he said.

"Not too many women you meet are likely to be deep into number theory," she said. "Nor many men, for that matter."

There was a gradual hush, as the crowd became aware that the senior officers had arrived. They took up places on a raised platform at one side of the enormous room.

Captain Jean-Luc Picard was still a little nervous of addressing crowds, although he was perfectly at ease in a position of command on the bridge. He liked to say his piece, and pass the baton to Riker. He stepped up to the improvised rostrum, and set the crowd at ease.

"Most of you have been a part of my crew before," he said.

"I welcome you back. We can get to know this ship again, together. To those of you who are joining the crew for the first time, you have big shoes to fill, but I am sure you are all capable of doing so. Some of you, like Ensign Mendon, have served with us briefly, but are now here to stay."

Ensign Mendon, startled to have been picked out, flushed with embarrassment. As his face was hidden by the breathing apparatus he always wore, nobody noticed.

He paused, then continued, "All of you have joined because you want to go that step further, to see what has not been seen. We will do that soon. Our first duty is simply a transport of an ambassador from Starbase 44 to Cardassia, after a conference. From there, however, we will continue on for exploration of unseen territory beyond the Cardassian territory. In repayment for our help in facilitating the meeting between their ambassador and the Excalbians, the Cardassians are allowing us to travel straight through their space instead of around it."

He sat down, and Commander William Riker rose, and began to announce duties and shifts. Mary Anne looked at

the handsome face as he spoke, and noted his trim physique, how well he spoke, and his air of command. "Is this page three?" she thought sardonically. She glanced around, and noted that most of the human females were also giving Riker some rapt attention. She formed an opinion that some might have received attention back. Not true, as it happened. Commander Riker maintained a distance from subordinates.

At the end, Riker said, "For those of you new to the ship, gatherings like this are not the norm. We have these formalities so that you can get together at least once, but normally communication will be by intra-ship broadcasts for general information, or meetings of smaller groups if necessary. Once again, welcome to the Enterprise, or welcome back. We expect excellence, and I'm sure you won't disappoint us."

"Was that a royal 'we'?" Mary Anne remarked to herself. The ceremonies ended, and the crowds drifted away. Some of the newcomers looked around curiously at the shipmates fate had saddled them with. Ensign Mary Anne Smith looked about at the crowd of strangers she would soon know well. Perhaps one of them... She sighed, and went back to her cabin, and found her new shipmate, who was Chr' Gyr'.

"Hi, I'm Chr'," said she. "Chr' Gyr'. I'm in Navigation. Is this your first time on the Enterprise?"

"It's my first time on any starship," said Mary Anne. "I'm fresh out of the Academy."

"You'll like it here," said Chr' Gyr'. "The Captain is a bit

distant, but you never see him much anyway. The rest are very nice. Strict but fair."

"Commander Riker seems very nice," Mary Anne said.

"Oh, he is," said Chr', "always charming, but tough on his subordinates."

"Strict but fair," said Mary Anne.

"A winner of hearts," said Chr'. "Can I help you unpack?"

"No thanks," answered Mary Anne. "I don't have all that much."

She opened the suitcase which had been delivered for her, and put her clothing in drawers. She took out a pile of books and set them out on shelves.

"Oh, the books," said Chr'. "I haven't seen any before."

"What do you mean, 'the books'?" asked Mary Anne.

"I was on luggage scanning. I thought they were blocks of wood. My partner explained what they were. Why do you carry them?"

"I guess they are sentimental favorites," smiled Mary Anne. "I like the feel of a book while I'm lying in bed."

"Then you lie in bed alone?" asked Chr'.

"So far," answered Mary Anne with a smile. "It might be difficult to share a bed when I'm sharing a room, anyway."

"What are the books?"

"Some scientific books, exobiology, astronomy, and so on, and some of my favorite Romance novels."

"What are they?"

"Oh, fantasy. A lonely young girl meets a handsome devil of a man and reforms him, and they marry, and presumably live happily ever after."

"Is that fantasy?"

"I suspect so," smiled Mary Anne. "I don't run into many handsome devils myself."

"Human women seem to regard Commander Riker so. Who knows?"

Mary Anne laughed.

The captain met briefly with the senior officers.

"That went well," he said. "It seems a good crew again. This is the kind of mission I enjoy. It is pleasant yet important in its way. If the meeting goes well, both Cardassia and the Excalbians will be more inclined towards peace with the Federation, and perhaps closer to joining."

"I think the Cardassians are a long way off yet!" said Riker.

"A while ago we would have thought that of the Klingons," replied Picard. "Now they are our good friends."

"But the Cardassians are basically a bunch of treacherous... lizards," muttered Worf.

Tactfully, no one replied.

"Well, we can only hope that the voices of reason among them prevail," said Jean-Luc after a pause. "The Excalbians are a strange race. They must finally have decided to mix. In any case, our safe conduct of the ambassador will be one step along in a long journey towards real peace with the Cardassians."

"I can't see a Cardassian joining Starfleet too soon," observed Riker.

"I wouldn't have thought a Ferengi could ever become a

Starfleet Ensign," remarked Geordi, "but I've got one under me, and he seems to be working very well so far. I would have thought a Ferengi would have been better at poker, though."

"Well, don't invite the Cardassian ambassador into your card games," said Picard. "That might set peace back a century!"

After the meeting Riker and Deanna made their way down to Ten Forward, partly to relax, but partly to get a look at some of the new crewmembers as they relaxed.

"Are there any hidden agendas to our mission, Will?" asked Deanna.

"No. Seems pretty straightforward. I could do with a straightforward mission," he added. "I'm tired of saving the world all the time."

"You've saved the world recently?" she asked with a smile. Gr'h Arrg, the ferocious looking new ensign, walked in, and headed towards the bar. People drifted out of his way. They knew he must be "all right" if he wore a Starfleet uniform, but his appearance was somewhat frightening. He seemed to scowl and glower as he looked around the room. "I hope he's not going to be one of those types who's always starting fights," muttered Riker.

Deanna looked puzzled.

"I'm not getting any feelings of animosity from him at all," she said.

"Dropped your shields to feel him out, have you?" he asked. "Actually, there's no trouble on his record, but I get

that feeling about him."

He drifted alone up to the bar, and Guinan came over. For once in her life she was surprised.

"You're a Tarkassian, aren't you?" she asked.

His face showed absolute fury, and he said, "Why, how did you know?"

"I was there once," she said. "When I was a little girl." She did not add that that was some centuries ago.

"You've visited Tarkassia?" he said, his voice snarling in pleasure. "Why would anyone do that?"

"My parents took me there," she said. "I loved it. So unusual. I loved the animals."

"Not many people visit Tarkassia," he observed.

"Not many people leave Tarkassia," she replied. "I never thought I'd see a Tarkassian in Starfleet."

"It was just something I thought I'd like to do," he said.

"It's been a bit lonely, but I expected that. It's so nice to meet someone who is friendly. Can I talk to you again?" Someone else was nervously trying to attract her attention.

"Anytime," she said, as she turned to serve him. "Enjoy your drink."

None of his talk had sounded at all friendly, but Guinan took it as meant. The ensign took his drink and moved into a corner of Ten Forward, a room in which corners were hard to find.

Riker moved over as he left, with Deanna in tow.

"You didn't seem too fazed by that fellow," he commented to Guinan. "Everyone else seems a bit nervous of him."

"How often have you seen me fazed?" she asked with a

quiet smile. "Are you nervous of him?"

"He's one of our new ensigns," Riker said, answering neither question.

"I know," replied Guinan. "What do you know about him?"

"He's Tarkassian," said Riker, "and came out with some of the top gunnery scores for his year. Very good at most sciences, but not a good mixer. I can see why!"

"That's unfortunate. What you see is not what you get on Tarkassia," said Guinan.

"Tarkassia, Tarkassia?" mused Deanna. "Didn't you have a Tarkassian pet once, you told me?"

"An imaginary Tarkassian razorbeast," Guinan smiled. "It protected me."

"Well, if it looked anything like Ensign Arrg," said Riker, "I'm not surprised!"

"It was actually a sort of personal joke," said Guinan, "even when I was small. If you're going to be working with a Tarkassian, there is something you should perhaps know."

"What's that?" said Riker and Deanna simultaneously, and they laughed.

"Tarkassian evolution was one of those unusual ones you sometimes find. The major defence of a lot of animals was to frighten off predators. The scariest-looking animals were usually completely harmless. If you saw an animal that looked like a rabbit or a hamster, you gave it a wide berth! It was likely to be a savage predator."

"So your razorbeast..." said Deanna.

"A real razorbeast looked absolutely terrifying, but was a great pet. It scared off the fears of childhood quite

adequately, but a razorbeast would be useless if actually attacked."

"But surely the predators would have learned all this?" said Deanna. "They would go for the most fearsome looking prey."

"Looking and sounding frightening weren't the only weapons in their armory," laughed Guinan. "The intelligent beings on Tarkassia evolved from the pussycat types who looked fierce but weren't. Just like we evolved from animals, and still have a lot of their characteristics, so did the Tarkassians. They look ferocious, but they are the gentlest people you could meet. That's why I was so amazed to see one in Starfleet. I can't imagine one actually firing a weapon!"

"That's handy to know," observed Riker. "He has never been in real combat, so I'll have to see how he goes. I won't rely on him to save my life, if I can help it, for a while! But he came out with great scores."

"He may be a great officer," said Guinan. "You can't judge a person by his species."

"By the way," Riker commented, "it must have taken your people a long time to evolve at all, with lifetimes the better part of a thousand years!"

"We evolved the long life," she said. "Our ancestors may not have lived so long. But compared to the life of the universe, you can fit in a hell of a lot of millenia to evolve in!"

"Well, here's to a boring assignment!" said Riker. "May nobody have to save anything."

Chapter 1

Some parts of the galaxy are crowded with stars, nebulae, dust. Others, the areas between the spiral arms, for instance, are virtually empty. Not just the ordinary emptiness of space, but an emptiness of background as well. There are no nearby stars, and the galaxy itself can be seen as a faint wash of dots painted in a smear.

Like a shadow, the Vardan Rak hung in this space unlit. An observer would have been unable to determine if it was moving, as there was nothing nearby to measure its movement against. This was a part of the Romulan empire's territory which was really just space. There were no stars near enough to light up its exterior, had there been anyone to see it, and its windows were shut, or blanked. Although stars and planets have their interest, deep space offers much to scientists. The background radiation of empty space provides continual grist to their mills.

Life aboard a Romulan science vessel might be considered boring to some, but the Romulans were not a race easily bored. Aboard the Vardan Rak those not actively on duty were wont to spend their time on contemplation, research or in intellectual games. They had learned the technology of holodecks from the Federation, but tended to use it to reconstruct scenes from home where they could sit and contemplate the great ideas. Romulus had a beautiful but violent face, and it might seem odd to a human to see a Romulan sitting entranced in his or her own thoughts at the

base of a spectacular fire falls.

As the ship was charting a relatively unexplored part of Romulan territory, they went about their duties methodically. All learning was important, and they dutifully recorded everything about the few stars in the distance, as well as the features of space itself.

The Tribune in charge of the ship was named Tripeg. He was a long-faced Romulan with a dark countenance, a lover of poetry and science, and he found a fascination in the mathematical aspects of space. A Romulan, like a Vulcan, would reject the idea that he would enjoy anything, but Tripeg enjoyed the empty wastes of space.

They had not been long arrived, but already data flowed in. 'Have we data recordings in every direction?' he asked. It was a formality. His crew were so experienced that they could probably have continued without his issuing a command during the stopover.

'I have not been recording in the area bearing 66 as yet,' said an officer. 'A vessel is on patrol there. It is the Forr Took, Tribune Sarel's warbird. Its emissions would overwhelm the readings. I will record there when it has gone, and its trail has dissipated.'

'Record in that direction anyway, but note its presence,' said Tripeg. 'The dissipation may have its own interest.'

'Tribune, I have something anomalous about three light years away,' said Moureg, a science officer, a short time later. 'It was good fortune that you gave that order.'

Tripeg came over.

'On short wavelengths there is some sort of vortex,' said

Moureg, 'but nothing is visible to the eye. It is some distance away, but fairly large. It has nothing to do with the starship. In fact it is a good distance away from it.'

Tripeg's interest was caught, and he ordered the ship to be brought closer. From nearby the identity of the phenomenon was clearer.

'It's a wormhole!' exclaimed Moureg with a sharpness in his voice which signaled excitement. 'It's not very big, but worth recording.'

Wormholes were uncommon enough that all the crew who were not required to maintain the ship either came to the bridge or followed the action through their viewscreens throughout the ship. A wormhole was like an eddy in space, which might go from one place to another like a huge door. But like an eddy in water, its stability was likely to be short.

Isgri, another science officer, joined Moureg. She did not have to explain her interest. Most of those on the bridge knew that the study of wormholes was her major interest, but she had never actually seen one.

Moureg studied the wormhole for a few minutes.

'Is it stable?' asked Tripeg with interest. 'The only known stable wormhole is in Bajoran space. It would be desirable to have one of our own.'

'It seems relatively stable,' replied Moureg, 'but not completely. I would estimate it might last some months, so it will be possible to explore it, but it is not big enough for a large ship to pass through.'

'So, not a warbird then,' said Tripeg, 'but could we go

through?'

'No, but a scout ship could fit through comfortably. I need not remind you, I am sure, that there is an element of risk. The wormhole might suddenly disappear. There is a small, but finite, chance that the other end of the wormhole might come out in a solid object.'

'I think that problem could be discounted,' remarked one of those nearby. 'The percentage of matter in space is so low that the chance is negligible. And if there were a solid mass right at the wormhole, traces of matter would be coming through it, especially if that matter were gaseous or stellar.'

'Then we can call for a volunteer crew, to explore who knows where,' said Tripeg. 'You all understand the danger?'

'The danger is mostly that the wormhole might close, and cut us off in some distant corner of the galaxy,' said Isgri.

'For a Romulan, not such a terror. A group of us could survive away from the Star Empire. The ship could sustain us indefinitely if we did not find a habitable planet. Which of us would not take the risk for the chance of new knowledge?'

'I agree,' replied Moureg. 'But do not forget we know almost nothing about wormholes. A few have been investigated without mishap, but the explorers have generally not stayed long, and have had little time for exploration. And we do not know that the other end is in our galaxy. In fact the worst scenario would be to find ourselves in intergalactic space.'

'Why so?' asked Tripeg curiously.

'Because if we were to be stranded, there would be nothing

to do but meditate for the rest of our lives!' said Moureg drily. 'We could be millions of light years from a star.' 'If that is the case,' interposed a woman, 'it might be best to take equal numbers of each gender. A colony could be maintained until the ship found another galaxy, and perhaps began to seed it with Romulans.'

'These hypotheses are becoming too involved,' said Tripeg, with a slight smile, 'but I agree. If we have the volunteers we will have a gender balance. It is overwhelmingly likely, however, that the ship will look around, record nothing of interest, and return through the wormhole. The most urbane of us might falter at maintaining a colony on a runabout. I presume from your continued use of the word 'we' that you intend to assign yourself to the crew, Moureg?'

'Yes,' Moureg agreed. 'It is also possible that we will find some resources which can be quickly mined or harvested in the next few months. The wormhole does seem likely to last at least that long.'

Tripeg considered contacting the warbird, but decided that this was his responsibility. The warbird would have its own agenda. It had probably not even registered the presence of the wormhole, as it would not be scanning all frequencies like the Vardan Rak was. If it approached the danger area it could be warned.

A crew of six was assembled, and Tribune Tripeg reported the discovery and his intentions back to the central base on Romulus. All information on star formations was downloaded into the scout ship, so that the explorers could

try to determine their position at the other end.

'We will fulfil the rest of our duties here while you explore,' said Tripeg, 'but will not stay beyond that time. If you are held up, but return later, the scout ship can easily take you home. I wish you well in your discoveries.'

The six, which included Moureg and Isgri, detached their vessel from the larger one, and aimed themselves through the center of the wormhole. It was an eerie sensation, even for a Romulan, since there was nothing visible to their senses.

Passage through a wormhole is an unsettling experience for humans, but the Romulans would have scorned closing their viewports, or protecting themselves, apart from the obvious action of turning on their shields. Moureg noted the time on the chronometer, and the space around them wilted.

For a time their internal clocks ceased to function, and they had no idea how long they had been traveling. As they popped back out into normal space, and the world seemed to fall back into flatness like a jigsaw puzzle solving itself, Moureg glanced at the chronometer. No time had passed. Interesting, he thought.

Isgri had remained impassive, as was the norm for her race, but her heart sang with the thrill. She absorbed every nuance of the journey, and the reactions of her own physiology to it. Strangely, it seemed long enough for her to take in every impression, but also seemed to take no time at all.

They were in open space, but there were a few stars within

a few light-years.

'So far safely,' said Moureg. 'Let us examine our surroundings. It is just possible that we are still within known space. If not, the computers may be able to extrapolate our position - if we are still in our own galaxy!'

'The wormhole is still visible, and seems stable still. We have a way home,' said Isgri without any emotional inflection. They began to analyse their surroundings and took measurements on the two nearest systems.

'One is a normal double star,' said the astrophysicist, Blend, 'and the other is a single yellow star. The double star has ten planets, none life-supporting. The yellow star has nine planets, the fifth one the largest, just sub-solar, and the third life-supporting. The computer is attempting a match from its database.'

They settled into looking at the stars around them, looking for any unusual phenomena, but were surprised as the computer almost instantly found a match.

Blend glanced at the screen and laughed shortly. The others looked at her. She swung around in her chair, with a grimace.

'What a great discovery!' she said sardonically. 'We have come on our great adventure and discovered - Earth!'

'Are you sure?' asked Moureg with a frown. 'If so, we had best be going back through the wormhole. I don't fancy facing earth's starships on their own territory!'

'What an anticlimax to a great adventure,' said Isgri wryly. 'All right, let us go back. we can take our recordings of the wormhole from our own side.'

'The High Command may have some idea how to use this tunnel into earth's home territory,' said Blend. 'I doubt it, though.'

'What starships?' asked another member of the crew, Roga puzzledly, still following Moureg's last words. 'I am not registering any extraterrestrial activity at all.'

'That's odd,' said Blend. 'The orbits and planet sizes match exactly, but the picture of the earth shows little resemblance! The atmosphere is almost right, but not the configuration of land.'

'There is a theory that a solar system of a given mass will form a certain configuration,' mused Moureg. 'This could be another star system which began with almost the same amount of matter as the earth's sun, and so condensed in an identical way.'

'With so many stars, its probability is possible,' said Blend doubtfully, 'but the odds that we should come out at a never-before discovered solar system which is identical with that of our greatest enemies...'

'The humans have on a number of occasions found parallel universes,' put in Roga. 'It only seems to happen to them. Could this be a parallel earth, where the humans have not developed space travel?'

'I have never heard of a wormhole which went to another universe,' said Isgri. 'But then, again, we know hardly anything about wormholes, and it may be theoretically possible.'

Blend pored over her computer.

'The next system is a perfect match for Alpha Centauri!

The odds of two systems matching is astronomical.'

'Well, this is astronomy we are talking about,' observed Roga.

Isgri in the meantime had been examining earth star maps which she had called up on the computer.

'Yes,' she said, 'the star maps are right for earth - almost.'

'Almost?' said Blend. She called up the maps herself, and studied them. Then she had the computer run a simulation. She sank back in her seat with a sigh of satisfaction.

'We missed the obvious,' she said. 'A wormhole is an eddy in space-time. Why did we assume it just came out in different space but the same time? We have not traveled far in space, but far in the past. It is earth, but the computer puts us about sixty-five million years in the past!'

The group were silent at the enormity of this discovery.

'This puts a different complexion on traveling through wormholes,' said Isgri eventually. 'The further back one goes, the higher the background radiation of the cosmos becomes. If we found ourselves within the first half million years of the universe, the radiation would be sufficient to disincorporate the atoms of the ship!'

'I think we would still have warning of that,' said Blend thoughtfully. 'Plasma would drift through the wormhole. I doubt that wormholes could exist back in that era.'

'An interesting idea arises then,' remarked one of the others. 'If we ever do discover how to travel through time, a measurement of the background radiation of space could give a general idea of where we were.'

'But why should this wormhole travel through time when

none of the others has?' asked Moureg with a frown.

'How do we know?' said Blend. 'There is no communication between the two ends of any wormhole besides going through it. There could be millions of years difference in time, and one would never know unless one were able to study it. We must make the suggestion to Bajor. Perhaps they would even let us investigate.'

'The wormhole near Bajor is atypical,' said Isgri. 'It is stable because it is maintained by some mysterious extratemporal beings. Traveling through it is said to be quite a different experience than through a natural one. It is known that both its ends are contemporaneous to some extent. Messages have been exchanged with ships after they have traversed it, by subspace.'

'We are here,' observed Blend, 'presumably in our own universe. What a chance to observe the changes over time. And how odd to be browsing at our leisure around the enemy camp, so to speak.'

'We must make sure not to be observed,' observed Moureg. 'A chance observation of an extraterrestrial vehicle might alter history somehow.'

'Just think,' added Isgri. 'They are probably crawling around down there, not having even discovered nuclear power yet.'

'I think we should go back soon, after making our observations,' said Moureg. 'The High Council may have some ideas on what to do.'

'How amusing it would be to come and mine all their outer planets before they even discover them,' smiled Blend. 'it

might set the earth alliances back centuries!'

'A dangerous thing to do,' said Moureg. 'Changing the past is always dangerous. They have interacted with us for some time. Still, they only traveled to the outer planets for mining a couple of centuries ago. Mining them would not have a far-reaching effect. Who knows what the Council may elect to do?'

'All tampering withtime is dangerous,' said Isgri. 'That is why time travel is forbidden. But while we are here, let us record what we can. We can have the computers scan quickly, and the scientists on Romulus can digest the information at their leisure'

They set out to photograph and record as much as possible of the planets and stars nearby.

'If nothing else,' chuckled Isgri, 'we might profit by selling all these records to the humans. They might pay a fortune for all this early history of their sector.'

'And to think we always thought you pure-bred Romulan,' observed Blend, 'when you obviously have a great deal of Ferengi blood.'

They all smiled, including Isgri.

The small ship popped back out of the wormhole. There was no sign of the Vardan Rak.

'Have they finished the survey already?' asked Isgri in surprise.

'Well, as the Tribune said, we can return by ourselves,' said Moureg, also puzzled. 'Set a course back for the home world.'

They did not hurry. There was some refitting of the ship necessary for the long journey, and Isgri waited to take more measurements of the wormhole.

'Odd,' she muttered. 'If anything, the wormhole seems slightly more stable than when we left.'

Eventually all was prepared, and they began their journey at impulse speed, while they continued to scan the area.

Suddenly Moureg said, 'It's going back!'

The Vardan Rak was returning. They drew to a halt, and began to trek back to the wormhole. They had nowhere near the speed of the big ship, so it was settled in place by the wormhole long before they caught up with it. They hailed it.

'I didn't see them come out!' exclaimed Tripeg. 'Bring them in!'

'Was it so uninteresting that you came straight back?' he asked as the crew disembarked from the small vessel.

'What do you mean?' asked Moureg in surprise.

'You've only been gone about ten hours,' said Tripeg.

'Interesting,' said Moureg. 'We felt we had been away about three days. What made you decide to come back?'

'What do you mean?' asked Tripeg. 'We have not had time to finish our explorations since you left.'

'Well, this is an interesting wormhole,' commented Isgri.

'Tell me about it, while the computer is uploading all your discoveries, then,' replied Tripeg. 'It sounds like the wormhole itself may be as interesting as anything else.'

Sela was meditating while staring out of her window at the

majestic scenery of the Romulan landscape. It never ceased to stir her with its rugged grandeur. The planet was in continual volcanic eruption, but in most areas the eruptions were controlled and predictable. Her home perched on a dangerous-looking outcrop, so that her views of the mountains could never be breached.

There was a signal from outside, and she called out, 'Enter!' Gan Devan, a member of the High Council, entered.

'May your meditations be peaceful, lady,' he said.

'And may yours be deep, Gan Devan,' she replied. 'What brings you here?'

Instead of answering, he said, 'All of your acquaintance know of your abiding fascination with the planet Earth and its inhabitants. How are your studies proceeding?'

He had used 'abiding fascination' where he meant 'obsession', but felt that it would be politic to use a euphemism. It was widely known that Sela was the daughter of a Romulan father and a human mother, and that she utterly rejected her human heritage, and hated the memory of the mother she had known only briefly.

In fact, the story was stranger still. Her mother had been Tasha Yar, a member of the Enterprise crew. Tasha had been killed during a visit to a planet many years before, but a temporal accident had changed history, so that she was no longer dead. In restoring history, Tasha had volunteered to go back in time, and had been captured by the Romulans. When time was restored the crew of the Enterprise had no memory of her restoration, so that they did not believe Sela's story of being Tasha's daughter. The Romulans did

not know that Sela's mother had been a part of the Enterprise crew, and that her hatred of humanity was directed more at the crew of the Enterprise, who she believed had sent her mother to death and humiliation.

'I am studying law at the moment,' she replied. 'They have some curious beliefs. In the past, even when they had the death penalty for various offences, it was regarded as a defence that one was insane!'

'You mean that a person who was insane could commit a crime and not be executed? Amazing. And how repulsive. Did they allow insane people to.. mix?'

'If they were dangerous they might be confined. It was felt that they might recover.'

In Romulan society, insanity was the antithesis of rationality, and therefore to be insane would involve at least being cut off from normal people. It was felt that a mind once insane could never fully recover. An insane Romulan who committed any crime would be executed, or put down as it were.

'Extraordinary!' he said. 'No wonder they are such a barbaric society.'

It occurred to him that this might subtly offend Sela, who was, after all, half human, but he detected no chilling of the air.

'They employed people known as psychiatrists who attempted to cure the insane. It appears that most humans were somewhat insane. Perhaps they still are.'

The thought flashed into his mind that perhaps Sela's obsessive interest with Earth might indicate a touch of

human insanity, but he brushed it away. She was a shining star in the Romulan High Command firmament.

'Knowing of your interest in the planet Earth,' he said, 'I have brought some news which should be of interest.' She bade him sit. She remained standing, staring out the window.

'One of our science vessels has discovered a wormhole in the Gardoff sector,' he said. 'When they investigated it they found that the other exit was not only near Earth, but far in the past. They have taken measurements of all the astrophysical data they could in the time, and have transmitted them back to Romulus. I thought it might interest you to have a copy.'

'How far in the past?' she asked interestedly.

'I am told, sixty-five million years,' he said.

She spun around as her interest flashed. 'Sixty five million? Do you have the reports on Earth itself?'

'Of course,' he replied. He handed her a padd, and she held her breath as she looked at it, and pressed a few buttons. After a moment she breathed out slowly, and asked, 'Is this wormhole still there?'

'Yes. Our scientists estimate that it will have a lifetime of some weeks to some months. But wormholes are notoriously hard to predict.'

'Your interest has been very helpful to me, Gan Devan,' she said, and he took this as both thanks and dismissal. When he had bowed himself from the room, Sela opened up a secure communications channel.

Chapter 2.

Long fairways lined with large and beautiful trees could be seen from the clubhouse of one of earth's foremost courses. In some cases those who compiled holodeck programs put together composite courses, so that one might play on eighteen superb holes from eighteen of the greatest courses recorded, but whoever had compiled this one had opted for a simple recording of one great course. Just like, thought Captain Picard, the earliest Greek dramatists had written plays which were a continuous flow of time, a unity.

He had not tried them, but the composite courses, as he instinctively felt, were somewhat unsettling. If you crossed fairways you would find yourself on a part of the course which you would never come across later, and your subconscious would tell you after a while that something was awry. Sensitive people could get something akin to seasickness. You might be within sight of the sea at one time, yet another hole would have a desert ambience. Still, some people liked that sort of thing. The program belonged to Doctor Crusher, who did not.

Once the Enterprise was on its way the Captain had some free time until the arrival at Starbase 44. The holodeck was a good place to unwind after the tensions of setting out on a new journey. Golf was a pleasure he had tried very infrequently, but it was fun to explore these programs in good company. Data had expressed an interest when he and two others had decided to try the program.

The program came with its own golf professionals, and Data had listened impassively as an instructor had shown him how to play. When the construct had offered to hold his arm to guide him, he had replied, 'That is unnecessary. I will emulate what you show me.' The instructor had then quickly run through the grip, basic strokes and various clubs. Data thanked him, and said, 'I am ready to begin.' He now stood with Picard, Will Riker and Counselor Deanna Troi. All were dressed in 'period' golf clothes which Picard had found by computer search, from a magazine called 'Punch', and had had created by the replicators. The drawings had been nicely colored in by pastel. They were startlingly loud, but Picard assured the others they were authentic.

'Some of the old-timers really went in for bright clothes, didn't they?' asked Riker.

'Yes,' agreed Deanna. 'I really enjoy the seventeenth century dresses. All bustles and crinolines.'

'But not too good for golf,' said Riker. 'These trousers are strange.'

'Called plus-fours,' said Picard. 'They were four inches too long, so they could be tucked into the socks, and kept out of the mud.'

Deanna was dressed the same as the men, since Picard had not found a drawing of female clothing, and assumed it was the same. His love of archaeology and history did not cover this period well. He liked the really old days.

'I shall access the rules of golf,' said Data.

'Don't bother, Data,' said Riker hurriedly. He did not know

the rules well, and Data was sure to pull everyone up on every little rule if he knew them. 'The idea is to try to get the ball in the hole on the green in par. Each hole has a par value. It's four on this one.'

'Very simple,' acknowledged Data. 'The best games often have very simple rules.'

They wandered down from the clubhouse. Picard had been talking, as usual, about archaeology, and the others, as usual, had politely failed to listen. They had found that the occasional 'My goodness!' or 'Oh, really?' sufficed to keep Jean-Luc enthusiastic, while they concentrated on whatever they were doing, in this case, playing golf.

'You know so much about so many planets, captain,' said Deanna. 'I suppose the archaeology of earth is old hat to you?'

'Not at all,' said Picard, swinging inexpertly at his drive. It bounced a few times and stopped just short of the mown fairway, in light rough. 'There are so many earth legends whose basis is unknown. Atlantis, the Bermuda Triangle and so on. But earth has been comprehensively studied, so these are unlikely to become any clearer. In the twenty second century we were able to survey all of the earth's surface, below as well as above sea, so no mysteries of that sort remain. We have done all of our physical tests of the surface. But on other planets so many mysteries remain.'

'So nobody knows why the legend of Atlantis or the Bermuda Triangle began?' said Riker with half interest, more to make conversation.

'Oh, theories are easy,' replied Picard. 'An anomalous

number of ships and aircraft went missing in an area, so it became a mystery region. There were many possible rational or statistical reasons possible. In the case of Atlantis, a number of civilisations are known to have vanished suddenly, probably from natural cataclysms. One of these probably gave rise to the legend.'

Data watched the first three hit their tee shots.

'What was your strategy in projecting your ball into that group of trees, Commander?' he asked Riker. 'I understood that the aim of the game was to project the ball into the hole on the green, in regulation, or par, figures. As par on this hole is four you will find that difficult to achieve now.' 'Play your ball, Data,' said Riker, with a forced smile. 'I will explain my strategy later. It is illegal for me to discuss my manner of play with you during the game.'

'Very well,' Data replied. 'An appropriate distance for my first shot would seem to be two hundred and ninety metres, and then a second stroke of two hundred and forty six metres should leave me at an appropriate distance to take two putts.'

He struck the ball two hundred and ninety metres.

After Riker had dropped his ball out of the rough and played short of the green, and the others had hit their second shots, Data struck his second shot two hundred and forty six metres. When they had all reached the green he carefully two-putted from ten centimetres distance.

'Data, I don't think you quite have the concept of this game,' said Deanna. 'The idea is to sink the ball in the least possible number of shots, not necessarily exactly par.'

'Ah,' said Data brightly, 'I wondered why Captain Picard had taken seven strokes, Commander Riker eight, and yourself nine. Is it permissible to have one's tee shot go straight in the hole, thus achieving the aim in one stroke?' 'I think we are going to regret introducing Mr Data to this game,' said Captain Picard, after Data's tee shot on the next hole landed squarely in the hole three hundred and forty metres away. Fortunately at that stage the captain was summoned on his communicator.

'Picard here,' he said.

'Captain, there is a message for you from Starfleet,' said Lieutenant Commander Worf.

'I'll take it in my ready room,' he replied. 'I'm sorry, everyone,' he said to the others, 'but I will have to miss the rest of this game. please continue without me.'

He called up a door, and left the holodeck. The door faded again, and the remaining three players prepared to continue.

'Data,' said Riker, as they arrived at the green, after an embarrassing number of strokes, 'the essence of golf is chance. No matter how good the player, there is a chance that some random effect will divert the ball. A gust of wind, a fallen branch. Computer, program change, authorisation Riker. After the player has hit his stroke, introduce random changes to the conditions of play.'

After a moment's thought he added, 'Make the random changes greater after the best player has hit.'

Query, said the voice of the computer. How is the parameter, Best Player, defined?

'The best player is Commander Data,' replied Riker.

'Why, thank you, Commander,' said Data. 'That should not be true, as this is my first lesson. I shall play less well.'

'Not necessary, Commander,' replied Riker cheerfully, and lined up his tee shot. As his ball traveled through the air the breeze changed direction slightly, the contours of the ground altered slightly, and his ball rolled under a bush which appeared out of nowhere. His cheerful demeanour changed to a scowl.

Deanna hit, and her shot traveled straight, but not very far, and rolled into a bunker which suddenly moved a metre sideways.

She gritted her teeth, and said, 'Computer. Program change. Authorisation Troi. The introduction of random changes shall only occur after a player's first stroke has exceeded one hundred and twenty metres.'

Data teed up his ball and struck it. It headed straight for the green, but a violent squall suddenly blew up, and torrential rain fell, drenching them all. As the ball would have reached the green the hole suddenly changed from front left to back right. In fact it did not, the sudden wind shortening its trajectory, so that it fell short, and in the rough.

Water dripping from his head, Data observed, 'What an interesting game! I had thought it a game of skill, but it is equally a game of chance. It does seem curious to completely change the conditions of play after play has begun. It seems curious also that the changes in conditions are greater for the better player.'

'It is called handicapping, Data,' said Riker. 'I believe it was introduced almost as soon as the game was invented early in the twenty first century.'

'Yes, there is a reference to handicapping in the rules,' agreed Data, quickly finding the relevant file and doing a word-search. 'It seemed to be a numerical thing, but as usual these things are easier to understand when one is given a practical example.'

'Handicapping has evolved since the rules were written down,' said Riker with a smile, as he brushed the water from his brow. 'Computer, save changed program as a separate program, for use by Commander Data - and of course ourselves. Name Data Golf game 1. Doctor Crusher might not appreciate us changing her original program,' he added to Data.

'I will remember to use the version which has my name,' agreed Data.

'Shall we continue?' asked Deanna. 'This hole looks interesting. We have to hit the ball across a small bay. Luckily the holodeck can produce an infinite number of balls.'

'One will do,' said Riker optimistically, and unprophetically.

In the meantime, Picard had reached his room, and still dressed for golf, activated his personal display. The features of Admiral Beaufort appeared.

'What can I do for you, Admiral,' asked Picard.

'Something curious has come up,' said the Admiral hesitantly. 'Have you heard of Ambassador Spock?'

'Certainly,' answered Picard. 'In fact we have met.'

'You are aware that Ambassador Spock has gone to ground on Romulus, in an attempt to teach his - disciples - Vulcan ways?'

'Yes,' agreed Picard. 'My encounter with him was in fact on Romulus, an adventure not without interest, as he might say. Go on.'

'Spock has heard of an attempt by a band of renegade Romulans to... well, he says to wipe out the human race.' Picard was all attention.

'From anyone but a Vulcan ambassador, one might take this as a joke,' he replied, 'but Spock would not say something like that lightly. But, wipe out the human race? We are spread over a large sector of the galaxy. We are even beginning to evolve differently on some planets! How could it be done?'

'Apparently the Romulans have discovered a wormhole in their territory which goes through time as well as space. Spock does not know details, but it appears to be some time before earth had space defences.

'The discovery of the wormhole was disseminated throughout the elite ranks of the Romulans, and some star charts published.

'The Romulans do have a sense of honor, even though they are basically a bunch of psychopaths - this is a secure line, I hope - and the idea of wiping out a race is abhorrent to most, but apparently a small group with a hate for humanity have taken off and run through the wormhole. Presumably they are from the group with access to details

about what was found there.'

'My experience with the Romulans has not led me to believe they are that bad,' said Picard, mildly amused by the Admiral's apparent prejudice, which would never be allowed to influence his behaviour, and probably was only a bit of hyperbole. 'But you believe this group may, in fact, be psychopaths?'

'Yes,' said the Admiral. 'Or presumably, the Romulan High Command thinks so. I suspect that they have let the information leak out. I suspect the leak to the underground may have come from the highest levels. Even the High Command would not want Romulus associated with such a deed.'

'Strangely, the conspirators seem to have only a small ship. Romulan security is quite good, and it would have been impossible for them to have stolen a heavily armed vessel.'

'Possibly a small ship is necessary to enter the wormhole. But can the past be changed?' asked Picard. 'Would not some other timeline be created?'

'It seems not,' replied Beaufort. 'Many years ago the first *Enterprise* crew traveled back in time - not in a Federation ship, I might add - and brought whales back to earth. Their presence and activities had to change history in at least some minor ways, but they came back to this same timeline. Earth had not had whales, and now we have them again.'

'One change we do know. They gave a formula for plastic to a man in the twentieth century. He is in the history books as its discoverer, but he could not have been. There exists a

paradox. Whoever really discovered it has been cut from history.

'Of course, we had no objection to the crew doing all this. There was no prime directive involved anyway, as we can presumably do what we like to our own race. If they hadn't interfered the earth wouldn't have survived, and there would be no records to read, correct or otherwise!'

'Where is the *Enterprise* involved?' asked Picard.

'Your mission to Starbase 44 brings you in proximity to the area of the Neutral Zone. This is a bit tricky diplomatically. The ambassador from Cardassia will be a bit miffed that he has to wait, but you are the closest starship at the time. We have to balance our probabilities here. If the mission turns out a red herring, we will have set back our peace plans with the Cardassians for nothing. But can we take the chance?'

'I see what you mean,' said Picard.

'Ambassador Spock has left the Neutral Zone, and is at Starbase 44 already. He has the coordinates of the wormhole. He could just beam them to you, but you will need his guidance to get you through Romulan space undetected. All the same, if the top brass did leak the information, I don't doubt they would look the other way while you traveled through. It's deep into Romulan territory, in the Neutral Zone, but it seems to be a remote area without a population. We recommend that you drop off most of your complement at the starbase, and take a skeleton crew.

'Basically, follow them, and stop them if you can.

Otherwise, we humans may simply blink out of existence! If at any time you still exist, presumably they have still not succeeded!

'This may need a small, fleet warship,' said Picard. 'I have no idea what size ship may fit through this wormhole. We can pick one up at Starbase 44 on the way. This is a tricky one. We must also consider that this may be an elaborate trap to catch a starship in Romulan territory in breach of treaty.'

'We doubt it,' said the Admiral. 'They know that you would have to abandon the ship and have it self-destruct. They would have a group of select prisoners, but that would seem an unnecessarily elaborate charade. The Romulans are very chary of time-travel. They may want us to take all the risks.'

'I don't fancy surrendering to the Romulans,' said Picard.

'They are not kind jailers. It might have to be a self-destruct. Still, as you say, that seems an unlikely scenario.'

'By the way, Picard,' said the Admiral, 'is that your pyjamas you are wearing?'

Chapter 3.

The crew on the bridge were all present as the Enterprise approached Starbase 44. The starship dropped out of warp about ten thousand kilometers away, and proceeded on impulse. Picard brought up their destination on the viewing screen.

The starbase was a huge station, with the number 44 painted on it in letters almost a kilometer high. Most ships approaching would not have any doubts about where they were headed, unless they were lost, but the station had to have a coating of radiation-resistant paint over metal shields, so it pleased someone to design the large numbers into the paint scheme.

If truth be told, the franchises producing holographic postcards for the station's floating population rather liked this. It gave their postcards more distinction, and the crews were more likely to buy souvenirs.

As the Enterprise was on approach, Captain Picard routinely contacted the Starbase Commander, Admiral Wrigley. Instead of the Commander's face, however, a secretary's face appeared.

'I'm sorry, captain,' he said apologetically. 'I'll find the Admiral. There's been a bit of a flap, but he'll be here soon.'

'Very well,' said Picard, disturbed. He did not know what the 'flap' involved, but it was somewhat unseemly for the approach of the fleet's flagship to be answered by a secretary. He felt it was a poor example for the officers on

his bridge. None of the officers shared his view, except perhaps Commander Riker, who was beginning to think like a captain. It was quite understandable to them that a starbase commander would be at the scene of some emergency, instead of greeting arriving starships. They were also consumed by speculation about what might be wrong. Would it be something affecting them?

Picard decided to take the message in his ready room, and left Riker in charge of the bridge. He transferred control to his own terminal, and waited for a minute, looking at an empty seat. Shortly afterwards, Admiral Wrigley came into view, and sat down, puffing. Not fit, thought Picard sympathetically, that's what a desk job does to you. Wrigley brushed off amenities.

'My god, Picard,' he said, 'it's bedlam at the moment. Your first mission is aborted, well, I suppose it was anyway, but you can get on with the new one without any worry. All the worries are mine!'

Jean-Luc was surprised with the informality of the opening, but admirals were allowed some latitude. And life on a space station tended to make surprises less normal than for a starship captain.

'Calm yourself, Admiral,' he began, and realized that was not an appropriate response to an admiral. He was glad he had taken the call in private, as such a reply would have been improper in front of the crew. Wrigley, however, was so overwrought that it slipped by him.

'It's a disaster,' he said. 'They will never forget it, the Cardassians, I mean. We guaranteed his safety!'

'Why, admiral, what's happened?' Picard asked. 'Something has happened to the ambassador?'

'Assassinated!' gasped Wrigley. 'A Bajoran terrorist stabbed him. We were on the lookout for all sorts of technology, but he got him with a simple plastic knife!'

'You have compressed your information somewhat more than necessary,' Picard said, with a touch of irony. 'You are saying that the ambassador has been killed, and that we will not have to worry about whether to take him home or not. That seems somewhat understated. The murder is a tragedy, and likely to have enormous repercussions with the Cardassians!'

'They're paranoid enough already!' exclaimed Wrigley. 'They have minds like mazes, always looking for conspiracy.'

'You have the perpetrator?' asked Picard.

'Yes, but he's small potatoes,' sighed Wrigley. 'The Cardassians aren't going to care who he is. And they aren't going to believe we didn't look away somehow. Who would believe a plastic knife?'

'The lower the level of technology, the easier it is to be overlooked,' said Picard. 'These days it's almost impossible to get away with murder, but if the assassin doesn't mind being caught, it can be done!'

He wondered, in passing, whether this might prove the case with the supposed Romulan assassins.

'In any case, Picard, welcome,' said Wrigley. 'I'm sorry for the holdup. We'll have everything set for you when you arrive.'

'No holdup so far,' Picard assured him. 'If I hadn't been sitting here waiting, I would have been sitting on the bridge looking at the viewscreen.'

'Thank you for your forbearance,' said Wrigley. 'I'll be waiting at the dock.'

He disappeared from the screen, and Picard switched it off thoughtfully. From his point of view, this simplified matters considerably. Any stressful encounter with the ambassador was obviated, but the stress was passed on to Starfleet, who would have to pacify the Cardassians. It would certainly suit them. They would regard the loss of an ambassador as well set-off against the chance to harass Starfleet. He sighed, and returned to the bridge.

'Open a channel to the crew, Mister Data,' he said, after settling into his chair. When he had the channel he began. 'Attention all personnel. This is the Captain. You all know that our mission was to have been a simple transport of a Cardassian ambassador. That mission has been changed. The ambassador has been murdered. However, even before we learned this, I had just received word of a covert mission which the Enterprise is to undertake. As we will be going into dangerous territory, we will take only a basic crew. All families and non-essential crew will remain on Starbase 44 until we return. Exact details will be given by Commander Riker in a short while. In the meanwhile, families should prepare for an extended stay on the Starbase.'

He switched off, and speculation and excitement swept the ship. The destination of the 'covert mission' was not too

much a secret, since the starbase was on the periphery of the Neutral Zone, and there were no other nearby dangerous areas. Those who might not consider themselves essential reacted with either disappointment or relief, and families began to think in terms of a holiday. The holiday thoughts were always tempered with the thought that the Enterprise might not come back to get them, so there was an undercurrent of tension in their preparations. Those who were not going to possibly lose close relatives, could lose good friends.

The Enterprise arrived to find matters had settled down. In fact, apart from late and purposeless extended security, things seemed normal. Picard met with Admiral Wrigley and tried to calm his distress. The Enterprise crew briefly had some 'shore leave' while the ship picked up both Ambassador Spock and two small ships, a starfighter and a small but speedy harrier.

The starfighter was of unusual design. Most ships in space were designed for aesthetics. Since there was no friction or resistance the shape of a spaceship was unimportant, but most were designed to look beautiful and streamlined. It did have one advantage. If a ship crashed into an atmosphere the streamlining might give it some survival potential, but fortunately this was a rare requirement. Some races, such as the Romulans, and then the Klingons, chose to build their ships for psychological purposes, to look frightening. Building them long and slim also meant that by turning side-on the ship could present very little surface to fire on. But mainly, designers liked to design

beautiful ships.

The Pinball Wizard, the Federation starfighter, was basically a sphere, with orifices for propulsion and firing. With the advances in technology a small silhouette was little use against a programmed missile, and the main defence was shields. Since the shields produced a spherical field it seemed logical to build a spherical ship to sit inside it.

In addition, a spherical shape is the strongest, and it offers very little flat surface, so that energy weapons can be made to bounce off more.

The ship was quite small, compared to a starship, but surprisingly roomy. All the weaponry and defence was around the outer skin, so that the inside part was able to be used for quarters, medicine and recreation, including a good-sized holodeck. A number of rooms were set aside as quarters for the small crew, and a few rooms were designed as cells for prisoners captured in battle. These were now empty, but in practice often became extra store rooms - always a nuisance when prisoners were occasionally captured! The bridge was dead center, all communication being by instruments.

Captain Picard and Commander Riker watched as the sphere drifted in under the effect of the Enterprise's tractor beams, and developed a trio of small legs to stand on in the artificial gravity of the larger vessel. The pilot climbed out and symbolically wiped his hands as he handed it over. 'Isn't it a beauty?' he asked, adding quickly, 'Sir,' as he saw their insignia.

'It is a revolutionary design,' said Picard.

'Oh, very good, sir,' laughed the pilot, then stopped short when he realized that Picard had not meant anything. 'Oh, I thought you meant... something to do with it being round. Sir. Spinning round. Revolutionary.'

He stopped short, glumly, but Picard was not offended.

'At ease,' he said. 'You can probably tell us more about this quickly than we can learn from a technical manual.'

The pilot immediately recovered his poise. A week's familiarity had made him feel an expert. He quickly pointed out the functions of the various parts.

'These are the openings for phasers,' he said. 'Can point any direction, with a quick spin of the ship. These are the photon torpedoes. The whole thing is very well equipped for its size. Nothing near the computational or sensor capacity of a starship, but it does what it is designed for very well. It's a bit more quickly manoeuvrable than a starship.'

This levity produced not a smile.

'It can take a normal crew up to twenty for a longish run, but it can actually be operated by one person if he does a lot of work. Do you see these lines? There are two escape pods. They fit in like pieces of a jigsaw.'

'Like slices in a spherical pie,' said Picard admiringly.

'Exactly, sir,' he replied. 'They slide in and just become part of the outer surface. Indistinguishable.'

'Thank you, lieutenant,' said Picard, 'you have been very helpful.'

'Not at all, sir,' he replied. 'Would you mind if I had a quick

look around before I beam back? I've never been on the Enterprise.'

He received his permission, and walked off.

Riker climbed into the underneath hatch, and hoisted himself in.

'With all this technology,' he said, 'you'd think they had a better way to get in!'

'They will, Number One,' answered Jean Luc seriously.

'We'll..'

'Er, that was a joke, sir,' interrupted Will, politely.

He stood inside the command center of the starfighter, and looked up, but decided to leave exploration until later. In the gravity of the Enterprise the odd angles of the outer areas of the ship seemed unbalancing. In space, with gravity designed around the shape of the vessel, each room would have its own orientation. The only unsettling thing for those unused to it, would be the changing from one area to another.

'At least it's good to have something to do,' Riker remarked. 'A pity to come out all this way for nothing.'

'I hope it's not too traumatic a new mission, Number One,' said Picard. 'We may have to take back the body of the Cardassian ambassador when we are finished in any case. I wonder what exactly happened?'

'Oh, I can tell you all the details, sir,' replied Riker. 'It was about the only topic of small talk about the station!'

In his cabin, Lieutenant Worf was watching a direct subspace transmission. On the screen dreadful carnage was occurring.

Two groups of combatants were waging a fierce battle. They employed a diversity of weapons, similar only in that they were all clean blades, that is, there were no barbs or serrated edges. As he watched one of the figures on the screen received a spear in the throat, and fell. He was trampled as other fighters milled around, until a pair of stretcher-bearers picked him up and fled the battlefield. Other wounds were taken and given, and blood flowed freely. Suddenly one of the combatants was struck from behind, and nearly decapitated. Worf leaped from his seat with a cry. 'A cowardly blow, a foul blow!'

The man was carried off, obviously in a bad way, but the battle continued with no let-up.

Suddenly Worf's communicator shrilled, and the voice of Commander Riker penetrated his consciousness.

'Lieutenant Worf, please report to the Conference Room. Acknowledge.'

An imprecation sprang to Worf's lips, but he obediently touched the communicator and replied, 'Acknowledged.'

He made his way to the Conference Room.

Picard and Riker had changed their clothes, cleaned themselves up, and had called a meeting of Ambassador Spock and the senior officers of the Enterprise. These included Worf, Counselor Troi, Commander Data, Commander Geordi La Forge, and Doctor Beverley Crusher. As Worf approached Riker greeted him.

'How are you, Lieutenant?'

'You picked a terrible time to call me, Commander,' replied Worf. 'Ten minutes to go in the last term of the Homeworld

Superbowl, and scores even! Fortunately I was recording it in order to study the finer points of play later.'

'As long as you don't let any of the ship's minors see it!' laughed Riker. He had once accepted an invitation to watch a Klingon sports event. One was enough.

The group entered the room, and sat quietly gossiping until Captain Picard and Ambassador Spock entered. They stood until the two were seated.

'This is an unusual mission,' began Picard. 'It is based on a rumor. I will let Ambassador Spock introduce it, and then we will have further discussion. Ambassador?'

Spock rose to his feet, which was not the custom normally in conference.

'I have been part of a secret underground movement on Romulus for some time,' he said. 'Fortunately, some of our members are of high rank, or we may not have heard this story. It seems that a Romulan science vessel discovered a wormhole, which is rumored to go back in time, and exit near earth. One of the members of the High Council who has a particular hatred of earth decided to gather a gang of extremists and travel back in time to do earth some harm. In fact, a second rumor circulated that one of the extremists had boasted that they would destroy the human race.'

There was a murmur of shock.

'It appears that this group has acquired a vessel of some sort, and has departed for the wormhole.'

'This seems a fantasy,' Jean-Luc told the assembled group in the conference room, 'but both Ambassador Spock and Starfleet Command take it seriously. We will be in

Romulan space soon, and trespassing. However the area of concern is somewhat off the beaten track, and Spock is confident of taking us there unseen.

'I'm puzzled by what the renegades hope to achieve. Even in the early days of man the Vulcans were in space around us, unseen. The energy required, and the time, to destroy a planetary surface would have attracted them quickly. It seems the renegades do not have a heavily armed warship.' 'I too am puzzled.' interposed Spock. 'The energy required to raze a planet would be quite significant, and easily attributable to its source. The Romulans would be the pariahs of the galaxy, albeit this group is a small band of malcontents. Their hatred of humanity must be great enough that they would destroy the honor of their own race as well.'

'If the wormhole is large enough,' added Picard, 'the *Enterprise* will go through, even if we have to separate the ship. Otherwise Commander Riker will fly the fighter we have picked up. He and I will select a crew after this meeting. If the wormhole is very small we may have to use the harrier.'

'If the wormhole is very small,' observed Geordi, 'that might be why they have taken a small ship.'

'Speculative fiction has often considered what would happen if the past were changed through time travel,' interposed Data. 'If we were in the past and some action led to a change in our history, would we cease to exist? Or would we return to a future where our friends did not know us, and our parents had never existed, but we still did?'

Both ideas lead to paradoxes, but one must be true.'

'Indeed,' said Spock, 'there might be a third possibility, where we might continue to exist in the past, but cease to exist on returning to our present. There may be some other variation we have not considered.'

'Well, I believe that if our ancestors ceased to exist, so would we,' said Riker. 'The fact that we still exist means they haven't succeeded yet. In fact, I think this whole mission is unlikely, but I don't mind a trip through the wormhole.'

'It is possible that this whole venture is a rumor built up into a fact,' agreed Spock. 'The difficulty is, the possibility that it may be fact is so overwhelming that it should be investigated. A parallel might be made with the discovery of the deterioration of the atmosphere on earth some centuries ago. Few were absolutely certain that a problem did exist, but the chance could not be taken that it did not. As a consequence the earth was saved, after some years of turmoil. If the story proves unfounded it is still worthwhile investigating the wormhole for its own sake. I do not believe the Romulan authorities will trouble us. They would most likely be pleased for us to investigate the problem for them, and undertake the danger as well.'

'The starfighter can take a crew of from six to twenty,' said Commander Riker. 'We'll take along about a dozen if we use it. The harrier only takes two, so if we have to use that it will just be myself and Commander Data.'

'I hope it does not come to that. If we do go back in time, I'd like to have a few specialists who could do some

exploring as well as being able to fight if necessary.'

'Will, remain here for a while,' said Picard, rising to his feet. 'and Ambassador Spock, if you will. The rest of you get prepared and get some rest.'

When the others had gone, Picard asked Riker who he wanted as crew on the starfighter, should the need arise.

'Data certainly, and Worf. We will need crew to man the phasers and photon torpedos. I would like to take Deanna as well, and a medical team. I don't know whether Ambassador Spock would be willing to come, but if he wants to, I would welcome him. He would have some familiarity with the Romulans certainly.'

'I would be very interested in the whole investigation,' said Spock, 'whether a threat exists or not. The chance to see the universe some years in the past would be intriguing.

However, if I am not useful, I would prefer to return to the matters which have become my major interest lately.'

'Surely your knowledge of the Romulans could not help but be useful?' said Picard.

'My knowledge may be duplicated by Lieutenant Selar,' replied Spock. 'She has made a special study of Romulan culture and history, so that her knowledge is likely to be equal to mine, and she will presumably be going in any case, as part of the medical team.'

'Why Deanna, Will?' Picard knew quite well why, but gave Riker the chance to explain, and perhaps elicit comment from Ambassador Spock.

'First, because we may have to deal with the Romulans face to face, and I would like some clue as to their

truthfulness. They are as impassive as Vulcans, but not as noted for their honesty. The other reason is that I would like to have a number of non-human personnel. If it does happen that the renegades succeed, and all humans blink out of existence, I want some people left who might either retrieve the situation or at least avenge us.'

'Counselor Troi would not qualify on that account,' observed Spock, 'as part of her heritage is human. But the principle is sound. A crew including many non-humans would be a practical choice.'

'Excellent thinking, number one,' said Picard. 'We will invite all non-human personnel to take part, on a voluntary basis.'

'Not the hairdresser, perhaps,' grinned Riker. 'I don't think he'd have much to contribute.'

'I doubt that Mr Mot would volunteer,' said Picard. 'He likes to give his tactical advice from behind his barber chair.'

Chapter 4.

Mary Anne Smith was in her quarters when there was a peep from the intercom, signaling that there was to be a message.

'Aha, Big Brother is about to speak!' she thought, and said aloud, 'Speak, O Big Brother!'

'All personnel, this is an important message,' came the voice of Commander Riker. Mary Anne immediately became more attentive. 'As the Captain informed you, the Enterprise is to undertake a mission which will entail some danger. Consequently we will leave all families of crew at Starbase 44, and will take a minimum crew. It may be that we will be using a starfighter crew, of from ten to twenty personnel, and for that we would like volunteers specializing in combat, weapons maintenance, starfighter operation and astronomy. For reasons we will explain later, we would like to take a number of non-human personnel. Any persons wishing to volunteer for starfighter crew please report to room 411 in fifteen minutes. Riker out.'

'Well, that's me,' she mused. 'They picked out all my specialities.'

Mary Anne had joined Starfleet in the hope of adventure, so she quickly jumped to her feet, but as she had also joined in the vague hope of finding Mister Right, she stopped to check her appearance and brush her hair. A mission in a small crew with the delectable Commander Riker! She whistled cheerfully as she strode down the corridor to the turbolift.

In Engineering, acting Ensign Glock looked up at the speaker where the message was coming from. He glanced at Commander La Forge.

'Excuse me, Commander La Forge,' he said, 'do you think I should volunteer for that?'

'Well, it's up to you, Glock,' answered Geordi. 'You're only on the ship as a sort of work experience from the Academy, but it's the sort of thing you'd be facing when you graduate.'

Glock swelled inwardly a little at the word 'when'. As a Ferengi, not a member of the Federation by race, he had been surprised to be accepted, along with a few comrades. He found himself more surprised each time he passed a barrier, and Geordi's simple use of the word gave him heart.

The Ferengi found the customs of Starfleet confusing, and they found him confusing at times. But they were used to having to accept unaccustomed behaviour, and he had been impressed by their willingness to pass over his constant social gaffes. But then, his mission was to learn about other peoples. He had struggled a bit in Engineering. His poor sight was a disadvantage, and his acute hearing not particularly useful, but this was all part of learning about all aspects of starship life. Later in his course, he would decide in what area to specialise.

'It would be interesting,' he said after some thought. 'As for the danger, a lot of people think we Ferengi are cowardly because we weigh up the profitability of our actions all the time. But we would never have got where we are if we

were cowards. From that point of view it would be good public relations. And I am non-human, which makes me valuable for some reason. And I joined Starfleet to experience new things. I think I'll go.'

'You can volunteer,' said Geordi, 'but they decide if you go. I'll be going, so I'll put in a word if I think the job suits you.'

Ensign Arrg sat quietly in his room. He had quickly given up spending time in Ten Forward. It was more comfortable to be alone in your room. He had brought a holodeck program which would simulate home, but was resolved not to use it unless he became unbearably lonely. Some few besides Guinan had tried to be friendly, but were put off by his manner. He could not help it, and he was painfully shy. This mission intrigued him. If they went in the starfighter he would be thrown in close proximity with a small group. Hope sprang eternal that it would bring him some friends, although he had managed to avoid it every opportunity so far. The thought of some possible danger thrilled him. His people were not used to actually being in danger, and he did not deeply consider the possibility that he might have to use a weapon against someone. He was also definitely non-human, and this gave him a chance of being selected. He had a history of not being selected for small groups. At Room 411 there was a gathering of about thirty. Since virtually everyone aboard had the same aspirations for adventure, all those qualified were there. She noted that there were not very many non-humans. The Enterprise tended to be human-run. Most starships tended to be

predominantly one race.

At this stage all that was happening was the taking of names. She found herself lined up between Ensign Mendon, a Benzite who always had to wear a special breathing apparatus, and a dark human.

'Hi, I'm Mary Anne,' she said to them. 'I'm mainly a biologist, but I'm qualified in the things they want too. Isn't it exciting? I wonder what the mission is?'

'I'm Malcolm,' said the human. 'I'm in Engineering. Mister La Forge hinted we might be trespassing in Romulan territory, so it could be a bit dangerous.'

'The Neutral Zone?' she queried. 'What about the treaty?'

'I don't know,' he said. 'If we get selected, I suppose they'll tell us more.'

She noticed Ensign Arrg in the line, within a large space as usual, and thought, 'Whew! I hope we're not working together!'

Once they had registered they sat in rows, and when all were finished, Commander Riker addressed them. He was the only senior officer present.

'Not all of you will be going,' he said, 'but I'll let you know something of what's happening. First, some personnel will be chosen because we need them, and they know already, the medical staff, chief engineer and so on, but we will need a few more. I need to warn you that we are going into the Neutral Zone, which is Romulan territory.'

'We think - I emphasize, think - that the Romulan leaders are prepared to look aside as we go, but if we are wrong, and they do confront us, it might be a case of self-destruct.'

That is a pretty fearful scenario, so if you don't like that idea, take your name off the list.'

'Excuse me, Commander,' asked one of the crew, 'but would that mean we would blow ourselves up?'

'We'd abandon the ship, and destroy it,' said Riker. 'Some of those with sensitive knowledge might stay with it. Getting captured by the Romulans may not be much better than being killed!'

There was some discussion, and a few humans with families aboard withdrew their names. They were reluctant to do so, not only because they were intrigued by the mission, but because they felt that to withdraw after volunteering might be a bad mark on their record. Riker could see their thinking, and said, 'No record will be kept of those who decide not to go. It will be as if you never volunteered.'

The group temporarily went off, while Riker took the list off to confer with the senior staff who would be going. An hour later, those who had been chosen were reconvened. As Mary Anne entered the room she bumped into a crew member just leaving, and dropped the book she had been carrying. Malcolm, who was just behind her, picked it up for her.

'A hard copy book!' he said. 'These are pretty rare now. You must treasure it. It's a Romance, isn't it?'

Mary Anne snatched it back, her face scarlet. 'Thank you,' she said.

'They have a pretty long history,' he said, 'for a line of books that all have the same plot!'

'They're not all the same!' she said indignantly. 'They take place in all different time periods.'

'Why do you like them?' he persisted, more for the sake of continuing the conversation. 'The heroine is always a helpless virgin, who meets this terrible rake and reforms him. It doesn't happen, you know.'

'You seem to know a lot about Romance novels,' she said haughtily.

'I have four sisters,' he said with a smile. 'I know all about them. The hero has to appear early, and so on.'

'He's supposed to appear on page two or three,' she agreed with a grin.

Like most briefing rooms, Room 411 was rather austere. It was small, and the furnishings consisted of a small table, around which a group could sit, and small chairs designed to fit under the table rather than to be comfortable. There was a short straight section for the group leader to occupy, and spread out papers if necessary, but the rest of the table was elliptical, so that the group could sit around it with no feelings of 'pecking order.' A small screen was framed into the wall. The small group sat quietly, still not sure why they had been gathered together.

'I have gathered you here for a pre-mission briefing,' Commander Riker said, sitting in the appropriate place as he spoke.

He glanced around the table. Apart from himself, Beverley Crusher and Deanna Troi, the other humans were Geordi La Forge, Malcolm French, and Mary Anne Smith. As well, there were Data, Worf, Lieutenant Selar, Glock, a

Ferengi fresh from Starfleet Academy, Gr'h Arrg, the Tarkassian, and Ensign Mendon, a Benzite. Mary Anne Smith had taken a seat next to Arrg, he noticed with approval. Arrg looked displeased, but Guinan had explained that Tarkassians had no way to look pleased that we could recognize.

'We have made an attempt to include a number of crew with no human background,' he added. 'I'll explain why in a moment. The mission will be to go through a wormhole, if it is too small for the whole Enterprise, and possibly try to stop an attempt to destroy earth.'

'Possibly, Commander?' asked Ensign Mendon. 'If there's an attempt, we should certainly stop it!'

'I meant possibly in the sense that there may not be such an attempt. There is a rumor that an attempt is being made, Ensign,' replied Riker. 'It doesn't seem all that likely, but we can't take the chance that the rumor is false. I'll explain further later, but the essential thing is that we are going into the past. If they do succeed in destroying the earth in the past then all of us who are human, or part human, would cease to exist. Those of you with no human background might be left to take over the ship. Perhaps to try to undo the damage somehow, or perhaps just to avenge us.'

Mary Anne felt a shiver. Dying was all very well, if you had a religious belief, and perhaps if you didn't. But never to have existed? Beside her, Malcolm noticed that she was wearing a subtle perfume which she had not worn before. Wearing a perfume for a briefing? He noticed then how she was giving all her attention to Commander Riker, and he

smiled to himself.

'They' is pretty vague, Commander,' said Malcolm. 'Who are 'they'?'

'Renegade Romulans, Ensign,' replied Riker. 'And we're going into Romulan territory to stop them, if necessary.'

'So the first problem is surviving a trip through Romulan territory!' exclaimed Ensign Mendon.

'That may not be a problem,' said Riker. 'The Romulans may be happy for us to solve the problem.'

'If you cease to exist,' observed Selar, who had been considering the problem, 'we may have no memory of you. This might make our presence in the past somewhat puzzling. Perhaps we would see the wormhole and decide to pass through it, so returning to our own time.'

'The Romulans would still be there in the past,' said Riker, a little unsettled by her calm acceptance of such a possibility. 'Maybe you would end up having a battle with them. They would probably attack.'

'If our memory had gone, we might not know there is a wormhole to return through,' speculated Ensign Arrg. His voice had a menacing ring to it that made the others cringe a little. 'We would simply be, and not know why.'

'Which is how we always are,' remarked Ensign Mendon philosophically.

Deanna said nothing. It was an intriguing prospect, of finding themselves in an unknown place and time, with no idea why they were there. She of course, would not be there, since she was half human, but the idea was like something from a holonovel, where amnesia was a

continually used plot device. She felt it curious that nobody present seemed to be alarmed. Perhaps nobody regarded the probability of discorporation seriously. Was there a better word than 'discorporation' for ceasing to have ever existed?

'It opens up the prospect of a number of temporal anomalies,' observed Data. 'If the humans on the trip disappeared, or ceased to have existed - and that would include myself since I am of human construction - would the mission itself ever have taken place?'

'So we might not be there at all?' mused Glock. 'I might be at home and never heard of Starfleet, or replicators.'

'Replicators?' echoed Beverley. 'Are they such a big thing?'

'Do you know what replicators have done to the Ferengi economy?' groaned Glock. 'Everything becomes recyclable. Only things with rare atoms remain valuable, when a replicator can rearrange atoms and molecules any way you like.'

'Back into the past,' mused Malcolm French. 'What an opportunity for research!'

'Forgive the thoughts of a stranger to your race, Commander,' said Glock, 'but is it easy to destroy a planet?'

'I can't take the prospect all that seriously myself,' admitted Riker, 'but that's what we are going to investigate. If the threat proves non-existent, or if we neutralize it, there might be some chance of looking around afterwards. Don't forget, it's a wormhole. There is always the possibility that it will suddenly cease to exist, and we'll be stranded there.' Glock shuddered at the thought. Alone in the universe

without another Ferengi! He internally gritted his teeth, and resolved to be brave.

Mary Anne had not asked any questions, but was intrigued by all the speculation. This was her first important mission, if it did turn out important. But the prospect of a trip to the past was irresistible, apart from the chance to study a wormhole! And of course to be proximate to the dashing Commander Riker!

'In any case,' added Riker, 'this is all predicated on our having to use the Starfighter. If the whole Enterprise goes through, there will be a lot more of us. Specifically, on the starfighter, your assignments will be Counselor Troi on the bridge, to help in negotiations, if any, Commander Data at the helm, Lieutenant Commander Worf in charge of weaponry and sensors, Doctor Crusher and Lieutenant Selar in sickbay, Commander La Forge and Ensign French in engineering, Ensign Glock on photon torpedo alert, as well as transporters, tractor beams and so on, and Ensigns Smith, Mendon and Arrg on phasers. The Ensigns will be rostered on duties such as meals, and all of you were selected because you had interests in astronomical surveying, biology and so on. I hope that the whole Enterprise can go on the mission, but if not we'll meet again in hangar six. You'll be called.'

As they were leaving, he added, 'If it turns out that the mission is a dud, we will still stay as long as seems safe, and we'll use your skills to have a look at the planets and stars of the past. We could be a while, so bring along something to pass the time, holonovels, cards, holodeck

programs, and so on. I hope some of you are poker players.'

When the others left Glock went with Malcolm French towards the Engineering area. French spoke to him.

'We haven't met but I've seen you about,' he said. 'We always seem to be on different shifts. I'm Malcolm. I gather we might be together in the weapons and engineering department.'

'I'm Glock,' he answered. 'I can't say I'm enthusiastic about this expedition, but I felt that volunteering for it would help me to advance in Starfleet.'

'I don't think they'd hold it against you if you knocked it back,' said Malcolm. 'The chance of being lost in the past would be more disturbing if you were the only one of your race. For me, if we were stranded, I'd be able to go to earth, and spend my days alone in Australia. Being a part of the land would be enough for me.'

'What is Australia?' asked Glock.

'It's a continent on earth. It's where my people came from,' answered Malcolm.

'But could you go there?' asked Glock. 'You might cause some temporal aberration.'

'I shouldn't,' admitted Malcolm. 'This is all a bit remote, of course, but I'd just have to not interact with other people. The wild man of the bush. If we do get stuck in the past, I suppose we'd have to make some change to history somehow. A stray starfighter would have to be noticed eventually.'

'Yes, but you'd be close to home,' nodded Glock. 'Not me.'

'You're the first Ferengi I've seen in Starfleet,' remarked Malcolm. 'Doesn't that make you feel a bit lonely?'

'I do miss Ferengi company,' he admitted, 'but a few of us started in Starfleet together. The Ferengi are basically businessmen, you know?'

'I've heard,' replied Malcolm with a grin.

'Other races tend to despise us a bit because of our commitment to business and profit,' said Glock. 'It's quite unfair. We have a very successful empire, if I may call it that, and it is based on very strong principles of honor.'

'The Rules of Acquisition,' nodded Malcolm.

'Ah, you are familiar with them!' said Glock with pleasure.

'They have an unnecessarily negative reputation. Anyone with whom we trade is welcome to peruse and learn the Rules, and then they will be on an equal footing. Is it our fault if noone does?'

'Of course not!' agreed Malcolm cheerfully. 'Although rumor has it that they are not actually in print, only in the heads of the Ferengi.'

'But any Ferengi would be willing to write them out, for the right price!'

Riker, who had just come into the room, listened in amusement.

'How much per rule?' he asked suddenly, and the two swung around.

'I didn't see you come in, Commander,' said Malcolm.

'I was looking for Geordi,' replied Riker.

'Well,' said Glock, 'in this case I would pass some along for free. My benefit would be in currying favor. Not all

transactions have to be in latinum.'

'That seems somewhat unsubtle,' remarked Riker.

'Ah!' said Glock, 'So currying favor is something that tends to be done subtly in hu-man society! I learn something already.'

'You didn't know that?' asked Riker.

'No,' said Glock. 'In Ferengi society it is understood that you get nothing for nothing. Any gift is expected to be paid for, and the most obvious way is in favor.'

'Well, if you go giving presents to your shipmates,' said Malcolm, 'all you'll get is a thank you. Buying friendships is something most humans grow out of in the first year of school!'

'And that is why we decided that some of us should join Starfleet,' said Glock. 'One of the rules is, Know how to think like your client. By joining Starfleet we can learn more about the hu-mans and Vul-cans and other races, and so trade with them more effectively.'

'So your joining Starfleet is basically to learn something about us,' said Malcolm.

'Don't misunderstand me,' said Glock. 'We are an honorable people. Joining Starfleet means embracing all of its ideals and living them. That's another rule: A deal is a deal. While I am a Starfleet officer I will be doing my best to be the best damn officer in it!'

'Couldn't ask more than that,' agreed Malcolm, offering his hand, and shaking that of Glock.

'Thank you,' said Glock. 'It is hard at times. I've been on the ship six months, and I haven't asked a female to take

off her clothes yet! But the most stressful thing is playing poker with the other crew.'

Malcolm forebore to ask him why.

As the Enterprise flew through the empty ranges of the Neutral Zone and Romulan space, they anxiously scanned for Warbirds or science vessels. Worf suddenly exclaimed, and watched his console carefully. The long-range scanners had detected the signature of a Romulan ship, but it had faded and left, not just abruptly disappearing.

'They may have detected us, sir,' said Worf. 'Shall I go to yellow alert?'

'No, Commander,' replied Picard. 'If they had seen us they would have cloaked. The fact that their signal faded slowly indicates they have left.'

'They may have seen us, but are going to ignore us,' said Riker. 'Either way, it looks like we can proceed unhindered.'

'We are being hailed, sir,' interrupted Lieutenant Commander Worf suddenly. 'It is a voice communication.'

'Let's hear it, Commander,' said Picard.

The voice of a Romulan echoed in an unnatural cheery greeting. 'Enterprise, how pleasant to see you visiting us. Have a good trip. I'm sure all will go well, Commander Riker. Don't worry, be happy. A member of the Romulan High Council wishes you well. No need to reply.'

There was a moment of astonished silence on the bridge. Picard broke it.

'Were we scanned, Mister La Forge?'

'If they did, we didn't detect it,' came the voice of Geordi La Forge.

'That's odd,' frowned Picard, 'it must be someone who knows us pretty well. What was that, don't worry, be happy?'

'It's the name of an old song from the late twentieth century,' said Will Riker, bemused. 'I almost recognise the voice. It's that Tribune I had a confrontation with a while ago, I think. He must be guessing I'm aboard.'

'Well, obviously the Romulans are not going to hinder us,' said Picard doubtfully. 'Let us proceed.'

The Enterprise had traveled at warp one, enough to cover enormous distances, but not too fast to be able to watch for stray vessels around them. Now they accelerated up to warp six. The entry into empty space was an interesting experience in a way. Most of their travel was inside stellar space, and at warp speed a flow of stars past the windows made streaks. Here the stars were so far off they were barely moving. It had the added advantage that any foreign vessel - well, they were the foreign vessel here - any Romulan vessel would stand out easily.

Most aboard had little actual experience of a normal wormhole, but they knew much of the theory. They stared with interest through the windows of Ten Forward and other places at the area in space which contained it, impressed that it was there, huge, and they could not see it. There was some analogy with the coral reefs that ancient ships encountered under earth's seas, to those with mariners in their ancestry.

The computer simulation of its appearance derived from high energy radiation showed on the viewscreen, but nobody on the bridge had gazed at it too long. To them, after the analysis of its size and stability, it was simply a door. The question, of course, was it a safe door?.

'The Enterprise would not fit through,' said Data, after examining the instruments briefly. 'The wormhole is too small. However the starfighter would fit through comfortably.'

'What is the status of the wormhole at this time, Data?'

'Our measurements indicate that it is likely to exist for many days yet, perhaps weeks, but it is starting slightly to spin. We can determine its likelihood of continuing to exist by a measure of eccentricity in its precession. In this case...'

'Thank you, Data,' said Picard, 'but the details of the matter are not necessary at the moment. Some days should be adequate to determine if there is a problem, and deal with it if so. Commander Riker convene your team on Hangar Six.'

Before they left he had a final word with Riker.

'Will, I know I don't have to say this, but I will. You will have to take whatever action seems appropriate, and since we have no idea of the threat I can't offer much advice. But apparently you are going to be in the vicinity of earth in past times.

'Whatever you do, stay away from earth itself. Resist all temptation to actually have a look at earth in the past. If possible, I suggest you stay as far away as possible, but we

know nothing of the circumstances. You could possibly orbit from a discreet distance, but any contact with people could have a disastrous effect on history.'

'That's assuming we still have a history,' said Will, hoping he was joking.

'More important, do we have a future?' said Picard. 'We need to take no chances, even though the whole thing seems tenuous.'

The starfighter had been prepared for combat. It was not particularly small, though compact, and had highly specialised equipment. Its shields were first-class, and it was capable of firing in any direction. As a combat vessel, it had extensive medical facilities, and recuperation areas. In this case it was also prepared for lengthy travel. It was capable of accommodating anywhere up to twenty people, but could be operated by as few as four.

Picard had told Riker, 'Will, I'm not going to stay here once you have gone. If your mission is successful, set out back to the starbase, and we'll wait for you there. There is no point in inviting an incident, as would happen if the Romulans turned up. I don't really expect this mission to involve much, but who knows. The starfighter is fitted out with some recreational material for the journey back afterwards. If nothing else, your team can take some photographic and other records of earth in the past, and the other planets.'

In the starfighter Riker briefly addressed the group.

'We are all going on the mission,' he said. 'It might be a good idea to quickly get to know each other if you haven't

met before. All of you should know me by now, and you may know Counselor Troi, Commander Data, Commander La Forge, Lieutenant Worf, and Doctor Crusher.

'You may not know Lieutenant Selar,' he added. 'She will be part of the medical team with Doctor Crusher. By the way, if I don't pronounce your name right, let me know.

Ensign French will be in Engineering with Mister La Forge, and they will basically be responsible for mending anything that does not work as well. Ensign Glock will be responsible for photon torpedo maintenance as well as manning them in battle. Ensign Arrg..'

He broke off as a deep-throated snarl emerged from Arrg's throat, and his fangs showed as his lip curled. The sound made everyone's flesh crawl. Some shivered irresistibly.

What did I say? he thought. Is he going to attack me?

Everyone looked at Arrg, while drawing back a little.

'What's the problem, Ensign?' he asked, drawing himself together.

'You said to let you know if you mispronounced our names,' said Arrg, wishing he could curl up in embarrassment. None of this showed in his demeanour.

'That's my name.' He repeated the growl. Their skins crawled again. 'But it's all right if you call me Arrg. I don't mind at all.'

He stopped in confusion. To the others he appeared to be glaring about in challenge.

'Oh,' said Riker, after a moment. 'Oh, well, I think I'll stick to Ensign Arrg. I don't think I could quite manage your real name. Um, Ensign... Arrg, Ensign Smith and Ensign

Mendon will be similarly responsible for a photon torpedo launcher each. The Ensigns will also be rostered for kitchen and cleaning duties, as I said. For now, I suggest you go to your positions and become familiar with them. The orientation of this ship may take a bit of getting used to, especially until we get into a place where it can have its own gravity.

'You all know your jobs. I have no idea what it's like to go through a wormhole, but be prepared for some disorientation. When we sight the enemy, treat this as a combat situation. Be ready to obey every order instantly. If you are asked a question, answer briefly and succinctly. If you can manage that, Data,' he finished with a grin.

'Certainly, Commander,' answered Data in surprise. 'I am quite capable of brevity in an answer should the situation require it. I have a great capacity for condensation of information into a nutshell, as the expression has it. Precise will be my watchword during this mission.'

'Right,' said Riker, smiling. 'I'm insulting you all by going through this. You all know your routines. Let's go.'

The group spread out. They had had a fairly brief familiarization with the new vessel, and each was curious and excited at the chance to learn something. Mary Anne slid into her seat and fingered the controls of the phasers. They seemed normal in their configuration. She uttered a few 'Pow! Pow!'s as she pretended to fire.

Ensign Mendon sat in his chair and simply looked. He had studied this new design already, and knew where everything was. He felt no need to finger everything.

Ensign Arrg moved into his turret, and spread himself around. This was going to be his home, he felt, so he would move in. He knew his presence would disturb the others, so he intended to keep to himself as much as possible. On a ship this size the only way to do that was to stay in your 'office.'

He carefully took out a large phial which looked fragile, but was actually almost indestructible. He put it next to the door on a shelf, ready for him to refill the smaller phial in his pocket whenever he left. He turned his attention to the phasers. He shared Riker's worry. Would he really be able to fire a weapon in combat? He was the first to break away from Tarkassia to try his luck in the larger world. It turned out that this was where his abilities supposedly lay, so he must succeed!

Riker, Data and Deanna were the only ones in the small control room -hardly a bridge - as the doors rolled open, and the atmosphere was drawn in by invisible force fields. The fighter rose from the hanger and soared towards the wormhole. Its shields were on full, as Data endeavoured to stay exactly at the invisible center.

The crew experienced for the first time the unsettling feeling of timelessness as they traveled for an uncertain time. As the Romulans had done previously, Data noted the fact that no passage of time had registered on either the ship's or his own chronometer. He felt no passage of time, but the others had that curious idea that they had been traveling for months, but arrived as they had started. No beards had grown, they were not tired.

Once out into real space again, all the humans were able to identify the familiar star configurations, and Data soon traced the position of the earth's solar system. They moved towards it at warp speed, and dropped back to impulse when they neared it.

'Let's scan for ion emissions,' said Riker. 'They may be cloaked, but they can't hide completely.'

'It is particularly easy to scan here, Commander,' said Data, after he and Geordi had spent some time over their respective instruments. 'There has not been recent space travel in this area. There is no trace of any ion emissions whatsoever. The Romulans are not in this area.'

'That's odd,' said Riker. 'The Vulcans were around quite a while ago. They should have left some trace.'

'By recent, I meant within a month or so, commander,' replied Data. 'The Vulcans would not necessarily have spent long periods in space.'

Riker considered. 'It's a relief that no problem exists. We could go straight back, but now that we're here let's gather some information. We'll work our way in. We won't go too close to earth, though.'

This sensible idea was received neutrally by the non-humans, but all the humans and part-humans longed to get close and have a look.

The ship cruised slowly through the outer reaches of the solar system, taking photographs and records of the outer planets, and spent a part of a day pottering around in this way. Mary Anne spent most of her time excitedly scanning the surfaces of the planets, and comparing them with the

files. She also took readings of the sun, as she had an interest in astrophysics. She longed to step out on Earth when they got near, but realized it was impossible. She knew Malcolm felt the same, and they talked over their meal about what earth might be like. They were slowly working their way inwards, and were nearing Mars.

'I can't wait to see it,' she said. 'Will it be before or after they nearly killed it with pollution? If we could get some information on it at that time it would be historically invaluable.'

'I'd like to see Australia,' he said. 'While it still had towns all over it.'

Will Riker entered the room at that moment, and her gaze drifted to him. She lost the thread of the conversation.

'You're not really fancying him, are you?' asked Malcolm. 'He has a bit of a reputation as a ladies' man. I guess he does fit the profile from your novels.'

'That's ridiculous!' she gasped, reddening. 'I just looked because he... came in. He means nothing to me.'

'Just as well,' he said. 'This idea that a rake will change his spots when he gets married is nonsense. If a man fools around before he's married, he'll fool around after.'

'How dare you call Commander Riker a rake!' she said hotly. 'He's a gentleman.'

'Just a bit of hyperbole,' said Malcolm with an embarrassed grin. 'But I think you might be competing with Counselor Troi. I think there might be something between them.'

Mary Anne fell silent, and changed the topic.

Great, thought Malcolm. About the first time you've

spoken more than a sentence to a pretty girl, and you've convinced her you're a drongo.

On her way to check out her turret (and retrieve her book) Mary-Anne noticed Arrg's door was still shut. She decided to bite the bullet and try to socialize. She knocked.

Arrg nearly fell off his chair in surprise at having a visitor. He looked more ferocious than ever as he opened the door, but Commander Riker had warned them about his demeanour.

'Hi,' she said, 'I just thought I'd drop in and be sociable. I noticed you've pretty much stayed in here. Just tell me if you want me to go away.'

'No,' he said hastily, 'no! Stay! I felt my presence might.. disturb people, so I've stayed here.'

'You can't stay here all trip,' said Mary Anne. 'We know you have an.. unusual behaviour pattern. We'll adjust to it.' Arrg was pitifully grateful. He showed it by rolling his eyes and curving his face into a terrifying appearance. In spite of knowing he was harmless, Mary Anne had to steel herself to smile at him. They exchanged a few words of gossip, and she turned to continue on her way. The phial caught her eye.

'What a lovely phial!' she said. 'May I open it?'

Arrg was not too keen, but he was desperate to oblige, so he said yes. She opened it, and exclaimed, 'It's perfume! It's beautiful! Could I have a little bit?'

'Well, I could spare a bit,' said Arrg. 'I brought a lot.' Mary Anne got a small perfume bottle from her room, which she

had managed to empty since first meeting Commander Riker. She refilled it.

'Why do you have this?' she asked curiously. 'You don't wear perfume. We'd have noticed.'

'Actually, it's an anti-pheromone,' he said. 'I need to wear it. I sort of cancel it out, so you don't notice it.'

'Oh, that's interesting,' she said, wondering what he meant.

'Anyway, I'm expecting you to be with us for dinner, instead of hiding away in here!'

'Yes, ma'am,' he said, and she smiled to herself as she left, thinking, At least you get to be a surrogate mother.

'Commander,' said Data suddenly over the intercom, 'there is an ion trail. A ship has come through the wormhole in the last day or so.'

'Don't tell me we got here before them!' exclaimed Riker, after he had moved quickly the short distance to the bridge. Data thought to himself, I was not going to do so, as it seemed self-evident.

'Let's find them!' said Riker.

Chapter 5.

A small cargo freighter emerged from the wormhole. Its four inhabitants were so tense that they scarcely registered the eerie feelings associated with its passage. The breeding and training of thousands of years on Vulcan and then Romulus and Remil had taken out expressions of emotion, and it would normally have troubled even this group to have been tense, but they were about to carry out a deed that would make them pariahs among their own people if it succeeded.

If it succeeded they would never see their own people again, on the other hand, so that was academic. They were a small group of fanatics, prepared to sacrifice their own existences in order to destroy those they saw as their enemies. However each of them had arrived at this irrationality, they were united now in a small group. None of their emotions showed. With the typical calm appearance of their race, they went about their investigations in a businesslike way as soon as they appeared. First, they established that they were far in the past. Then they moved to warp speed to reach the outer limits of the solar system. They knew what they were after, and the search limited itself to several thousand searches. "I have it!" called Revi exultantly. She swung away from the computer screen. "The computer has identified it. An hour's travel will bring us within sight of it." "At last!" cried Dovor, and the other three Romulans gathered around her. Revi was a young woman, beautiful

but for the air of fanaticism about her, which made her sour and humorless even for a Romulan. Pachek was also young, a male counterpart to Revi, with less glitter in his eye, but even less humor.

Dovor was an equally ruthless anarchistic fanatic, but age had given him a veneer of what passed for bonhomie among Romulans. He had, in addition to the plain consciencelessness of the two younger terrorists, a streak of sadism. In contrast to the three others, all younger, he dressed somewhat ostentatiously, in flowing garb. The others all wore very simple, stark dress, in itself an affectation. They saw themselves as the pure ones.

"Your studies of history have paid off," Dovor added to the woman gazing at the screen with glittering eyes. "Going back to your roots, as the humans say."

Sela turned angrily on him.

"Do not mock me, Dovor! I hate the taint of humanness. It will be a relief to cease to exist, taking my heritage with me. Let's get this done."

He smiled, with the satisfaction of a natural bully, at having touched her quick, but he returned to the command seat and issued orders. With a complement of four, this was probably unnecessary, but he enjoyed the power of command.

They settled back into their seats, and the ship began to move around. They were already in the earth's solar system, so they traveled only on impulse engines, looking for their objective. Although they were fixated on what they sought, they kept to their assigned tasks as well,

scanning all about them.

"Dovor!" cried Pachek, the navigator, "We have company!"

"What is it?" asked Dovor.

"A small round starship," said Pachek. "I have not seen the shape before."

Dovor frowned. "Who would have had starships this far in the past?"

"Some race we have not heard of?" said Sela, also frowning.

"No, nothing so easy," said Pachek. "It has writing on it. It's a Federation warship!"

"There can't be any Federation.." began Revi, then stopped, embarrassed at missing the obvious. "Well, obviously they are."

"They must have come through the wormhole!" Pachek supplied the obvious for her. "Blast them, how did they know? We've only been here a few hours!"

"That is immaterial," Sela said tightly. "They are here."

"Well that's the end of our little expedition," said Revi with a grimace. "We can't do anything with them watching over our shoulders!"

Dovor showed his emotion by rising to his feet.

"Damnation! We can't fight them and .."

Dovor's voice softened.

"We will have to surrender. We are no match for a fighter. But there is still hope. The game is not yet lost. Now, which one of you lily-livered cowards is going to betray me?"

They looked at him with interest.

Aboard the Pinball Wizard, everyone had come alive. It did not seem mysterious that they had beaten the Romulans here. Obviously they had had difficulty in obtaining a ship, or were held up somewhere, or had come by some devious and slow route. But they had arrived, and needed to be stopped. The three gunners jumped to their stations, and slid into place.

Ensign Mendon moved somewhat slowly. He noted it himself absently. His need to balance his breathing apparatus slowed him down a little. It was not something which had shown up in simulations, which generally started up with the gunners in place. He resolved to come up with a solution, if he survived this encounter.

Arrg sat behind his array, trying to brace himself mentally. I can do it, he thought, if I treat it as an intellectual exercise. I am not facing them. All I need to do is push the right buttons at the right moment.

Mary-Anne held the controls like the steering wheel of a car. It was far too early. They had not even come near yet, but she had to do something physical to relieve the tension. "I have them, sir," said Data calmly, in the command area. "We will be with them in a few minutes. They are in a cargo freighter."

"A cargo freighter?" Riker frowned. "How the hell were they going to destroy earth with a cargo freighter? It's all weight and no weapons."

"They do have some small phasers, sir, but little else."

"Perhaps they hoped to sell them something," said Glock.

"I hardly think that would be an efficient way to wipe out a race," said Riker drily.

"On the contrary," said Glock, "it could be quite efficient. Sell a primitive tribe a nuclear weapon, and disappear before they use it."

"They haven't brought nuclear weapons," said Riker. "Or any weapons besides hand phasers."

"They could change history by just interacting with them," said Malcolm, who was still on the bridge. "They could just ask them what they did want, and sell them something sophisticated, and muck up history completely."

"The only things they could want would be things they knew about already," observed Deanna. "Which the Romulans don't have."

"One of the Rules of Acquisition," said Glock, "is that if you don't have what the customer wants you sell him the nearest thing that you do have."

"I'll remember that!" laughed Riker. "I'll be sure of what I want when I'm dealing with a Ferengi. The thing is, they don't have anything much at all. Only food."

The entire team was gathered in the small command deck, except those few needed to man weapons elsewhere.

Malcolm headed off back to engineering in case a battle ensued. Beverley Crusher had come in case of injuries, but now it looked as if she would be superfluous. With her was Lieutenant Selar, not only for medical assistance, but as a non-human. Worf manned the main weapons console, and Data the sensory apparatus. Deanna Troi sat by Will Riker, her face sombre.

In their weapons bays the three gunners could follow all communication on the screens, but could hear only sound from the bridge, while sound was switched on. Mary Anne, in fact all of them, sat alertly, aware that this might be their last day. For her, it was the first time.

"How romantic," she thought sardonically, "to die with my new unrequited love."

It quickly became clear to them that there was no danger, and all three relaxed, but stayed put until given instructions to go off alert.

The freighter had given no sign that they had become aware of the approach of the starfighter. They continued to fly through space, with Dovor quickly explaining his plans, and waiting as long as possible before being contacted.

"Send a hailing signal, Mister Worf," ordered Riker, and Worf pressed an appropriate button. A combination of common signals was programmed into the computer, so that the dialling of a number would send off a specific message.

"They are responding visually, Commander," Worf reported.

"On screen," said Riker, and the screen showed the bridge of a run-down cargo vessel, with a minimum of equipment. It appeared to have been stripped down. Whether this had been done deliberately for the trip, or whether they had obtained a shell of a ship and had not bothered to fully fit it out was not apparent. Two figures could be seen in front of the communication module, and two others were distant in the background.

But it was not the room which aroused interest so much as the woman standing just behind the man in charge.

"Sela!" said Data in surprise.

"Yes, Mr Data?" asked Lieutenant Selar, who was not expecting to be called upon at this stage.

"No, Lieutenant, I was referring to the woman on screen, whose name is quite similar to yours. I had not expected to see her here. It was an exclamation of surprise."

"I did not assume you capable of surprise, Commander," said Selar.

"Oh, yes. One always has a selection of expected events in view. When an event occurs not within those parameters, surprise is an appropriate response."

Worf stared at the screen. He had seen Sela before, but had not recognised her as Tasha Yar's supposed daughter. She did not look at all alike. Her skin was a different color, her hair differently shaped, her manner different. It was difficult to discriminate humans based only on facial features, even after being raised among them. He sighed.

"Mr Data," interposed Riker, "for the moment please keep to minimum responses. We need to find out what is going on."

He addressed the screen.

"This is Commander Riker of the *Pinball Wizard*."

Where do they get these names? he thought.

"You are trespassing in Federation territory, Captain..?"

"Dovor. Captain Dovor you may call me if you will. I must agree that we are within range of earth, as you call it, but hardly Federation territory. The Federation does not yet

exist."

"We know you plan to destroy humanity," said Riker angrily. "We will not allow you to succeed."

"Destroy humanity?" asked Dovor with a puzzled look.

"What with? We are here illegally, I grant, as far as the Romulan government is concerned. We intended -intend, if you will allow us, - no, I don't suppose you would - to harvest some of the valuable minerals from this system before other explorers arrive. We have brought a cargo ship, not a destroyer."

"I might believe that if Sela wasn't with you," replied Riker. "She's too big a wheel to be on some penny-ante poaching trip."

"I think I grasp the gist of your comment, Commander," said Dovor. "Sela wanted to come out of curiosity, both scientific, and to have a look at the planet from which half of her heritage has sprung."

"One last look," commented Sela with a cold smile, "before I go back to Romulus forever."

Riker switched off the sound and looked around.

"They are nervous," commented Deanna Troi quietly. "I think he is lying."

"But what are they doing?" Riker asked in puzzlement. Aloud, he switched on again and spoke to Dovor. "I'm going to ask you all to beam over here. I want a team to inspect your ship."

"Tch! And to look at all our private belongings? Ah well, if it must be. We will be ready in a few minutes."

Dovor switched off.

"Do we have everything necessary?" he asked. The other three patted the weapons they were wearing, and smiled. He secreted a small radio transmitter in a ring, then reestablished communication.

"They have a Betazoid with them," observed Revi.

"Then we must endeavour to tell only the truth," said Sela.

"As always," smiled Dovor.

"We are ready to beam over, Commander," he said, and the four of them were carried to the transporter room of the federation vessel.

"Is there somewhere we can leave our weapons?" he asked smoothly. Worf was covering them all with a phaser. They removed their sidearms, and Glock, acting as transporter operator, collected them.

"Keep them safe for us," remarked Pachek as he stepped off the platform. The four visitors followed Riker to the command deck.

After they had left, Geordi La Forge came into the transporter room. Only Glock remained.

"Have I missed the visitors?" asked Geordi.

"They just left, sir," said Glock. "They left their weapons for us to put away."

Geordi didn't much worry about missing visitors. He preferred to socialise with his engines. He knew how they thought and behaved. But he was curious about the Romulans. He had had only bad experiences with them.

"Why would they wear weapons for a visit like this?" asked Glock. "They would just have to take them off."

"Perhaps it's some sort of Romulan formality," said Geordi.

"I dunno," said Glock, scratching his jaw. "Anyways, let's do as we were asked, and park them somewhere safe."

"I know just the place," said Geordi.

In the command area the four Romulans sat easily. The room was becoming crowded, as it had already been comparatively full, and the three weapons personnel had rejoined the main bunch. Beverley Crusher quickly scanned the newcomers.

"They aren't carrying anything. The captain has a radio in his ring, but there won't be anyone to send messages to here."

"They are tense, but.. upbeat," said Deanna quietly to Riker. She was leaning close to him so they could not hear her. "I don't understand it. Did they want to be captured?"

"Nothing makes sense so far," he admitted quietly. "But we can stop them doing anything now."

She had a sudden sensation of... disappointment, and glanced around to see Mary Anne watching her whispering to Will. Oh, she thought, so that's the way the wind blows. Will has an admirer.

"Who is this Sela, anyway?" Malcolm whispered to Glock. The two had come to the bridge as they were not needed elsewhere, and, as all the "enemies" were there, made some extra backup.

"I dunno," whispered Glock back.

"She is a Romulan who claims to be the daughter of one of our crew who was killed some time ago," interposed Worf, who had overheard them. "That is impossible, as Tasha Yar

never had a daughter, and would have been no older than Sela any way. The others consider she bears a strong resemblance to Tasha but I cannot see it. Her hair is a different color, her complexion is different. Perhaps her facial features are similar. Humans seem to rely heavily on these for recognition."

"I suppose we do," smiled Malcolm.

"You would probably get a better idea if you saw her with her clothes off," offered Glock.

"I have never seen Tasha Yar naked," said Worf in an offended tone, "and I am unlikely to see Sela so."

"Oh, bad luck," commiserated Glock. He assumed other races had the capacity of the Ferengi to find females of any race attractive. They were the chauvinists of the galaxy. Their own women had no rights, were allowed to wear no clothes, and were quite subordinate. As a result all the less subordinate females of the Federation became immediately attractive. Ferengi men persisted in the faith that all women found them attractive in spite of considerable evidence to the contrary, and no evidence in support. This was a single blind spot in an otherwise perceptive race.

They had never really grasped the fact that the women they met always wore clothes. It was reasonable that people would wear uniforms - once they had got over the mind-blowing idea that females might actually have jobs and rank - but they assumed that women in civilian life would dress like their women.

That Worf would find only Klingon women attractive would never have occurred to him. He interpreted the

disapproval in Worf's tone as disappointment.

"Well, I suppose we'd better be off for our look at the enemy craft," said Malcolm. "You can run the transporter for Geordi and me, Glock?"

"No worries, mate," said Glock, and Malcolm smiled.

"You're learning all the important things."

Geordi and Malcolm beamed across to the freighter, with Glock operating the transporter. The ship was surprisingly empty.

"Boy, the Romulans believe in Spartan living!" muttered Geordi. He moved around the ship examining things.

"The only things they seem to have been using are the computers," he said. "They are pretty good for a freighter, but nothing else seems out of the ordinary. They don't even seem to have used the replicators much. They have spider webs in them! Too immersed in their work to eat much! Or clean them! They don't have transporters, and they haven't used the tractor beam in quite a while."

"It all seems stripped down," said Malcolm in puzzlement.

"Why would they have a freighter with no transporters?"

How could they collect stuff?"

"They have very little food, and no amenities," said

Geordi. "Either they intended this to be a very short trip, or they didn't intend going back. This is weird. Sela is a pretty big wheel on Romulus, I hear. She could afford a better set-up than this!"

"Romulans don't think much about comfort," said Malcolm doubtfully. "Maybe they find it easier to sit and contemplate with nothing around them."

"Well, there doesn't seem to be anything suspicious here," said Geordi at last. "Let's go back."

He pressed his communicator.

In the meantime, Commander Riker interrogated the Romulans. In a larger ship, he would have taken his guests to a ready room for a private interview. Ordinary rooms were at a premium, however on a starfighter, so Riker interviewed them on the bridge.

"So, Captain, you are here on a scavenging mission?" asked Riker. "Have you found anything?"

"I can honestly say, all we have done so far is some preliminary surveying. We have done nothing to harm anyone. We had no intention of harming any human being." Dovor could not keep a note of self-satisfaction out of his voice.

"I think he's pleased to be telling the truth," said Deanna quietly, "but he is still tense. It is very difficult. Romulans are almost as good as Vulcans in suppressing their emotions."

Riker chewed his lip. He preferred action. If he had known this mission had been going to be a lot of jawing he would have left it to Picard. Or Spock.

"Is Mr La Forge with you?" asked Sela suddenly.

"Geordi?" Riker responded in surprise. "How do you know him?"

"We met once, but I doubt he would remember me." She smiled secretively.

"Geordi is in Engineering. In fact he is Engineering," said Riker. "We brought a minimal crew in a small craft to stop

you."

"Stop us what?" asked Pachek. "We have done nothing." He spoke in an amused way, with a ray of arrogance flickering through his wall of impassivity. Riker decided immediately that he did not like him, and that there was something unusually cold-blooded about him. A detached part of his mind thought, how can such hot-blooded people seem so cold-blooded? But he did not allow his prejudices to affect his behaviour. That was one of the first lessons in the Academy, and he was long past that.

Lieutenant Selar spoke to Riker. "Commander, should I try a mind meld? They are Romulans, so it would be difficult but I could try."

Riker knew that Vulcans did not favor mind-melding, and that it would be particularly distasteful to Selar to mind-meld with a Romulan, but he agreed. Distaste was a mild reaction, and a Vulcan would allow nothing more.

"Anything," said Riker. "Do it in sick bay. Beverley will help you if you need it. Maybe to sedate them. Dovor seems to be the leader, so try him first."

Revi and Pachek looked at each other with what might have been relief, but it was too faint for Deanna to feel.

"Sedation will not be necessary," said Selar. "A conscious mind is preferable."

"It will not be necessary," agreed Dovor. "I will cooperate."

Lieutenant Selar looked at him speculatively. It would be even less pleasant for him to undergo melding than it would be for her to do it. He was being remarkably cooperative.

Dovor and the other two visitors left with Worf and the two doctors, but Sela lingered.

"May I have a word with you, Commander Riker?"

"Of course. I am very interested to meet you at last. I would like to believe you are Tasha's daughter, you look so much like her, but I can't see how. Can you tell me what this is all about?"

"I have a certain reputation among my people for my hatred of humans. When these others came up with their scheme they invited me to join them, because they assumed I would sympathise with them."

"So there is a scheme!"

"Yes." Sela smiled grimly. "You have all the clues. What is the main feature of a cargo ship? A tractor beam."

Riker looked, and was, baffled.

"Were you going to move the earth? That's impossible."

"No, something smaller. May I use your starmap? I need to find... Ah! If you use the computer to track the path of this comet I think you will find that it intersects that of earth."

Sela easily took over the controls of the computers. Riker was uncomfortable letting her do so. She was a prisoner, a suspected terrorist, and could quickly do some damage. But she simply brought up a picture of a dark ball of matter.

"Data, is this true? Will the comet hit the earth?" Riker was all attention.

Data replied, "The computer will need a few moments to analyse the path of the comet, and to read in and analyse the path of the earth." He took over the controls, and

concentrated for a few minutes while all movement seemed to stop on the bridge.

He sat back and said, "Yes, the comet will collide with the earth, in.."

Subprogram Brevity broke in, and he stopped.

"The comet doesn't seem that large," said Riker thoughtfully. "Could it destroy the earth?"

"No, it is about twenty to thirty kilometers across," said Data. "I will measure it more accurately later. It could have a devastating effect by raising a cloud of matter into the atmosphere of the earth, and cutting off sunlight. If sufficient light were cut off, life might become extinct." The words, "In fact.." had sprung to his lips before the subprogram prevented them.

"You have never seemed friendly to earth," Riker said to Sela. "What caused this sudden change of heart?"

"When they spoke to me they intended to destroy humanity. They assumed my hatred would lead me to support them. They overlooked the obvious. I hate humanity because I am half human, and humanity betrayed my mother. But if humanity is destroyed in the past I will cease to exist myself. I do not hate you that much."

That's odd, thought Deanna. That was a lie, but everything else seems to be true.

"So you altered its path with the tractor beam?" said Riker tensely.

"I personally did nothing, Commander," she replied calmly. "I merely accompanied them."

Riker's communicator shrilled.

"Riker here," he said automatically.

"Lieutenant Selar here," came her voice. "Dovor fought me, but I did get some information. He was going to divert a comet.."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Riker interposed. "You have confirmed what we have learned here."

"But, strangely enough, he seems to think of all this as some sort of experiment where he was not sure of the outcome. He repeated that no human would be hurt by what he had done, and he was telling the truth."

"That's not what we hear here," said Riker. "Lock them up, and come back here."

He turned to Worf.

"Can we alter its orbit so it will never intersect with earth?"

"The simplest method seems to be to destroy the comet," replied Worf.

"Possibly not," interposed Data. "If the comet were blown apart its centre of mass would still be the same. Over time the parts would flow back together, reconstituting the comet. Altering its orbit would be simple, and we could try orbits until we found one which never intersects that of earth."

"Very time-consuming to do trial and error," said Worf.

"Simpler to crash it into something big. Like Jupiter, or the sun."

"Do it!" said Riker.

"Mary Anne," said Deanna, as Mary Anne was leaving the bridge. She caught her, and said, "I hope you don't mind my commenting, but I had my shields down during the

interchange, and I felt your... disappointment when I was whispering to Commander Riker. Will and I used to be close, but we decided to go our own ways. I was just whispering about the Romulans, not sweet nothings."

Once again Mary Anne went pink.

"Thank you for telling me," she said, "but it was just... daydreaming."

"Well, it depends on what you are dreaming about," smiled Deanna. "If you were after fun, I don't think Commander Riker would become involved with someone under his command. That would be unethical. He wasn't ready for marriage when I was with him, but who knows now? You would have to follow him though. He has his ambitions."

"I'm not.." Mary Anne paused to get it right. She was acutely aware that Deanna was a superior officer. "I don't have any ideas. He's just a good-looking man. I don't.. expect anything."

"That's all right," said Deanna. "I thought I'd let you know the lie of the land, so to speak. I don't usually go around picking up everyone's emotional reactions. I just had my shields down then."

"Thanks for telling me," said Mary Anne.

"At least we can gossip about the men, together, then," said Deanna with a laugh. "You and I and Beverley. We girls have to stick together."

Mary Anne smiled weakly. She was just as likely to get into a gossip session with two of the most senior officers on the Enterprise as she was to fly around the outside of the starfighter, but she could not disagree. Deanna was a bit

overpowering. Her position as Counselor put her in a unique position to mix with anyone, but Mary Anne felt that Doctor Crusher might not concur with Deanna on this. Well, that's interesting, thought Mary Anne, as she went back to her room. The Commander doesn't mind a bit of fun! Right out of the book! Can Mary Anne capture the elusive heart of the handsome rake, Commander William Riker, and reduce him to domesticity? Does she want to? She passed Malcolm.

"Hi," she said. "I'm sorry for getting offended before. I do know the difference between fantasy and reality, though. It's like being in a lottery. You know you won't win when you buy a ticket, but that little number in a computer means you can daydream."

"I shouldn't have said it," he answered. "Would you be interested in a look at my holodeck program?"

"You didn't buy it from Glock, did you?" she laughed.

"No, it's just a walk through a part of Australia."

"Well, I brought a game of basketball," she said. "If I play your game, you have to play mine later."

"Deal!" he said. "I sort of feel sorry for the Romulans.

They had nothing for entertainment on that tub, not even a pack of cards."

"Nothing to seduce their women with?" she said merrily.

The Pinball Wizard located the comet, and Data steered towards it on impulse engines. From close up it was larger than Data had thought, though in relation to the size of the earth still quite small. It was quite rough in shape, about sixty or seventy kilometres across at its widest point, and a

blue-white color. This far from the sun it gleamed palely against the backdrop of stars.

It was so far from the sun that it had virtually no tail. As it moved closer in its orbit the sun would transform some of the surface ice into a spray of gas pouring out thousands of miles away from it. Some of this would be lost, but as it moved out into deep space again most of the gas would slowly drift back under gravity's tiny pull, until the next sweep near the sun.

The humans never failed to be thrilled by the spectacular sights of the various astrophysical objects they encountered. Riker looked in awe at the comet from close up. He felt again as he had once felt standing at the foot of a huge glacier somewhere in Alaska. The tiny ball of the Pinball Wizard seemed insignificant in comparison, but what it lacked in size it made up for with technology.

Worf operated the tractor beam, with the aid of the ship's computer, and gently changed the path of the comet. All of them watched the viewscreen avidly, not least Sela.

Deanna watched her with a troubled expression.

There was little to see. The tiny tail continued to point away from the sun, and the comet began to get smaller slowly as they pulled away from it.

"How long until it hits something?" asked Riker anxiously.

"About three days," replied Worf. Data opened his mouth to give an exact time, but closed it again.

"It will impact on the planet Jupiter," added Worf. "It will have a negligible effect. The planet is too big."

"Can we afford to stay here that long to make sure it hits?"

asked Riker.

"The wormhole still appears to be quite stable, sir," answered Data. "We have no obvious need to hurry back." Deanna spoke to Will Riker. She was disturbed, but could not put her finger on the reason.

"Sela was certainly quite happy to see you move the comet. That's reasonable, I suppose. But there is a suppressed excitement in her. Her reactions are not quite.... right."

"Well, she has succeeded in foiling the others," said Riker, feeling that he had the hang of the situation again. "And it is exciting to see a comet crash onto a planet. Are we recording everything for the boffins?" he asked Data.

"Everything we have learned is in the computer," said Data, "and everything visual is being recorded."

Will Riker began to relax.

"How is the wormhole, Data?" he asked again. Data replied again that it still appeared stable.

Riker called all the crew together, and told them, "We seem to have things under control, but I'd like to hang around until we see that comet actually hit the planet."

"What comet is this we're talking about, Worf?" asked Geordi.

"A comet which was going to impact on the earth," replied Worf. "We have diverted it, and it will now crash upon the planet Jupiter."

"Wow, lucky they noticed it!" said Geordi to Malcolm, as he headed back out to his domain.

"We have a few days to wait, everyone" Riker said. "Let's get the ship in perfect shape again. The duty rosters can

begin from now. Sela, I'm afraid I am not going to be able to leave you alone, but you have the freedom of the ship. I'll have to have at least one of the other women stay with you until we get you back to Romulan space."

"The freedom of the ship?" she asked quizzically. "What is there to do on a Federation starfighter?"

"We have a library," answered Deanna with a frown. "The computer system is quite extensive, downloaded from the Enterprise, and so the replicators can create thousands of books. And there is the holodeck."

"You have a holodeck on a starfighter?" asked Sela, surprise for once breaking an expression through to her face.

"There is a lot of just plain traveling, even on a starfighter," said Beverley Crusher, who had just reentered with Lieutenant Selar. "But in fact it has a medicinal use. Crewmembers suffering combat trauma can be de-traumatized in some familiar or soothing surroundings."

"Romulans would not require such a thing," Sela replied. "All this can be done with the mind. Pain can be shut out. Fear can be denied."

Worf nodded approvingly.

"A starfighter just has to be small enough to enable maximum shielding," added Riker. "In space, size means nothing, beyond making as small a target as possible. As most of the weaponry naturally has to be at the perimeter, there can be a lot of excess space in the center."

Worf also spoke. "A primary function of the holodeck is for combat training. Various planetary surfaces can be

replicated, and fighting simulated. Crew-members' reflexes can thus be kept finely honed."

"I feel like I am in a room of schoolteachers," smiled Sela. "While we are in the area, could we have a look at earth? I must confess some curiosity after all. One look at my heritage."

"We can look from afar," said Riker, "but we can't land. Any contact between us and early man could change history, and we've just gone to some trouble to avoid that!" Sela opened her mouth to comment, but stopped. *Never say more than you have to*, she thought. *You don't know. Maybe Dovor will tell them - eventually.*

"Can't we put down somewhere where there are no people?" asked Deanna.

"There is an old tale," said Data, "where a man travels back through the past and steps on a butterfly, and so changes history. The story was not factual, as the man returned to a future with the same people, and history greatly changed. The most likely change would be nothing at all, but if a chaotic disturbance were initiated, the ripple effect would ensure that the future was totally different, so that the people were not the same. It is safer not to do so, though I find the probability of such a ripple effect infinitesimally low."

"Perhaps you might like to look at earth in the holodeck," smiled Beverley. "We do have my golf simulation with us, and Captain Picard's horse-riding module."

"What is golf?" asked Sela.

"It is a game involving physical coordination, where one

attempts to strike a small ball and drop it into a hole in the least number of strokes," said Lieutenant Selar.

"You're familiar with golf?" asked Riker in surprise.

"In my spare time I often try out the open access programs of the holodeck, in case any are of interest. Golf is a game with some appeal to a Vulcan."

"I didn't think Vulcans were interested in... pleasure," said Riker, awkwardly.

"A common misconception among earth people," replied Selar. "We believe in total emotional control, certainly, but if there were no pleasure there would be no motivation to do anything. All pleasure in life derives from doing something well, or from contemplation of philosophical ideas."

"Well, that's a Vulcan view," grinned Riker.

"Our people still hunt, for example, but no longer kill," she continued unperturbed. "The pleasure arises from tracking and touching the animal, in other words the use of skill. Humans observe the same ritual sometimes and then photograph the game, so we are not entirely different. In fact my people and yours interact fairly comfortably because we are not dissimilar in some ways. We have even been influenced by you in a number of ways."

"How is that?" asked Deanna.

"We have copied the ritual of smiling," said Selar, her face remaining impassive. "It exercises the facial muscles, as well as serving to acknowledge some particularly adept wordplay."

"Jokes, in other words," said Beverley.

"Not really," answered Selar. "A joke depends on an unexpected outcome to a story. A Vulcan would normally have considered all possible outcomes to the story, and would be unlikely to be surprised. We smile rather at clever wordplay."

"I have never seen a Vulcan smile," said Riker.

"That does seem likely," said Selar.

"I wonder if Vulcans know the expression, 'Taking the Mickey?'" whispered Malcolm to Mary Anne.

Sela had been listening to the interplay without comment, but now she broke in.

"How can you accept this dilution of your heritage?" she asked tightly. "Centuries of development polluted by the human infestation!"

The others looked at her in surprise. Her normal impassivity had slipped to reveal the hatred which festered within her.

"We choose to change sometimes," said Selar calmly.

"Where humanity is seen to have something worthy of consideration, we consider it. Some of our number have even chosen companions of their race. Vulcan was perhaps becoming a bit sterile, lacking development. Many regard our mingling with other races to be a benefit. Others do not."

"I can't understand you, Sela," said Riker impatiently. "You say you are Tasha's daughter, which is impossible. But if you are, why do you hate her so?"

"I do not hate my mother. She was a slave, and I only knew her four years. But she was just a prisoner of war, spoils if

you will. The Captain of the Enterprise sent her to an ignominious death. Earth has spread like an infection through the galaxy. Romulus had a perfectly developed philosophy of life, settled over millenia. The Federation is like a cancer, altering everything it touches till it dies."

"Romulus has chosen not to mingle too much, so it should not be too infected," said Lieutenant Selar. "In any case, the Romulans are an offshoot of Vulcan. You have already digressed from our philosophies."

"Millenia ago," said Sela. "We have evolved our own ideals."

"Not involving morality too deeply," said Selar drily, "though you have managed to lessen your natural emotions. That is something which arouses our curiosity."

"Lessen?" Deanna enquired in surprise. "I would have thought the Romulans much more emotional than the Vulcans. Infinitely more, even!"

"Our - curse, if you like, is that we are extremely emotional by nature," replied Selar. "All Vulcans spend their lives learning to suppress emotion. Complete subjection of emotion is our ideal. In those few cases where a Vulcan has failed to achieve this there is a complete breakdown of inhibition and a terrible outcome."

"The Romulans still follow many of our philosophies and practices, but their natural emotions have obviously atrophied. They have often allowed their emotions to overwhelm them without unduly dire consequences."

Sela had recovered her composure. She changed the subject.

"Perhaps a look at earth through your program would be a way to pass time," she said graciously.

Riker and Data accompanied the three women, Riker because he could think of nothing which required a captain's attention at the time, and Data from curiosity about Sela, who did look so mysteriously like Tasha Yar. They reached the holodeck, and Riker called up the modified program, as Data was playing. Immediately they were standing on a beautiful golf course. Sela looked around with a reluctant flow of pleasure at the scene. She had seen equally beautiful scenes on other planets, but each planet had a special beauty of its own, if it had any beauty at all.

The fairways rolled away, wide and grassed like carpets. Various birds chirped in trees, or grazed around them as if oblivious to their presence. Her mind registered that of course they were, being only computer simulations.

"This is your program?" she asked Beverley Crusher.

"I've had it for years," Beverley answered her. "It was Jack's. My husband's. I learned the game from him. We went to a real course during our honeymoon. Of course, I couldn't play then, but I grew to love it."

"Its beauty is different from that of Romulus or Remil," said Sela quietly. "It is softer. The beauty of Romulus is dramatic and overwhelming."

There were quite a group of them on the tee. Riker, Deanna, Beverley, Sela and Selar, and Data. The first tee was a raised platform of green, sweeping off to a long fairway. On either side it had rough, over which could be

seen the sea on both sides. The course sat on a peninsula.

"The program can produce over a hundred different courses, from quite different climatic zones," said Deanna.

"But this is a nice one."

"This is a slightly modified version of your program," whispered Riker to Doctor Crusher. She looked at him with raised eyebrows, but he added no more.

"The game is normally played with four players," said Beverley, when all were gathered. "In reality that is for safety. Being hit by a golf ball can seriously damage you. But as this is a simulation we can't come to harm, so does everyone want to play?"

"I will watch," said Sela. "I don't know how to play, in any case."

"Oh, that's easy," said Beverley. "Subprogram Professional, please."

Suddenly a smiling teacher was with them. "Who wants to learn?" he asked.

"Not I," said Sela. "I would want to learn nothing from a human!"

"No problem," replied Riker. "Computer, alter professional to Romulan form."

The professional immediately changed to a Romulan. The computer was sufficiently well programmed that not only was the appearance, but the manner, Romulan. Instead of a friendly, helpful manner, demonstrating and perhaps guiding, he informed Sela of the correct motions, and the correct methods, briefly demonstrating each.

Fortunately she was dressed in loose clothes, and was able

to swing easily. She dropped a couple of balls and hit them easily - and perfectly - about two hundred metres. Riker, Deanna and Beverley watched with down-hearted amazement.

"So the idea is to hit the ball into that hole where the flag is," asked Sela. "It seems simple."

"It is to be done in the least possible number of strokes," added Data.

"Of course," retorted Sela, "there would be no point to the game otherwise."

"Oh?" said Data, digesting this information.

Sela lined up her ball and hit it straight down the center of the fairway, about two hundred metres. Lieutenant Selar lined up and hit it about ten metres further. In both cases the wind suddenly changed after the stroke, but the strokes were so well hit it had minimal effect. They both noticed, however, the subtle changes in the configuration of the fairway. Sela considered that perhaps earth was subject to a lot of seismic disturbance. This did not seem to gel with the gentle curvature of the scenery.

"I have had more practice than you," Selar offered to Sela.

"No doubt you will be equaling me soon."

"I have no intention of playing more than one game," replied Sela. "When one has conquered a skill, what point is there in repeating it? Is it my imagination, or did the configuration of the fairway change during our strokes?"

"Commander Riker?" invited Selar.

"Oh... No," he said, deliberately misunderstanding the question. "The rules allow only four players at a time.

Beverley, it's your game... and Deanna?"

Deanna said hastily, "Commander Data is just learning the game. I think it should be him!"

"Thanks, Will," said Beverley drily.

She took out her driver and hit about one hundred and thirty metres, slicing into the rough. Sela watched closely, but there was no movement in the terrain, and the light breeze stayed steady.

She was still frowning in puzzlement as Data lined up and hit. So was Lieutenant Selar.

As Data's ball flew from the tee a squall blew up. A tornado moved across the fairway sending his ball into the rough. Rain pelted them, and they had difficulty keeping their feet. The green moved twenty metres, and sandtraps disappeared and appeared in other places.

"What in the name of Beshnir is happening?" gasped Sela, struggling for breath in the wind. As his ball stopped moving, the conditions returned to normal, though reconfigured. The breeze dropped and the sun shone again.

"Is this typical earth weather?"

"It is a concept called handicapping," explained Data, unconcerned at the water dripping from him. "The conditions are made a little more difficult for the best player."

"How does the computer know who is the best player while you are still playing?" asked Sela curiously.

"Commander Riker has defined me as the best player," replied Data, "Not unreasonably."

Suddenly Sela grinned.

The logical part of her mind thought, *I'm smiling. Why? Because we humans have played a joke on Data!* The smile froze on her face and disappeared. *I am not a human!* she thought stubbornly

"I have played enough of the game," she said sullenly.

"This view of earth will suffice."

The others were somewhat taken aback by this interplay of emotions on her normally impassive face, but did not comment.

She left the holodeck, with Deanna and Selar accompanying her, and retired to the room she had been allotted. Lieutenant Selar shared the room, and they made very quiet roommates. Nevertheless, over the next two days, bored, or feeling the need for exercise, she did play one or two complete rounds - very well. They used Beverley's original program. Selar matched her impassively, while Deanna and Beverley went around feeling somewhat humiliated.

Beverley actually commented so on one of the rounds.

"But you invented it," said Selar. "We may be better at it than you, but neither of our peoples has invented a similar game. It is a very good way to exercise while enjoying both pleasant surroundings and the opportunity for contemplation."

"We would be better at any game requiring skill and coordination," observed Sela. "But it is true. Earth people have a skill in invention, probably necessary to overcome your shortcomings. Perhaps we, Vulcans and Romulans, that is, spend too much time contemplating what is, rather

than inventing new things."

"Thanks," said Beverley drily again.

Mary Anne came across Revi sitting in a chair, doing nothing.

"Hi," she said, and Revi looked at her. "I'm just going off to try a game of basketball. If you're bored, you might like to try it."

"What does 'bored' mean?" asked Revi.

"Well, it means you have nothing to do, and you start to get, oh, jumpy."

"But one never has nothing to do," replied Revi. "One is always either doing or thinking."

"Oh, well, if you or your boyfriend feel like a game, you're welcome anyway."

"What is my 'boyfriend'?" asked Revi in puzzlement.

"Pachek," replied Mary Anne. "You and he are always together. I just assumed you were in some sort of relationship."

"You mean sexual?" said Revi, amused at the idea.

"Romulans do not engage in occasional sex. We still retain the tradition of Pon Farr."

"Oh, like the Vulcans? I didn't know how much you kept of Vulcan ways."

"It is logical to retain what is good. It enables us to control our population in a sensible way. You humans breed like insects and have to keep spreading." She had been about to say, "like a plague," but thought this might be impolitic, and would only tend to hasten their execution. "That is

why we have cut off communication. We will not be overrun."

"You don't spread out?" said Mary Anne. "What if you find new territory?"

"If we were to discover a new and attractive territory we might send out a party to live there. They would then breed up to a suitable population, and stop at it."

"Is that how Romulus and Remil were begun?"

"The Romulan people evolved, and left," said Revi with a toss of her head. "We had found a new world, so we began it." The thought filtered through her mind that even the names of their two worlds had been foisted on them by the humans. The unpronounceable original Romulan names had been supplanted by their Federation nicknames. Another impurity allowed to live on!

"How are your relations with the Vulcans now?" asked Mary Anne curiously.

"How are your relations with the cave-dwellers from whom you descend?" asked Revi in return. While Mary Anne hoped this was not a reply typical of all Romulans, she read into it a possibility that they might be in paleolithic times.

"How do you know so much about human history?" she asked.

"Sela has enlightened us of some of your history while we traveled," said Revi. "It is well to know.." She was about to say "..your enemy," but decided this might also be somewhat tactless, so she finished the sentence smoothly, "..as much about the universe as one can. Perhaps it would

be of interest to see your game. No knowledge is wasted." They entered the holodeck, and Mary Anne initiated her program. A team of humans and a team of Romulans appeared, and Mary Anne explained the rules. They played for a few minutes, and the Romulans were ahead.

"There seems to be no intellectual side to this game," said Revi. "It involves simply physical skill."

"It's a very good way to keep fit," said Mary Anne defensively.

"Romulans have developed a set of aerobic exercises which are practised at a set time. It has been scientifically designed for maximum effect over centuries. All Romulans are therefore at maximum fitness."

"But what do you do for fun?" Mary Anne asked, before thinking, What a dumb question.

"Our 'fun' is the attainment of self-perfection," said Revi.

"That is, of course, the quest for it. This is frivolity, which we.." She thought "despise" is probably also tactless.

"..refrain from."

"And you never form temporary sexual relationships?" asked Mary Anne. "I don't myself, but it seems to be a general human trait."

"Sexual relationships are an indulgence of emotion," replied Revi. "We allow only the Pon Farr, for the purpose of maintaining our race. Your race's predilection for occasional lapses of emotional restraint must make service on a starship difficult? It must reduce discipline."

"We have had to deal with that problem," agreed Mary Anne. "There are rules."

"We have no such spontaneous pairings," said Revi.

"Well, the great Mills and Boon empire will never spread to Romulus," said Mary Anne, and had to explain the reference. Revi wondered how it was possible that a race so undisciplined in emotion had ever left the surface of the planet.

Mary Anne lent her a Romance novel, which she read quickly, anxious to widen her knowledge of the enemy. Mary Anne had to explain to her the concept of 'fiction', as Revi was totally baffled by the idea at first. She found it interesting, and indicating moral degeneracy in the race. It did not occur to her that even 'fiction' might bear no relation to reality.

Riker normally quite enjoyed his game of golf, but was somewhat intimidated by the fact that Data, Sela and Selar could all thrash him comprehensively. He and Deanna came down to the holodeck as Mary Anne and Malcolm were leaving.

Malcolm was sweating deeply, while Mary Anne was still bouncing around on the balls of her feet, barely perspiring. They had each been playing with teams of greats from the recent past, but Malcolm had cheerfully been out of his depth. The game was keyed to the real players, so that the ability of each player's team was related to his or her ability, which meant that the men had been comprehensively trounced by the women.

"Hi, Mary Anne and Malcolm," said Deanna. "We're just going to have a game of golf. Care to join us?"

"Can't, sorry," said Malcolm, "I'm just back on duty."

"I'd love to," said Mary Anne. "I'll just get changed."

"Well, isn't that nice," thought Deanna in amusement. "Our little love triangle all together!"

A few minutes later, the three stood on the first tee. Mary Anne, noted Deanna, had not only showered, but had quickly had her hair done, wore a subtle perfume, and was wearing a slightly more provocative dress than was the norm for the game. A new course had been summoned up, with Beverley's original program, and they swung clubs to warm up, which Mary Anne hardly needed.

"Thank god I'm not playing with those machines," Riker thought.

He lined up, and hit an ordinary shot about ninety metres. It landed in a sand trap. He groaned. Sand traps were not his speciality. Deanna lined up and hit about a hundred and thirty metres. It landed in the middle of the fairway. Mary Anne lined up.

"Oh, look, I'm in a bunker too," she said. Riker scowled. Her bunker was about two hundred and thirty metres away and she hit her shot out of the bunker about another hundred metres, while he took three shots to get out.

Eighteen holes later they departed, Riker barely civil.

"Well, a rake is one thing," thought Mary Anne, as she flung her clothes down on her bed. "A male chauvinist pig is another! But then, that's what they are like in the books! But I couldn't just play badly and lose!"

Chapter 6.

After the inspection of the Romulan freighter, Geordi had reported to Will Riker that there was nothing suspicious to be seen on it, and that it seemed to be almost underequipped. He returned to work, and spent most of the next two days on maintenance and discovery. The ship was new to him, and he and French found its weaponry and guidance systems new and interesting.

They tended to eat together, although the whole crew did get together for the evening meals, but the conversations tended to be reminiscences and gossip. Even Sela ate in the same room, with Lieutenant Selar, but these two often remained silent, or discussed erudite topics. Sela found herself reluctantly taking an interest in the behaviour of the humans, especially in their easy mixing with the non-humans. They were making an effort to create a comfortable atmosphere for Glock, Mendon and Arrg. None of this fitted her preconception of the human race. Although her demeanour showed nothing, she was becoming uneasy.

Geordi was working with Malcolm on the second day, when the communicator came alive.

"Geordi," called Riker eventually, "do you and your crew want to watch the comet hitting Jupiter? It's happening in about ten minutes."

"Coming, Commander," he said, and they quickly tidied up before moving through to the bridge, with its fairly large viewscreen.

"What's this?" asked Geordi, as he came to the bridge.

"The comet is about to hit," said Mary Anne. "Data is recording it all."

It was just one of those things. In the two intervening days nobody had happened to tell the two engineers about Dovor's supposed plan. Geordi still assumed it was a comet that they had come across, and were simply going to observe.

"The impact will be in a few minutes," said Data. "I will record it on every frequency. It's not a very rare event, but still interesting."

Most of the ship's contingent had gathered on the bridge. Sela was thoughtful.

"Dovor and the others might like to see this," she said.

Riker considered for a moment. He considered the Romulans terrorists, but they had shown no aggression, and there was the outside possibility that they were just scientists. Renegade scientists, unlawfully and recklessly traveling into the past, but perhaps nothing else. Besides, it was best to bring them out occasionally.

"Can't do any harm, I guess," said Riker. "OK. Would you get them, Mister Worf?"

Sela walked down with Worf. He never took his eyes off her, expecting some move. When they approached the room which held Dovor and Pachek they were sitting calmly in meditation. Revi was in a different room, in a segregation which would have meant nothing to the Romulans, but did give them some more space each.

"The comet is going to be destroyed," Sela said calmly to

Dovor. "All your plans come to naught."

"How sad," he said calmly.

"You can go up and see it if you like," she added. "Mister Worf has come to escort you."

The three Romulans were gathered and accompanied Worf, with a muted excitement.

"Are you going to.. use your radio?" asked Sela quietly.

"Not unless necessary," he replied in a similar tone. "We'll see."

"By the way," she added, "I don't realize how far back we've come. I thought it was just a few hundred years."

They lined up. Deanna watched them curiously. They had come a long way, and taken great risk to try to use this comet, but seemed unconcerned about its destruction. Did they have some backup plan? She bit her lip.

The three Romulans were in strong command of their emotions, but some feeling of elation broke through as the comet hit. Sela, on the other hand, seemed extremely wrought with emotions all in conflict. For a moment there was a torrent of glee, self-hate, despair and a longing for death. Deanna was momentarily overwhelmed but it was quickly gone as Sela regained her total control. Deanna felt she should report all this to Riker, but did not know what to report!

They were close to Jupiter, so that it filled their screen. Their shields were on, to deflect the radiation which would have killed them. The comet could be seen to curve in as the strong gravitation took it. It struck the upper atmosphere like a drop of milk falling into a jug, and the

wave which radiated from it seemed to flow in extreme slow motion, and stop. They knew the wave was actually thousands of kilometers across, but it looked small. It was still collapsing back, but would take weeks or months to dissipate, affected now only by gravity.

All of them watched in wonder, even the Romulans. Sela slowly exhaled.

"Well," she said, almost puzzled, "we're still all here."

"So we are," said Dovor, after a moment. He had immediately recovered his sang-froid. He turned to Riker then Data. "It would be interesting to have a quick peep at earth before you return? We do have time, Mister Data?"

"Yes," he answered. "The wormhole still appears quite stable. We may have some weeks left still."

"We did, after all," said Dovor, "come here on a scientific expedition. Anything we.."

"Afraid not, Dovor," interrupted Riker. He was slightly annoyed that Dovor, a prisoner, and someone who had supposedly hoped to wipe out the human race, was trying to take over his bridge. "You have no rights on this ship. You have attempted the most heinous crime in history, and will face charges when we return. You will be confined to a cell until then!"

"Sela accuses me for some unfathomable reason," said Dovor blandly. "I repeat, I would have harmed no one."

"A jury will decide that," growled Riker. "In the meantime, back to your confinement."

"An interesting question about jurisdiction," observed Dovor cheerfully, "but we shall see."

"All the same, it would be interesting to look at earth," said Beverley. "Can't we land in an isolated spot?"

"No," said Riker. "We can't afford to meet any primitive people. It might still change history somehow."

"Meet people?" said Dovor, with mock surprise. "Haven't you worked out yet how far back we are in time?"

"No, we haven't had time," replied Riker, an uneasy feeling returning to his stomach.

"We are back about sixty five million years," smiled Dovor. "I meant what I said about not harming any humans. Humans will not appear on earth for millions of years yet!"

"But you told me.." interrupted Sela.

"Ah, I needed the support of someone important. I wanted to come back and do my little experiments, and your party of earth-haters seemed ready to spread around money and assistance."

Pachek and Revi looked mildly puzzled, but held their peace.

"What did you mean, before *we* went back?" asked Deanna. "Aren't you going back with us?"

"We are captured prisoners of war," said Dovor. "I expect you will execute us."

"Of course we won't," exclaimed Beverley. "We wouldn't treat you like guests then turn around and kill you!"

"We are impressed by the honor you give us by allowing us so much freedom," said Dovor, "but we are enemies. There is no Federation here to protect us. We would expect to be executed."

"Surely you didn't expect that, Sela?" Beverley addressed her with surprise.

"But I remain a sworn enemy of your whole race," she said. "I at least would expect to already have been tortured and killed for that."

"Is that why you said, 'We're still all here?'" asked Geordi.

"You have excellent hearing, Geordi," she said.

"How do you know my name?" he asked.

"She seems to think you've met before," said Riker.

"I haven't had a lot to do with the Romulans," said Geordi thoughtfully, giving Sela a hard look. She smiled back at him blandly.

Riker interrupted impatiently.

"If this is true, that humanity won't even appear for millions of years, then we've wasted a lot of time."

"Surely not," said Data. "The chance to gather astronomical data from a time period so long ago is invaluable. We do have some time left still. I believe it is worth the risk."

Riker thought for a minute.

"All right, Data. We'll take a shuttle to earth orbit. You and Geordi can take readings, and those who wish can beam down with us to the surface. It looks like your intentions may not have been as bad as I thought, Dovor," he added, "but Mister Worf will be keeping a weather eye on the lot of you."

"We are honored to be so trusted," Dovor replied smoothly. Worf scowled unseen by them. He did not trust them at all, but they were unarmed, and he had confidence in his own

ability to keep an eye on them at all times, even without the assistance of the four ensigns.

From far out in space Data, Malcolm and Geordi scanned the surface of not only earth, but the other planets nearby. Mars had more atmosphere than in later millenia, but no observable higher life forms. Venus was as inhospitable as always.

Earth, however, was full of life, but with mainly amphibious animals. The temperature was higher, and dinosaurs ruled. Data brought up on the main viewer a picture of the blue planet.

"It's nothing like earth!" gasped Malcolm. The color was right, but the configuration was nothing like what he expected.

"The continents move around the surface at a slow rate," said Data. "But over sixty five million years a few centimetres a year changes from an imperceptible amount to a long way."

"That's right," agreed Malcolm, still a bit shaken. "I remember from school that Australia moves north about ten centimeters a year."

"A little more, I think, in this time," said Data. "But sixty five million times ten centimeters would amount to six thousand five hundred kilometers. At this time most of the continents you are familiar with are still grouped together. In the future they will spread around the globe."

"I can't even recognize which bit is Australia," breathed Malcolm.

"It is this area here," indicated Data on the screen.

Malcolm looked with interest at the area. Australia seemed only vaguely the right shape. "It's still almost attached to Antarctica," he said in surprise.

"The reason is that the sea level is somewhat low at this time, observed Data. "The land you see will be underneath the ocean in our own times."

"But quite a lot of Australia seems to be under water," said Malcolm in puzzlement. "That would be the area I came from. It doesn't look like I'm going to stand on old Swan Hill. It isn't there! The sea is over it. And Victoria is all black?"

"The dark color is caused by volcanic activity," said Data. "That area going up the east coast is quite active. It stands out somewhat, in fact. The whole land mass of the planet is remarkably flat. Presumably the reason why some parts of the shore are under the sea is that the land has sunk or risen in various places. The water inland is lakes."

"Obviously the movement of the earth's plates has not got much under way," said Beverley. "I wonder if the lack of mountains means that there is not much bad weather?"

"Possibly not a lot of rain," said Data. "What is especially interesting is this area."

He indicated a fairly round continent, isolated from the others.

"This area has no modern counterpart. I conjecture from the very high mountains it contains that it is an area where one plate is being subducted beneath another. By our own time it will have completely disappeared. It contrasts with the rest of the planet."

"I would really like to set foot on Australia," said Malcolm. "My own home town is under water, but any part would do. A part that's not under water in our day!"

"I've never actually been on earth," said Mary Anne. "I've always wanted to visit it, but I didn't expect it would be like this!"

"Well, if we are going, who wants to be a part of the expedition?" asked Riker.

Ensign Mendon spoke for one of the few times on the trip.

"I will not go," he said. "The uncontrolled atmosphere of the surface would only make it more difficult for me to breathe. I shall stay and assist on the ship." Ensign Arrg decided to go. He really must begin to socialize, he decided.

Geordi decided to stay aboard with Data, which surprised Will. "I'll study all your photography," he said. "I don't really like getting my feet wet."

"Is it necessary that you should get wet feet?" asked Revi.

"Can you not wear a force field?"

"It's an expression," answered Geordi. "I just like this world better than that world. I can look at all your recordings later, and I really would like to have a good look at this ship without everyone in my way. And it's a bit hotter than I like."

"We would be interested in a look at a primitive world," said Pachek, "if we may."

"I suggest that you wear something a bit lighter, Dovor," said Beverley. "It will be quite hot down there. "

"These are my clothes," he said. "This is how I dress. In

fact, flowing robes are quite cool. We come from a hot planet. If you can bear the heat it will be no trouble to us." In the end, quite a crowd traveled in the shuttle. Worf came because he was determined to keep an eye on the Romulans, though there was no obvious harm they could do. He actually thought it a good thing to have them in a group, and off the ship. With luck they might revolt and be shot. Everyone was issued a communication badge who did not have one, and Riker gave instructions.

"We could land in the shuttle," he said, "but it will cause a lot of damage as it lands, so I think we'll park in orbit and beam down. That should do no harm at all.

"I'm setting the transporter to beam us back automatically in six hours. That should give us time to see what it's like. Try to stay together, but if we do get separated you'll be beamed up with the rest. I can override and bring us all back up quickly if necessary. Don't do any damage you can help. Leave only footprints, as they say, and not even those if possible."

He added that they would visit a couple of places in Australia for Malcolm, and then he intended to have a look at the isolated continent on the far side.

Worf and the humans were all armed, and determined to keep an eye on the Romulans, although there seemed no immediate danger.

"Data identified Australia for me," said Malcolm to Riker quietly. "Can we land in that area there?"

"It's as good as most places, I guess," said Riker. "We'll have a look around, but be careful, then I thought we might

have a look at that continent that won't exist in our time. We shouldn't be able to do much harm there!"

"It's an aborigine thing," said Malcolm. "It's been a part of our culture for thousands of years that we and the land are one. It would be an unbelievably moving moment for me to stand on the land of my ancestors before they were even there!"

"You wouldn't have much experience of that sort of thing, would you?" asked Riker with interest. "You're a city boy, not a country boy."

"It's a sort of tradition with my people," shrugged Malcolm with a smile. "Tribes have elected to live in the deserts in the old ways. A lot of us go and live with them for a few years when we are just kids. Good for the soul. There are plenty of reservations, but only where the cities and towns haven't grown - in other words, the desert! A couple of centuries ago, when they had exhausted most of the minerals and oil, all of Australia except the east coast was declared a national park. It's been our major source of income ever since, with tourists from all over the galaxy."

"I've been there," agreed Beverley. "It will be interesting to compare."

"OK," agreed Riker. "Let's have a look. Keep an eye on the guests all the same."

Worf nodded. He did not need to be told.

Malcolm located Australia, or what would become Australia, and Riker set the transporters. The vessel was capable of landing, but transporting seemed to offer less likelihood of any unfortunate contamination. The

transporters could be set to remove any bacterial or insect intruders.

"I came from Victoria," he said. "That's the bit in the south-east corner. But what is not under water seems to be all active volcanoes. We'd probably better go for somewhere safer. I thought over there?"

The area he had chosen seemed to be adjacent to a variety of terrains, so they could visit them all with a bit of walking. This seemed to the Romulans an inefficient mode of travel, but Riker pointed out again that they must do minimal damage.

They materialized in forest country. To the south was a tongue of a large lake, west was a small range of mountains, more hills really. East were extensive grasslands.

"In our time this area is desert!" Malcolm told them.

"There's a big area of inland sea just north of here. I gather when it dries up the rain goes with it. History indicates that the early settlers - aboriginal, I mean - might have wreaked havoc with the ecology before they came to their understanding with the land. Whatever, it's very different!" The forest was not thick, and they moved through it easily. Malcolm was interested to see that the trees were fairly familiar, though not of as wide a variety as in sixty five million years' time.

Mary Anne was alert but daydreaming. She looked at the tree roots lying across their path. If I managed to catch my foot in one, she thought, and fell, and cried helplessly, 'Oh, I've twisted my ankle,' would the Commander sweep me up

in his arms and say, 'I have you, my proud beauty'? Unfortunately Doctor Crusher was present and would quickly announce that there was nothing wrong with her. What if she really twisted her ankle. Just a little bit? While her imagination fluttered around these ideas, her brain took in all the beauty and science around her, and she recorded thoroughly.

Glock had every intention of doing the right thing, all the time, but there was the problem of knowing what was the right thing. He had learned a lot of human customs, but it's the ones you don't know that trip you up.

On the home planet it was just as wrong as anywhere to steal. But taking temporary custody of someone else's possession in order to evaluate it was the normal thing. It would only be stealing if you did not give it back, or denied having it when accused. How else could one trade effectively?

Ferengi were odd-looking to human eyes, and lacked some human virtues, but in matters relating to commerce they had powers far beyond the human. Any young Ferengi could make the best pickpocket on earth seem all thumbs. And they had an innate sense for people with secret possessions.

Ensign Gr'h Arrg had a secret possession. It was something he kept checking in his big loose pocket. Not even a challenge.

Revi and Pachek were showing a surprising interest in all Malcolm had to say. He could not help but be flattered to be recognised as the resident expert by a pair of Romulans.

"Some of these trees are pretty much the same," he said. "They seem to be mainly pine trees, and some eucalypts. Those look like hoop pines, and those are a bit like celery-top pines."

"Is that important to know?" asked Pachek politely.

"Well, eucalyptus trees, or gum trees, depend on fire a lot," answered Malcolm. "If they are here, there are probably a lot of fires. They burn like torches, but so quickly they survive, and other vegetation is burned away. It's their survival thing."

Pachek did not ask where the fires would come from. As a Romulan he was well aware of the effects of lightning, which occurred widely on his volcanic homeland.

"These herbs are good for flavoring," said Malcolm, indicating some small plants.

"What is flavoring?" asked Revi curiously.

"Well, if you're eating something that has a rather bland taste, you can make it better," said Malcolm in surprise.

"You mean that you alter the taste of food for no practical reason?" said Pachek. "How odd."

Romulans ate food as nourishment. The idea of eating food as pleasure was new to them. They had not traveled at all. Romulans who had interacted with other races were familiar with the idea, and usually made polite noises to indicate that they did not find the idea repellent.

"Those are cycads," observed Mary Anne as they passed a group of new trees.

"You're a tree expert?" asked Malcolm curiously.

"I'm a textbook expert," she said. "I can tell you a lot about

them, but you know more than I do."

Revi and Pachek immediately added her to their circle of interest, but drifted back to Malcolm when they realized that she did not know too much about the nitty-gritty of survival in the wild.

Small animals fled at the sight of them, but when they came across larger ones they showed no fear at all. Most of these were small dinosaurs.

"They've never seen man," said Beverley. "We're not big enough to be a predator, so they aren't worried about us."

"Should we be worried about them?" asked Deanna.

"That's a bigger question!"

"I've no idea what they are, either," said Malcolm. "They must be reptiles, but I don't know much about them. One thing I do know about reptiles. They'll eat anything they can fit in their mouths!"

"Fortunately, there do not seem to be any around large enough to swallow us," said Pachek.

"These kind won't," agreed Malcolm, never averse to a tall tale, "but watch out for big snakes. They have big mouths that can unhinge, and then they sort of wrap themselves around you. They generally squash you to death first, though."

The visitors were duly impressed by this. Like many others they took a lot of notice of the harmless flies that circled their heads, but had to be warned about the savage ants which they were ignoring.

"What a great thing it would be if we could take back a few of these dinosaurs for the present day national park," said

Malcolm.

"Sorry," said Riker. "It might upset the balance. Probably wouldn't, but could."

"So this world is nothing like the one you know?" asked Revi.

"No, but there's a magic just being here. The plants aren't all that different, though," he added. "I could live on the plants."

"Could you?" asked Revi with interest. "Tell us about them."

"Well, see these bright red berries? That's a sign they're poisonous. These ones are OK. And these plants have edible roots. You have to boil them in water for a while." They had come out into less sheltered territory now.

"How long should you boil them?" asked Pachek.

Malcolm talked on, flattered by their interest, and a chance to air his knowledge on one of his specialities.

"Something I do know in the animal world," he said. "See these trees? In the bark is a thing called a witchetty grub. See here? You can eat them raw, or cook them."

Malcolm and the two Romulans tried them.

"I hope they weren't going to be the butterfly that changes the future!" laughed Riker. "I read that story myself once." The Romulans looked puzzled, and Riker summarized the story.

"Well, we'll all be startled if we go back and find history changed," observed Sela drily, glancing at Dovor. He blandly returned her gaze. Deanna frowned.

"There aren't as many animals as I'd imagined," said Riker.

"The old history books always had the place covered in dinosaurs."

"You can only have so many large animals in one area," said Malcolm. "In our day there are very few because the days are so hot. Most of them are nocturnal. Maybe it's something like that."

Suddenly Mary Anne's foot slipped, and she fell on her bottom. She let out a shriek as something speared her.

"Hey!" said Malcolm suddenly, "That's an echidna! So they existed way back here!"

The animal appeared to be a ball of spikes, which was quickly burrowing into a patch of soft earth. It disappeared as they watched.

Neither Riker nor any of the males ran to help her up. She presumed from Malcolm's sang-froid that the spikes did not contain deadly poison. After she had struggled back to her feet, rubbing her posterior, Beverley took her aside to apply some medication in privacy.

"There are probably platypuses and some other marsupials as well!" said Malcolm excitedly. "I feel at home after all! I could survive here alone."

"You could live on berries?" asked Pachek.

"These animals are all edible," said Malcolm. "You just make a fire and cook them."

"So your ancestors had fire-making machines?"

He laughed, and said, "I'll show you." He found two dry sticks, and showed the others how to make fire by rubbing them together over dry tinder. Revi and Pachek watched with interest.

Malcolm enjoyed himself. He had a great affinity for the land, and soaked in the smells of the eucalypts and pines. There were spiky grasses which he had learned to avoid, and most bushes had prickles, but he loved the land.

Mary Anne watched him with a smile. He was a remarkably transparent sort of man. Just the sort of man Chr' had told her Engineering was full of. She herself was seeing earth for the first time, so she was not as familiar with it, and could not so easily recognise how it would change. She had experienced parts of earth in holoprograms and books, but they were only samples, usually unrepresentative of the whole.

Sela found herself curiously removed from it. She had wondered whether her suppressed human nature would spring out with some sort of homesickness, and if so would she recognise it as that. But there was nothing but an aesthetic appreciation of its beauty. Of course, her mother had not been born here either, and for all she knew none of her human ancestors for generations. She was too young to have learned much from Tasha by the time she had abandoned her and been killed trying to flee.

Am I being irrational in blaming her for leaving me? It was the first time the thought had obtruded, and she considered it with surprise. She continued to observe.

After a while they had found only one other mammal, a small mouse skulking in the grass. They were surprised to see Ensign Arrg fling himself back in terror at the sight of small mammals, but he was beginning to adjust. He took no notice of animals like tyrannosaurus, and they had to

alert him that this also was inappropriate.

"Oh, thank you, thank you!" he snarled.

"There are probably platypuses in the lake," said Malcolm, "but it would take a while to spot them. You have to sit around quietly for a while."

"Well, I won't be doing that till we get back to the sick bay," thought Mary Anne as she limped along.

They were now in grasslands, and could hear something large approaching. A few minutes later they had a glimpse of the famous Tyrannosaurus Rex! The humans and Worf anxiously fingered their phasers, but it ignored them and moved on through the grass. Beverley eagerly recorded everything.

She was interested to note that the grasslands were covered in flowers, but their variety was not spectacular. They had evolved, and spread rapidly, but had not attained the diversity of spectacular forms and colors that they would develop over the next millions of years. Mary Anne forgot about her injury as she became absorbed in the flowers, one of her special interests.

Out in the grasslands they found themselves waving away the flies still. Their suits had a built-in repellent field to prevent insects landing on them, as insect bites from an unknown planet could be dangerous, but the flies just buzzed around, and they found themselves waving continuously.

Once or twice they found themselves startling a flock of large flightless birds.

"Those look like emus!" exclaimed Malcolm. "Not exactly,

but who would have thought they were this old!"

"Some look like ostriches," said Beverley Crusher. "Others I haven't seen before - naturally."

"Are these birds good to eat?" asked Revi. "Would they need to be cooked?"

"I wouldn't like to try one raw," laughed Malcolm, "but, yes. Most birds taste all right, and are quite nourishing. My ancestors used to catch the emus by behaving oddly, and the birds would come over for a look. Obviously these ones have more predators. They are quite shy."

The weather was hot and steamy. In spite of Beverley's speculation about the weather, it did suddenly rain twice, and each time suddenly clear up.

"Hasn't changed in sixty million years," commented Malcolm.

"It's just like your golf game," remarked Sela. Malcolm was puzzled, but the others just smiled.

The only other event Beverley recorded was that a flock of birds suddenly flew up, and a pair of pterodactyls flew over, and swooped among them.

"It never occurred to me that birds and pterodactyls existed at the same time!" said Beverley. "But I suppose they had to evolve to exist when the pterodactyls died out!"

Deanna was puzzled when Sela and Dovor suddenly tensed up, and then relaxed again. What had been said?

A little later they were suddenly transported back to the shuttle.

"You have to keep your eye on the time," remarked Beverley. "It might be embarrassing to be transported back

at the wrong moment, when you were answering the call of nature or something!"

The Romulans did not know the term, but inferred its meaning correctly.

They had another brief look at a sandy desert area, but found thirty minutes enough, except for Malcolm and Mary Anne.

"It's beautiful," said Mary Anne. "I suppose you intend to retire to somewhere like this eventually."

"No!" he laughed. "I think it's great to rough it out in a place like this for a holiday, but I'm a city boy. If I ever have to retire I'll find a smallish town."

"Tch, what a blow to your image!" she smiled.

"I could live out here now," he said, "but I don't know about when I'm ninety."

The two of them trailed around for a while, dragging feet through the sand, feeling companionable. They found themselves talking freely. They could have stayed longer, but obviously the others had run out of interest.

"I'd like a look at the isolated continent," said Riker, when they were back again. "We'll give ourselves the six hours time again, after a bite to eat and a nap. If anyone is getting tired, call out and we'll come back. Twelve hours exploration might be a long time."

They beamed down onto the new location, and Revi and Pachek took note of the time carefully.

Worf and the humans remained armed, and still determined to keep an eye on the Romulans, although there seemed no immediate danger.

"Rather conveniently, Lieutenant Selar has not accompanied us," remarked Revi, "so there is nobody but us within earshot who speaks Romulan."

"Have you some plan?" asked Sela. "I had no other intention in coming here than curiosity. Our plan has either worked or has not."

"Pachek and I had thought to flee and hide. In spite of what they say, the humans will execute us. If we have succeeded, our world would not even know us. If not, we can still destroy the humans. We can stay here and breed. Far from being a human planet, this will be another outpost of Romulans."

"You would be found easily and returned," observed Sela. "The instruments on the starship could easily locate two Romulans by their DNA signatures."

"Not if there were some reason why the starship should quickly return to our time. Their instruments are much inferior to those of a starship in this case. You could drop a hint, and they would flee back. Until then we could find some underground hideaway."

The country in which the group had materialized was fairly open, as this seemed safest, and indeed most of the planet seemed to be open plains and swamps. This was a surprise to the humans, who had had some intuitive feeling that the primitive world would all be thick jungle. The unknown continent was somewhat distinctive in having one of the few high mountain ranges on earth..

Riker decided that this unknown continent would provide the best place for inspection. The fact that over the next

few millions of years it would be swallowed up made it less likely that anything they might do would have an effect on posterity. As it happened to be isolated, its impact on history was likely to be nil.

Beverley and he had their cameras, and they began recording a variety of experiences. They had clothing which protected them from the snakes and vertebrates which snapped and hissed at them, though most life forms fled them. There seemed to be no birds here, not even pterodactyls.

Eventually, however, they came across a group of dinosaurs. They watched from the shelter of some trees, breathless, and Beverley and Riker recorded as much as they could.

A small dinosaur of a type they did not recognize (which was not surprising as they were limited to vague ideas of Tyrannosaurus and Brontosaurus) was incubating eggs, when it was attacked and killed and eaten. They photographed the attack in silence. In fact they had learned something of great scientific interest, though they did not realize it, that some dinosaurs incubated young.

The recordings were quite spectacular. There were cliffs and caves in the background which added to the spectacle. Beverley and Malcolm both looked at the clutch of eggs. Beverley had the soul of a scientist, and Malcolm thought of the giant national park that Australia would become.

"Could we?" she pleaded with Will. "They're only going to spoil or be eaten here."

"Well, this whole continent is going to vanish," said Will,

reluctantly. "OK."

Beverley reverently gathered up the clutch. "I hope we have both sexes," she said.

Glock surreptitiously examined the phial and found it contained perfume. It seemed to be the same as that worn by Ensign Smith. It was pleasant, and he filed the aroma in his brain for later investigation. His mind was already putting a market value on it. Nothing out of the ordinary, though not unpleasant.

In the meantime Ensign Arrg was becoming agitated. This was indistinguishable to his companions, but he had frantically searched his pockets. Oh, oh! thought Glock. Perhaps earth customs are different!

"Stay with the group, Ensign!" called Riker, as Arrg began to keep his distance. Arrg was too inherently meek and subordinate to refuse, and he began to move with them again, albeit drifting off to one side.

Dovor had noticed Arrg's secrecy, and also detected Glock's temporary loan. He was wondering about this when he began to feel some apprehension. Were the others about to attack him? He dismissed the feeling as illogical. So did the other Romulans and Selar, who were all experiencing similar fears. They found the experience intriguing.

Worf began to feel a curious idea forming. If he had recognized it, it too was fear. It translated into a haunting thought that he was about to lose his honor. He became uncharacteristically introspective, and lost his

concentration.

The humans and Glock, however, simply became terrified, paralysed with fear - except Mary Anne. They had no idea what they were afraid of, but dread overcame them.

Deanna was especially incapacitated, because she absorbed everyone else's fear as well as her own.

Mary Anne became aware that the others were behaving strangely, as they swung about wide-eyed, but had no idea what was going on. Her 'perfume' was protecting her, though she did not know it.

A raptor, which had been traveling in parallel, suddenly became aware that most of the little herd of unfamiliar animals it had been stalking were suddenly spooked and afraid. It swung into action and charged through the undergrowth at them.

Dovor first registered the onrushing beast, but it was not attacking him, so he paused to see how the drama would develop. Selar was at the tail of the group, and somewhat out of sight, or she could have reacted. She heard the attack, and swung around to see, but assumed that Riker or one of the others closer by would react to whatever it was. Riker, however, was in a state of panic. He looked around at the large lizard flying across the grass at him, and froze. As it launched itself through the air a figure met it in mid-flight. Mary Anne Smith hit it hip and shoulder, and as it twisted in the air hit it with a blow near the skull. She could not fire her phaser because she would hit others, so she relied on her martial arts training. When the animal was isolated she could try to stun it. A stun setting for

humans might not slow a raptor.

This might not have been enough to defeat it, except that it, too, became infected with the wave of terror, and tried to squirm away. The others forced themselves to overcome their terror, and closed in on the animal, wrestling it down. Worf in particular led the attack. The animal managed to work free and fled.

In the panic Dovor relieved Mary Anne and Beverley Crusher of their phasers. He quickly pushed them into the back of his belt. If their loss was noticed quickly he would pull them out and go down fighting. If not, he would bide his time.

Ensign Arrg was howling. "It's my fault!" he cried. "It's my fault!"

Riker fought to control his shaking and fear. "What do you mean?" he managed to say. Mary Anne lay on the ground still.

Arrg backed away. "I need my phial," he said. "I give off pheromones. That's why you are all terrified. I need my anti-pheromone to neutralise it! It's gone!"

"Do you know where you last had it?" asked Pachek quickly. "We can look for it."

"I had it when we were over by that rock," said Arrg dolefully. He pointed to a large formation about a kilometer away.

"Well, we've been over there, and there, and there," said Pachek. "Revi and I will look over there," he indicated an area in the direction of the cliffs. "Someone look in the other two areas, and see if we can find it. We only have

about six minutes."

"I'll look down this path," said Glock, indicating a path they had made through the grass. "I believe I may have heard something drop." Malcolm and Arrg also spread out. "I've got it!" called out Glock, after a few moments. "A Ferengi can find anything!" Especially if it's in his pocket, he thought. Arrg thankfully sprayed a little around his neck, and the breeze took away the tainted air.

In the meantime, Riker struggled to regain his composure. He noticed Mary Anne still sitting on the ground.

"What's the trouble, Ensign?" he asked.

"Oh, I think I twisted my ankle," she said. Commander Riker bent over and picked her up.

"I can't leave you here after you saved my life," he smiled. She was about to reply with something coquettish when they were suddenly beamed up. There were eight people, and two extra communicators.

"Hell!" exclaimed Riker, "Where are they? They've taken off their badges. We'll have to search for them."

"My phaser is missing!" gasped Mary Anne as Riker put her down gingerly.

"And mine!" said Beverley. "I noticed it was gone while we were still down there. I assumed I lost it in the fight, but I didn't have time to go look!"

"Those two must have stolen them and vanished!" exclaimed Deanna. Dovor was thankful that someone had made the suggestion, as it might have been more suspicious coming from him. He had the two phasers in the back of his clothing. Fortunately Glock was still too

disoriented by the fear pheromones to notice.

Also fortunately for him, they all raced back to the bridge. He followed, and quietly secreted them away during the excitement. Worf's attention was with the others, on the instruments.

The shuttle's equipment, however, was insufficient to trace them. After a brief try, they returned to the *Pinball Wizard*. "I am unable to trace them," said Data. "Since they seem to have discarded their communicators it must be presumed they intended to stay, so they could be presumed to be hiding, or they could have become prey to some predator. It seems strange that I cannot trace the phasers. They must be hidden under dense rocks."

"We can go back and find them," said Riker. "I don't like to leave them there. They could muck up history somehow."

"Why did they run off?" asked Geordi in puzzlement.

"Because they were afraid we'd punish them for trying to crash that comet on the earth," said Riker.

"Huh?" said Geordi. "They didn't do anything. None of their equipment had been used."

"What do you mean?" asked Riker in confusion.

"They didn't do anything with that ship", repeated Geordi.

"None of their equipment had been used. It had spider webs on it!"

"But the comet was about to hit earth," said Riker stupidly.

"I think it may be time to cut to the chase," said Sela, "as the earth expression has it. They decided to die there rather than be executed."

"But why?" asked Deanna in bewilderment. "They knew

we would not hurt them."

"That was when you thought we had failed. Maybe we have. We will never know until we return through the wormhole. Mr Data, from your knowledge of earth history, what caused the dinosaurs to suddenly die out after many millions of years of existence?"

Data consulted his interior database.

"The current belief, for many years now, is that they were destroyed by a large comet striking the earth. Conditions became impossible for them to survive. Only the smallest of creatures did survive."

"Including some small creatures we call mammals," said Sela with a forced relish, "some of which evolved into humans."

Rikers lips became dry.

"What do you mean?" he whispered.

"We won't know for sure until we go back, but I suspect that there are no humans in the future," said Sela.

"Mister Data, set a course through the wormhole!" cried Commander Riker hoarsely. "Lieutenant Worf, confine those two!"

Dovor and Sela sat down with Worf covering them with a phaser. Riker forgot them as he anxiously watched the screen for the approaching wormhole to be displayed. Sela thought, *The die has been cast. It was an evil thing to do, but it is done. Our hand must be played out.*

Dovor thought, *Still they do not kill us! What a poorly organized race. But it will be interesting to see that we have succeeded. One can die happily if one has achieved*

something great.

Worf, on the other hand, had not forgotten them. Nor was he averse to punishing them. He waited for them to try something.

Chapter 7.

Revi and Pachek had been waiting for an opportunity to discard their communication badges. They had been glancing at their watches from time to time, intending to move away and lose the badges before the automated beaming back, as close to the time as possible, in case Worf noticed what they were doing.

Their attention to the time was noticed by Dovor. He could detect also their unusually high tension, imperceptible to the others. He was with Sela, and he glanced around to reassure himself that Selar was not within hearing range, then whispered in Romulan, "What is the matter with those two?"

Sela did not move her head to look at him as she answered, "They have decided to stay here. They will either die, or develop another line of Romulans. If we have not succeeded in what we have done, they may succeed otherwise."

"What admirable initiative!" he said. "I doubt they will succeed, but we must offer what help we can."

He and Sela began to consult their watches also. It was about five minutes before their planned departure when the animal attacked. Dovor watched as Mary Anne flung herself at the raptor, and the others closed in, fighting off fear.

He looked around at his companions, and snapped, "All of us! Rush in and help. Crowd!"

They glanced questioningly, but obeyed without hesitation.

Dovor himself threw himself into the melee, and stole the phasers. Lieutenant Selar was busy really fighting the animal, and the others were all in the throes of terror, so he was unnoticed. After Ensign Arrg's confession, Revi and Pachek took the opportunity to head for the cliffs. They remembered a few deep-looking caves, and walked that way, pretending to look about for the vial. After a few steps they discarded their badges under the pretext of searching in some bushes.

Revi looked at her watch, and counted down. She looked up as the rest of the landing party shimmered out of existence, and the two of them bolted for the nearest cave. A large dinosaur turned and looked at them, but they did not pause, running around it, and it went on with its feeding.

They ran into the cave, hoping that the party on the shuttle would still be recovering from their fear. As they ran into the cave there was a terrified snorting and snuffling, and a large reptile squeezed past them and fled. They may still have carried traces of Arrg's pheromones.

"That was a fortunate occurrence," said Pachek, as they sat while their heart rates returned to normal. "I think we may have had difficulty reaching safety without some such distraction."

"I think we are fairly safe here," said Revi. "We can build up the front of the cave for protection from animals while we construct housing. If they have not found us within an hour we can assume that the minerals in the ground are sufficient to hide us."

They sat deep in the gloom of the cave, both with arms folded over their knees.

"We will have to experiment with the food," said Revi.

"We can establish which vegetation is edible. Malcolm has given us a good start there. I will eat one sort of fruit. If I become ill, you can nurse me back to health. Then you can try the next variety."

"We can see what vegetation or wild animal skins can be utilised for clothes," added Pachek.

"I don't think clothes will be too great a priority," said Revi grimly. "There will not be any company for some time, and it is quite warm. You can set about building us a home first."

"Build a home?" asked Pachek with a frown. "What does one build a home from?"

"I think trees," she answered doubtfully. "One saws them and fits them together somehow."

"Do you know how?" he asked. "And how does one cut them?"

"This looks like a comfortable cave," said Revi gloomily after a pause.

"How can we make some furniture?" he asked. "And how does one cook? It would have been a good idea to have brought some sort of implement with us!"

"Worf would have taken it from us," she replied calmly. She looked at her watch. "This is the only technology we have. At least we will always know what time it is, after we set them to earth time."

Pachek looked sharply at her. It was the first time he had

heard a whimsical remark from her. The watches would be useful, at that. They were able to be set to any planet's variables, so it would be a matter of discovering what the day and year lengths were in this place.

After the hour had passed, they moved outside. First they gathered branches and debris, and camouflaged the entrance to the cave. This would have no effect against the tricorders of the humans if they returned, but might keep out the local animals. They began to inspect their surroundings.

"The trees are not the same," said Revi with some irritation. "I can see no witchetty grubs, or their like."

"The plants are different as well," said Pachek. "But perhaps the principles will apply."

He pulled up some plants and after a great deal of breaking of the fingernails and scratches, found some roots.

"We can cook these and see if they are edible," he said.

"How are we going to boil the water?" asked Revi.

They thought about that without coming to a solution.

Pachek stored the roots inside the cave in case they came up with a way to boil water before they rotted.

"Our watches have batteries that will last longer than we will," said Pachek, "but the repellent fields inside our belts will not last long. We will have to watch out for the dangers of this place, whatever they may be."

Revi went back into the cave, and looked about it with a new interest. It was going to be home for a while, so it would need some amendments, such as flattening of the floor. She realised she was going to miss information

padds.

They gathered a supply of what fruits they could find, which were very few, and set about tasting them. Revi looked at the small pile of roots, and said, "We might be able to simply heat them at a fire. Let us build one."

Starting a fire turned out to be not as easy as Malcolm had made it look. Hours later Pachek finally got a small blaze going, and sat back with his first feeling of satisfaction since they had arrived in this time. They both speared a root each, and sat cross-legged toasting them on the fire. They gossiped about their dreams for the future, a new Romulan planet peopled with their descendants.

The fire continued to burn brightly, and they talked on, until suddenly they found themselves unable to breathe. The smoke had gradually filled the top of the cave, until it reached their level. Coughing and gasping, they scrambled out, and watched the smoke pouring up from the entrance. "Evidently one should not light fires inside a closed room," said Pachek. "Perhaps tomorrow we should look for a cave which has a natural chimney. If not, we will have to have our fires outside. That might attract predatory animals, though."

It had become dusk, and they sat down in the growing gloom. They prepared to wait until the fire had burned itself out. Each held a root on a stick, and they began to cautiously nibble them.

"It's like eating a piece of wood," said Pachek. "I hope it is nutritious."

"I hope it is digestible, and not poisonous," said Revi, more

pragmatically. "What knowledge do you have of living in the wilderness? Did you have any special interests in this area?"

"I read a book once," he said gloomily, "about how the Vulcans used to stalk animals and touch them. It was a point of honor not to kill them."

"Well, we may have to kill some if we want to eat," she said. "If we can catch anything. Perhaps we can dig holes into which they will fall. Onto spikes?"

"Some primitive weapons may be easy to make," he mused. "If primitives can make them, then so should we be able to. We can make arrows and bows. We can make knives."

"I daresay knives would need to be first," she said. "They would be necessary to make the others. What studies have you undertaken that could be useful in the context of survival on a primitive planet?"

"My studies were in thermonuclear physics, and Romulan philosophies," said Pachek. "My hobbies were in the deep structure of transcendental numbers, and the poetry of fundamental particles."

"My occupation was the programming of computers. My interests were in the foundation theories of multiperson strategic mental games," she said.

She sighed. "It's going to be a long sixty-five million years."

Chapter 8.

Aboard the Pinball Wizard, Will Riker sat in the command chair, and tried to marshall his thoughts.

Mary Anne, Mendon and Arrg had moved out to man their positions, and Glock and the engineers had gone to theirs. All the others were still on the bridge.

"I'll ask for advice," said Riker suddenly. "I have to consider that I'm still affected by those damned pheromones. My impulse was to run back home and see if the future is affected. Is that the right decision? Should I stay and find those two?"

"I would agree with your decision, Commander," said Lieutenant Selar calmly. "Before solving a problem, we should know that the problem exists. If there has been no change to the future, nothing more needs to be done. If the future has changed for the worse, we can return through the wormhole and attempt to rectify it."

"Unless we come back to some other past," said Deanna.

"From any future, there is only one past," said Selar.

"All right," said Riker, glad to have had some confirmation of his actions. "Mister Worf, take our two guests and confine them in a cell. Doctor, would you take over the weapons and communications until he returns?"

Beverley quickly moved over and took Worf's position. He merely pointed his phaser at Dovor and Sela, and they rose to their feet and preceded him. Sela glanced meaningfully at Dovor's ring, but he replied, "I'm curious to see how this all plays out." Worf took them and locked them in separate

cells.

Data steered the ship back toward the wormhole at high impulse. Beverley kept an eye on the scanners, and suddenly noticed an anomaly.

"Will," she suddenly called, "there are three ships!"

"Where?" he cried hoarsely.

"About fifty thousand kilometres away," she said. A puzzled look came over her face. "One of them is a starship. They must have sent us some backup. We're already a long way past them. I can't pick up what the others are. Worf might know them."

Riker paused, irresolute.

"I think we have to stick with what Lieutenant Selar said," he decided. "Let's go see if the problem exists. Send them a message, though."

"What message, sir?"

"Find and confine two Romulans on planet earth," he said.

"If they do that, it's half our job done."

Beverley quickly sent a voice message in the direction of the ships. The Pinball Wizard was approaching the coordinates of the wormhole. Worf reappeared, and took over his posts. Data did not bother bringing up a semblance of the wormhole. Nobody wanted to look at it. They just wanted to go through it. He guided the small round vehicle swiftly but carefully into the center, and it appeared to just wink out of existence.

Strangely, this time there seemed to be no subjective long journey. Everyone was concentrating so much on what waited for them that the time passed instantly, and they

popped out into normal space. There was nothing to see. Silence reigned for a moment. Everyone had half expected some immediate revelation. Riker gathered himself, still tense, and ordered, "Mister Data, set course for home, warp two."

The starfighter was capable of greater speed, though not the speed of the Enterprise, but the greater the speed the stronger the signature, and the greater chance of detection. This was still a very empty section of space, so there was a good chance nobody would be about. For a few minutes they sped silently.

Suddenly Worf gave an explosive sigh. "We have company," he said. "The vessel is unfamiliar, and catching us rapidly. They are signalling us to stop. By firing across our bow."

"Damn!" said Riker. "Full stop. On screen."

"Their broadcasting system is also unfamiliar, Commander," said Worf. "But easily converted."

A picture appeared on the viewscreen. Riker's heart sank. The captain was obviously Romulan, but quite different from what he was used to. Like the Vulcans, Romulans scorned personal adornment, but this man had his hair arranged unusually, and wore a ring in the nose. He also had an obvious air of arrogance. The viewscreen showed nobody else, as it came from a narrow-focus camera. When he spoke his voice was incomprehensible, but the universal translator quickly kicked in.

"He was speaking a form of Romulan," observed Selar, "but not one familiar to me."

"This is the Federation ship, Pinball Wizard, under the command of William Riker. We apologise for our intrusion..." Riker began. He was interrupted.

"What is this? Some sort of galactic zoo? Our sensors pick up various races aboard. What race are you? And what is this talk of a Federation?"

"What are you talking about?" asked Riker, feeling the blood drain from his face.

"This is most interesting," said Data. "We still exist, though our forebears do not. One of the paradoxes of time travel is solved."

"Shut up, Data!" hissed a chorus of voices.

"I've destroyed the human race!" Riker whispered, his voice refusing to work properly.

"What species are you? You do not belong to the Empire?" asked the Romulan curiously.

Lieutenant Selar realised that Commander Riker seemed speechless, and intervened. "They are humans," she said.

"From a planet you would probably know as Gellius Minor, since that is what the Vulcans first called it. They call it earth."

"Look it up," the Captain ordered someone offscreen. "And who are you? A Vulcan?"

"I am," she said calmly.

"Well, please ask your commanding officer to surrender his ship or be blown apart!"

Riker tried to gather himself together. He was outgunned, and humanity was dead. He felt a great weight, but he tried to respond. He allowed his resentment of anyone usurping

his bridge to resurface, and deliberately moved in front of Lieutenant Selar. She graciously ceded back his bridge and moved back.

"We will not surrender, but we do not wish to fight. We have come from.."

"You will fight or surrender," said the Romulan pleasantly.

"We have Romulans aboard, commander," said Selar softly.

"Give me a minute to confer," he said.

"If that is a short period of time, certainly," responded the other. He saw the screen go blank.

"Shall we blast them, Tribune?" asked the gunner.

"No, I'm curious," said the Tribune. "I have never seen such a craft. Have you scanned it?"

"We were scanning it, but they have managed to prevent our sensors," said the science officer. "Such an instrument would be worth having."

Meanwhile, Riker called out to Worf to bring the prisoners up. Deanna Troi was having to erect her mental shields. Both Will and Beverley were radiating a profound distress, and she wondered how they were managing to function. She could also feel emanations from the other humans on the ship, who had heard the exchanges.

Will Riker was the most disturbed. He had caused the disaster! The others were overwhelmed, but still functioning because they had specific jobs. Deanna knew they all needed her counseling services, but the time seemed inappropriate. However, she moved closer to Will. "It may be appropriate to exchange our prisoners for our freedom," said Selar. "It would save the difficulty of

returning them to justice, if that opportunity arises. A trial may be difficult."

Riker nodded. The opportunity to be rid of them was appealing. Worf arrived with the two prisoners, and they stepped forward curiously into view of the monitor.

"On screen," ordered Riker. The Tribune appeared again, and Dovor and Sela eyed him speculatively. It was obvious that this was not their universe, and a thrill of joy ran through Dovor's body. Sela was not so overcome. With hidden dismay she looked at the ornamented Romulan.

"We have called up the planet that the Vulcan mentioned," said the Tribune. "Are you trying to mock me? That planet is a center of Romulan life. We have occupied it for millenia, even before the great conflict."

"We will explain everything," said Sela, walking within view of the tribune. "It may amuse you. These are the only examples that exist of the human race."

The tribune's lip curled.

"What are you? Some sort of damned half-breed? An abomination! You mock the purity of the Romulan race! And how is a Vulcan slave walking free? What other offensive insults do you carry?"

Sela's face flushed.

Dovor showed himself. "I am Dovor," he said, "a pure Romulan. We are prisoners of these humans. I would be grateful if you were to rescue us from their clutches."

"We are willing to exchange these two prisoners for a chance to return the way we came," said Riker. The tribune ignored him.

"Prisoners?" he said. "How careless of you. If you are not killed in the conflict, we may set you free somewhere. The halfbreed will be killed before she propagates. The others are interesting. We may keep them to dissect."

"Commander, they are unloading a small fighter to get behind us," Worf called suddenly. Riker hesitated. Instead of reacting normally, he was slow, and felt it.

Beverly Crusher was not much better, and Deanna was overwhelmed by their anguish.

"Will," she whispered, coming up to him, "you must react. You are the captain of the ship. They are all waiting for you!"

This was not actually true as yet. All those not overwhelmed by the revelation were attending mainly to the byplay across the viewscreens. But he shuddered, and tried to focus his attention on what was happening. With a sense of hopelessness.

In their little rooms, Mary Anne and the others listened to the interchanges in horror. She because her race had been eliminated, the others at the prospect of being killed.

The Romulan tribune had reacted to the sound of Worf's words, however.

"Did I hear a Klingon?" he asked eagerly. "I thought there were none left in a century. They all fought to the last man in the Conflict."

"What was this conflict?" asked Lieutenant Selar.

"The slave dares speak!" cried the tribune in mock delight.

"Ah, we shall have to have your tongue for that!"

"You.. we are not from here," said Riker, stumblingly. "We

came from a wormhole, from... a long time ago."

"A wormhole! Where is this? I have never seen one! The Vulcans learned something about them, but we lost the knowledge when we eradicated them."

"Do I understand that you have wiped out both the Klingons and the Vulcans?" asked Selar calmly.

"All the Klingons, we thought, though obviously not. And there are many Vulcans left as slaves. Have you truly come from some place which is not the empire?"

"How is it that the Romulans know nothing of wormholes?" exploded Sela. "What has happened to the great thirst for knowledge of our people? Why are you dressed up like a popinjay?"

"If you say, 'our people' again, you half-breed sow, I shall have your tongue taken out in slices," said the Romulan calmly. "Prepare to be boarded, or destroyed."

"We would like simply to return through the wormhole," interposed Selar. Riker snapped to a sort of attention. He'd be damned if everybody else was going to take over his bridge.

"At ease, Lieutenant," he snapped, "this is my bridge. We would like simply to return through the wormhole," he repeated, "and return to.. another time."

"Commander, the Romulan fighter is slowly moving to starboard," repeated Worf, and this time Riker reacted.

"Status?"

"Commander, their weaponry is quite amazing," said Data, "but they have no shields, or transporters. I do not know how effective our shields would be, but they appear to be

defenceless!"

"Shields and transporters were human inventions," observed Selar. "Though I thought the Klingons also invented transporters. It is of paramount importance that we return through the wormhole."

In her cubbyhole Mary Anne suddenly realised what Selar meant. She became even more trigger happy than she had been, if possible.

"I have to survive!" she thought grimly. Then her irrepressible sense of humor came to the fore. "Wow! Mary Anne Smith the Earth Mother! Maybe the Bible will record Adam and Eve, secret identities, Mary Anne Smith and... William Riker."

"On the other hand," added Data, "I do not recognize the metal of which their hulls are composed. It may very well be impervious to our weapons."

"We're leaving," Riker abruptly told the Romulans. "I suggest you don't follow us through the wormhole. You won't fit. Mister Data, take us back, maximum warp!"

"The maximum warp of this vessel is only warp seven," observed Data as he keyed in the instructions. "It will be interesting to see whether they can match it."

The starfighter shot off back through the empty space.

"I do not recognize their method of propulsion," added Data. "They are not warp engines, since those were also a human invention, but they may be the equivalent."

As they set off the Romulan ship fired a shot, expecting the small orb to be instantly obliterated. It was deflected by the shields. The smaller Romulan ship shot after them,

matching their course. The Pinball Wizard had equivalent speed, and kept ahead as it went to warp two for a short distance, then dropped to impulse as Data guided it unerringly into the wormhole. The Romulan fighter had kept with them, and it followed them straight into the wormhole.

"Tribune, our fire bounced off them!" said one of the Romulans in the bigger ship.

"Don't lie, you dog!" thundered the tribune. "You missed! The penalty is an ear."

"Tribune, forgive my intrusion, but it is true. I measured its path. It deflected," interposed another. "They have some type of invisible deflector. If we had it we would be invincible."

"We are already invincible," said the tribune.

"Actually, I meant, 'we, this ship', rather than 'we, the Romulans'," remarked the other.

"I like your thinking," said the tribune. "It would be nice to be more invincible. Did you analyse their armament?"

The bridge's second-in-command interposed.

"It was not familiar, but must have been inferior. If they could have destroyed us, obviously they would have. One does not spare an enemy if one has a chance at victory."

"True," grinned the tribune. "Set course and follow them!"

The Romulan ship turned quickly and followed the two smaller ships. It was faster, but they had a few minutes start. They found the trail, and began to close.

"An interesting problem," commented a science officer. "If our weapons are deflected, how do we stop them?"

"We did not use much force," said the Tribune. "I doubt they could stand up to a full volley. In any case, if they are running for a wormhole, we will simply stand between it and them."

"We are closing," said the navigator. "Hello, they have both disappeared. The wormhole must be invisible to ordinary light."

"Do you know where it is?"

"Exactly," responded the navigator. "I have their exact path."

"Match their path and speed exactly." The Tribune was standing in his excitement. All this new weaponry and defence systems! When he had it his ship would be the centerpiece of the Romulan navy! He began to dream of a position near the Emperor. Perhaps one day, even...

"Yes, sir," said the navigator confidently. The great ship flew directly and accurately at the wormhole. The center of it passed through to the past of sixty million years before. The sides stayed in the present. The results were spectacular but devastating.

Chapter 9.

After some days Revi and Pachek became reasonably secure that they were not being hunted. They would have seen nothing, but if the Pinball Wizard had been looking for them, they would have easily been found.

They had begun to fit into their environment, by examining it rationally. This had meant a lot of adjustment by them rather than the environment. The larger carnivores would attack them whenever they had the chance, so they were to be avoided. Luckily most large dinosaurs had not had to evolve stealth, so they could be heard a long way away, especially as the Romulans had excellent hearing.

They were quite scientific about their investigation. On a typical evening early in their sojourn, Revi was vomiting over a small nearby cliff. Pale and trembling, she returned to the cave.

"Now, you had the yellow fruit and the stick-like insects. I had the stick-like insects and the brown berries. Obviously the brown berries are toxic and the others not," she noted. This was unnecessary elaboration, but both had adopted the habit of speaking even if it were platitudes, for the sake of breaking the eternal silence. They had noted this formally, of course, and had made a conscious effort to talk of the philosophies of their heritage. When the time came, these must be passed on in their entirety to their offspring. So far these offspring remained an abstract concept.

The repellent fields in their outfits faded with the passing of the weeks, and their clothing also became too hot as the

season changed. The clothes were designed for the controlled atmosphere of a city or starship, not for hot, humid air. They had to experiment here as well.

"Small insects have been biting me," commented Revi in surprise. "Lumps are forming on my skin."

"And on mine," said Pachek. "It is to be hoped this will not have fatal results."

"A pity we could not have brought a knife," commented Pachek. "Or some implements of some kind."

"I think Lieutenant Commander Worf would have looked askance at us if we had carried weapons. A book on cooking of vegetation might have been useful."

"I'm sure Worf would have thought it a little suspicious if we had brought along a text, 'How to survive alone on a primitive planet'," smiled Pachek. Revi thought, We have changed. We smile, we talk. When we have children we will have to make the effort to return to the old ways. Our heritage is all that is important.

Their clothes would not have lasted long, in any case, although the material was very durable. But it was intended as decoration, not protection. Had they been dressed in protective clothing it might have lasted through their lives. During the warming months after they had arrived they eventually dispensed with clothing, but when winter came around again, it became quite cold, at least for Romulans. They tried stitching together foliage to make garments, but apart from being difficult to do, and not lasting very long, in many cases the leaves provided great irritating rashes. Eventually they turned to making clothing from the fur of

small rodents that they captured. It needed a lot of rodents to make a loin cloth. Unfortunately all the larger animals, although pretty stupid and easy to trap, were covered in scales, which proved impossible for them to work with. They did not know how to treat reptile skins to make leather, though their descendents soon worked this out. Fortunately one of the things Malcolm had shown them was how to rub sticks together to make a fire, but for a long time they were unable to discover a container in which to boil water, until they discovered to their surprise that large leaves could be used over a fire. They were then able to try boiling roots and other vegetables, and once again go through the process of testing them through sickness and health. Purely by luck, neither of them died. After about eight months they were sitting, as miserably as such philosophical beings could be, around a campfire. They were wearing basic clothing made from skins. They had not yet discovered the concept of curing the skins, which were just small mammals with their insides removed, and sewn together. The 'dress' they each wore looked interesting, with its row of animal heads dangling down, but the smell was somewhat disconcerting, even to those with great mental powers.

During the better weather they found it advisable to abandon clothing altogether. Especially as it was even smellier when warm.

"We have to some extent conquered our environment," said Pachek at length. "We have a safe cave, and sufficient food."

"Yes?" replied Revi.

"It might be advantageous for us to mate without awaiting the onset of Pon Farr."

"Yes!" she said brightly.

Life began to improve. Knowing by now what was and was not edible, and what was poisonous to the touch, and able to hunt smaller animals for food, they began to settle down into a happy lifestyle. They had to spend so much time working, making primitive tools from stone, collecting the food during the times when it was scarce, and eventually attempting to build very primitive shelters outside, that they simply became content.

In a fortunate statistical event, they had four children, two girls and two boys. This seemed an appropriate number, giving a reasonable probability of their race being able to continue, so they stopped there. They were not great frontierspeople, and throughout their lives continued to struggle to survive. They told their children all about their heritage, and instilled in them the great ideas of Romulan history and philosophy. They could do no more than give them ideas, though, of such concepts as houses, books, weapons and so on, as they could not actually demonstrate them. During their lives they never progressed beyond knives made of stone, and rocks used as hammers.

They instilled in their progeny those things which they believed in, contemplation, philosophy, and so on, but as they did not have the technology to make paper, this was not too useful in the embryonic colony. Going back to

something even more primitive than paper never occurred to them. There were no cave paintings created by this civilisation.

Pachek and Revi were probably happier in this life than they would ever have been in their original culture.

Arrogant misfits on Romulus, they had drifted into a terrorist underground because they had nothing to do. Full of ambition and energy, here they had challenges every day, and not a lot of time to sit idly and philosophise. But one of those challenges was to instil in their children and grandchildren the heritage that they were to recreate. Their descendants would all know that they were part of a glorious continuum. They reached a good old age together, not as long as they might have lived in their original home, but with a feeling of achievement, and died in quick succession.

What they knew was quickly lost after their deaths, but their mode of life lasted a long time. Their people were a tribe of primitive thinkers, not doers.

The huge predators and the low fecundity of the Romulans made progress slow. The Romulans were quite long-lived by earth standards, and not naturally an adventurous people, but after a few thousand years they had developed a stable civilisation. True to their heritage, they did not spread out in a swathe of exploration, but consolidated where they were, gradually building into a strong but compact little Romulan empire.

The continent they were on did not connect naturally to any others, and the seas in those days were inhospitable.

When the community had grown a little there would be an ice age, which would cut their numbers back decisively. Over the centuries they would develop housing able to withstand the cold, usually in caves, but as the ice retreated and it became warm again, they would revert to simple lean-tos again, until the next ice age suddenly appeared and cut them back again. As a result they spread only slowly through the inhabitable part of the country, which was named New Romulus.

Nobody knew why the country was so named. Revi and Pachek never managed to invent a method of recording language. Without padds they were forced to rely on verbal communication, so that their stories became "oral tradition" and changed greatly over the centuries. While the philosophy of Romulus and Vulcan was carried on, resulting in a fairly unadventurous populace, it took a long time for real building to develop.

But eventually architects were born, and a great civilization developed, all on the one continent. True to the tradition of their ancestors, the people simply populated the area in which they were comfortable and safe. By this time they were able to repel the marauding dinosaurs, and even tame them.

The cities of New Romulus were first brick, and wood, until the discoveries of the metals. They had not yet discovered any sources of energy, but clever uses of glass and insulation enabled them to heat and cool their buildings, which were thus able to become quite large. The country was subject to severe earthquakes, and had many

volcanoes. While these were dangerous, they provided heating and fertile soil.

Over the next few million years the scientists became aware that the land on which they lived was shrinking, being drawn down in the center. The seas had become more amenable, though still a source of superstitious terror, and some adventurers set out in small vessels to search over the horizon.

Unfortunately the land which did exist over the horizon was a long way away, and for some time none of these venturers returned. But it was inevitable that one day someone did, and the Romulans spread out throughout the surface of the planet, to which they spread the name New Romulus.

They had always known that the other stars were like the sun, and astronomy had been a major study for millenia, but because they were more thinkers than doers it took a long time for them to make the leap into space. As the other planets were all uninhabitable interest waned, and they did not happen to make the leap to interplanetary travel.

Meanwhile the Vulcans, Romulans and Klingons were spreading out, absorbing or destroying whatever other cultures they met in the latter two cases, merely observing in the former. After an uneasy coexistence boundaries were breached, about sixty-five million years after Revi and Pachek's deaths, and the three were at war.

Treachery was the main weapon of the Romulans, who exploited the ethos of the Klingons to destroy them. They

concentrated on eliminating Klingons from single areas. The Klingons' beliefs did not allow them surrender, and they fought to the last person. As their numbers lessened the proportionately greater numbers of Romulans hastened their demise, until all were gone.

The Vulcans were immediately handicapped by their unwillingness to kill, and were brought into subjection, or killed. Bereft of emotion, they were not resentful of their subject state, and made good slaves, though they always thought about the possibilities of reversing their status. When the Great Romulan Empire found New Romulus they prepared to wipe it out. They appeared in great starships and overawed the locals.

A number of the earth people were taken for experiment, and it was a great puzzle when it was discovered that they were genetically truly Romulan. Even more amazingly, their language was still recognisably Romulan, allowing for dialects. Nobody understood how, but they were accepted into the Romulan empire. They were in fact a minor moderating influence on the empire, where absolute power had corrupted absolutely; somewhat ironically, since they were descended from two fanatics.

New Romulus was, in fact, something of an anomaly. There were two genetically distinct evolutions. Because they had arrived on earth already evolved, the Romulans were able to compete successfully even though outnumbered. When they spread over the planet their ecological concerns led them to create great game parks for the dinosaurs, and the earth became a sort of giant holiday

park for the galaxy. They had forgotten any history of having come from an extraterrestrial source, and had wanted to preserve as much of their terrestrial heritage as possible.

Chapter 10.

The Pinball Wizard raced at top speed back towards the wormhole. Worf anxiously watched the Romulan starfighter trailing along behind them.

"They are exactly matching our speed and path," he announced. "The parent ship has swung around and is following us. They will easily overtake us if they have the normal speed of a warbird."

"We have no idea of their speed, Commander," said Data.

"They are not a warbird."

"Well, we should get to the wormhole in minutes," said Riker grimly. "Can we go in at this speed?"

"Speed should not be a consideration," observed Data.

"Only accuracy. I believe we can enter exactly."

Any other pilot but Data would have had trouble arriving at the exact coordinates at maximum impulse, but he calmly steered the ship into the exact center where his instruments said, and they were soon in the eerie environs of non-time. Worf had begun to speak.

"I believe the Romulan starfighter is going to attempt..."

He seemed to stop, and an unknowable time passed. In contrast to their path back to the future, their anxiety now was whether they would pass through safely, and now they seemed frozen. eventually, however, they were suddenly in normal space. Stars were close by, and they were still at maximum impulse.

"to follow us in." ended Worf, to his surprise. He had forgotten starting the sentence. "There is something ahead

of us!" he said quickly, looking at his screen.

"On screen!" called Riker, and the big screen flared into life.

Will Riker looked at the viewscreen in surprise. The Romulan fighter which had been following them was traveling ahead of them.

"They must have passed us inside the wormhole!" he said in surprise

"Surprising," agreed Data. "But we understand very little about wormholes. The paradox is that no time seems to have passed during a transit. How does one ship pass another in zero time?"

Worf remarked, "There is a large mass of debris ahead, flying away from us, but not very quickly."

The Romulan ship also scanned ahead. The small ship they were following had disappeared from their sensors. All of them were somewhat stunned by their first pass through a wormhole, but they were too disciplined to let it disturb their efficiency.

"Where did they go?" the Tribune demanded. "They could not have gained too much on us."

"There is a large accumulation of debris ahead of us," said an officer doubtfully. "It is too big to be the ship we were following. It seems to be a ship that has exploded."

"Stop it with a tractor beam," ordered the Tribune. The starship was traveling at its maximum speed, and the debris was moving somewhat faster, but the beam gradually drew it to a halt, as the fighter also slowed down. It was immediately obvious that the debris was the innards of a

starship of some kind, and that it contained bodies.

"Bring one in," said the Tribune curiously. A body was pulled in through an airlock, and he went in to examine it. In spite of the fact that its veins had erupted in the vacuum, he was able to recognise it!

"Vodor!" he gasped. "That's our ship! But how? We left it behind us!"

The officer interrupted him. "Wait. A ship has appeared behind us. It is them!"

The Romulan ship veered around towards the Pinball Wizard. They stopped, and regarded each other. Unnoticed, a message logged on to the communications module. Beverley, who had nothing to do, quickly scanned it, keeping an eye on proceedings at the same time. She looked at it for a moment in shock, then erased it.

"Obviously it is possible to get through a wormhole without shields," observed Data.

"I don't think I'll try it though," answered Riker. "What are they going to do now?"

"They are turning to face us," said Data. "I am not detecting energy build-up."

"Destroy the animals!" snarled the Romulan Tribune, in a rage. "They have destroyed the Vantagar!"

The crew silently registered this unseemly excess of emotion, but obeyed. The Tribune ruled his ship by fear. They fired a shock wave at the Pinball Wizard, and were amazed when it bounced off. The Tribune stopped his rage immediately, and began to consider his options.

On the other ship, Worf commented, "Our shields need

some time to recover. They are down to seventy six per cent. Those weapons have drained them remarkably, as well as some stress from traveling three times through the wormhole."

"Be ready to fire if they power up their weapons," said Riker.

"Their weapons do not seem to need to power up," remarked Worf. "We were unable to detect that they were going to fire. I recommend we destroy the other ship quickly."

"I'll talk first," said Riker. "They only fired the once, and we should be able to withstand one more shot. Probably trying us out. On screen."

The face of a sneering Romulan appeared. Sela frowned.

"Are they all like this?" she murmured. She and Dovor were still on the bridge. Events had moved so quickly that Worf had not had the opportunity to escort them back to their cells. He had his phaser close to hand, though.

Deanna detected a feeling of despair emanating from Sela, and a deep sorrow. Interesting. She was playing the part of a fanatic well, but internally filled with deep regret. When the time was appropriate she would inform Will.

"Are you offering to surrender?" asked the Romulan. "We feel disposed to destroy you."

"What's the point of that?" asked Riker, "even if you could. We are now millions of years in the past. Romulus does not even exist yet as a civilisation. There is nothing here for you. Go back while you can."

The universal translator used the Romulan name for

Romulus.

"If there is nothing here for us, what is there here for you?" asked the Romulan.

"Survival," said Riker bitterly. "We ask only to be left alone."

"We do not feel disposed to spare you, humans," said the Tribune. "We may not be able to survive ourselves, since you have destroyed our starship, but we will destroy you at least."

"Why, for God's sake?" cried Riker.

"Because you are not Romulans. You are not pure!"

"You can't," said Riker. "You saw your weapons bounce off. Our technology will prevent you hurting us. If you stay here with us we will be the only humanoid beings in the galaxy."

"I will consider my course of action," said the Tribune after a moment.

"Shall I blast them, sir?" asked the weapons master. "their deflectors may have limited capacity."

"Good thinking, Master, but no," the Tribune replied. "If we destroy them we destroy their amazing defence system. I would prefer to capture them."

"Tribune," interrupted one of the Romulans, "there is some sort of signal attached to a... box of some sort. It is just floating in space."

The Tribune switched off communication suddenly, leaving Riker staring at a blank screen.

"Draw it in," he said.

The container was drawn in by tractor beam, and proved to

be an airtight box, which contained four objects.

"They look like guns of some sort," mused the Tribune.

"Perhaps we could take them back and learn something of their technology. This could be very rewarding, if we can make it back home."

He casually pointed one of the weapons at one of the more dispensable crew members, who looked understandably nervous.

"Tribune!" called the second in command, then checked himself with a touch of fear. "I'm sorry. But we know nothing about these weapons. If you fire it, it might blast a hole clear through the ship."

"You're right, of course," said the Tribune mildly, putting the weapon down. He took his own pistol from his hip and shot the second in command dead, and added, "But don't shout at me."

Other crew paled, as they were supposed to, but went about their duties. The Tribune examined the weapons further. Their power sources were new. What a discovery! And where were they from?

"We need to get aboard that ship," he said. "We must have the secret of those shields. We will feign weakness of some sort, and get aboard, and seize our chance. Obviously their weapons are inferior or non-existent, or they would have blasted us by now."

He fell into the same assumption as the late commander of his mother ship. Also he knew that the others were not Romulans, and would never be a match for them in strength or wits.

"Excuse me, sir," asked one of the officers politely. "Could these weapons have come from that ship?"

"Possible, but unlikely," he mused. "We followed them here, and would have detected them dropping anything. So it can't be some trap laid for us. They didn't know we would follow. It may belong to whatever destroyed the Vantagar."

"So they did not?" asked the science officer.

"They followed us," said the Tribune. "The Vantagar arrived first and was destroyed. It must have passed us somehow while we were in the wormhole. I have no idea how long that journey took. Whatever destroyed it seems to have vanished, though."

"I wonder where we are?" pondered an officer aloud.

"Or when," said another. "They did say they were from the past."

"No matter," said the Tribune. "We'll get their secrets and take them home. The doorway is still there. We'll be the new power base in the Romulan empire."

"I have the coordinates of the place we entered," said the navigator. "There are detectable radiations coming from there."

"Was that true, that we do not have the power necessary to get us to a starbase, sir" asked an officer curiously.

"I do not lie," said the Tribune with a smile. "I did not mention that we can summon support from the Berulias and be picked up by them in days."

"If we agree to talk," offered an officer, "they may have to take down those deflectors to let our craft approach. If the

ship was armed it could fire as it approached."

"Well done," said the Tribune. "You have the intellect of an executive. Prepare a craft."

The officer called together a small crew, and left.

"Do you think they are likely to fall for that, sir?" asked his second in command. "If they do have weapons they will have them trained on our ship."

"Exactly," said the Tribune. "They may not be able to fire through their own defences. When our ship attacks we will have our weapons ready. The second they fire, we fire."

"What about our crew?"

"A small price to pay for such secrets. Get me that captain again."

The second in command grimaced, not so much in sympathy as in the knowledge that he would be dispensed with just as easily if it suited the Tribune.

Riker soon appeared on his screen again.

"Human, if I got the term correctly," said the Tribune, "we wish to discuss our mutual problem. We will send across one of our lifeboats with a delegation..."

"That's not necessary, Tribune," interrupted Riker. "My title, by the way, is Commander Riker, although Captain would be acceptable. We have the technology to beam some of your crew across. Have your delegation discard their weapons, and stand in a group so we can isolate them."

"Beam?" inquired the Tribune, his lips almost dry with anticipation. "You can transmit matter from us to you?"

"That's right," said Riker.

"We'll be prepared in a moment. I'll call you back."

He turned to his crew.

"Call back that lifeboat. Get a crew to stand in a group. I'm guessing that they will have to turn off their deflectors to - beam anyone. As soon as they give the word they are about to beam, cripple their weaponry and engines."

"Sir," said an officer, "if their technology is so advanced they may be able to detect that we are preparing our weaponry."

"Possibly," he admitted, "but I'm gambling that our technology may be just as alien to them as theirs is to us. If it doesn't work we are no worse off."

He was right. The Enterprise was not able to tell that the weapons were being prepared. Geordi and his small crew prepared to drop the shields and beam them across. In the meantime, Mary Anne sat tensely at her phaser, now desperate to survive. She was willing Commander Riker to agree with Worf, and give her the word to fire. She had her coordinates locked in already.

Riker stared for a moment at the blank screen, then sighed. Worf remarked, "They show no sign of activity. All the same, I believe a preemptive strike would be appropriate. They will shoot as soon as we lower our shields, which are weakening."

Data interposed, "For a moment I thought I had another ship passing us, and going back towards the wormhole, but I can find no trace now."

Beverley frowned. There were three ships here, albeit one

was in shreds, and a single ship was heading back to the wormhole. "We received a message from it, but it's not important at the moment. Let's worry about it later."

Riker looked at her in surprise. But he trusted her judgment, and this was an emergency situation.

Data brought back the picture of the Romulan ship, hanging in space.

"They know nothing about shields. I doubt they could detect them." Riker paused. "All right, ensign Glock, whenever they are ready, bring them across."

Aboard the Romulan ship a small group stood, somewhat unwillingly, and the Tribune found himself communicating with a Ferengi! He bit back his distaste, and smiled as he gave the coordinates of his team. The team were understandably nervous. If they were actually beamed over, they would be on the small ship as it was fired on. The Tribune's intention was only to disable, but who knew how resilient the ship might be? They were the sacrificial goats, if the Romulans could not fire before the beaming took place.

"Are you ready?" asked the Ferengi, and he answered, "Yes." The gunner sat anxiously fingering his fire button. Meanwhile Riker could think of something else at last. He sat back, relaxed for the first time in hours, and turned to Selar, more for conversation than anything else. "Why were you so adamant we should come back here, Lieutenant?"

Lieutenant Selar answered, "In that future it is all disaster. The Romulans have wiped out my people, and the

Klingons. Back here we cannot undo what is done, but perhaps we can institute some other change. Whatever future we create, it can be no worse. Here, we have the only surviving humans. We..."

A sudden thought struck her. She rose quickly to her feet, and swung around to face Dovor and Sela.

"Dovor may have thought of his plan quickly, but he is very intelligent. He got you to destroy the human race, but if this ship stayed in the past - if the wormhole closed suddenly, for instance - there would still be some humans. He may have made some plan to destroy us as well. Did he bring anything aboard?"

Dovor had been sitting fiddling with the ring on his left hand. He did not react hastily, but grinned nastily as he pressed his ring.

"Too late," he smiled. "It will take about twenty seconds to build up a critical mass. Goodbye." He sat back flinching, expecting Worf to shoot him, but the deed was done, and Worf merely jumped over, grabbed him, and roughly tore the ring from him.

"Glock," called Riker, jabbing his communicator, "what did you do with the visitors' weapons?"

"Commander la Forge put them somewhere safe," came the reply. Glock had his hand on the transporter ready to beam the Romulans.

Geordi had been watching all of this on a screen in engineering. On another screen was a picture of the Romulan ship hovering menacingly. He interposed, "I put them in a container. They are where they can't do any

harm."

Suddenly the Romulan ship on the screen exploded soundlessly.

"At least, I thought that's where I put them," he added after a moment.

Chapter 11.

'It seemed strange they would bring weapons on board, just so they could take them off,' Geordi said, on the bridge with the rest.

All of the crew were gathered together. Since the ship was motionless, and they were still in the process of deciding what to do, and since it involved everyone aboard, all work was suspended, while they decided on a course of action. Mary Anne and her colleagues had abandoned their weapons as there was presumably no threat left.

'When they arrived they were wearing them and just took them straight off,' Geordi said. 'Glock was the first to think it was strange, and I agreed. Even if it was some sort of ceremonial dress, why get rid of them immediately?'

'I thought, perhaps they have no intention of ever going back to their ship,' agreed Glock. 'These might have been their only possessions. When Geordi and Malcolm went over, the ship was stripped down, with nothing of value left aboard, so I still thought that.'

'Well, that was a reasonable guess, I suppose,' said Geordi. 'Especially when they all handed them over and asked us to keep them somewhere safe. But I had to consider the possibility they were booby-trapped, which they were! I figured a safe place for them was out in space. I put them in a box, put a signal device on it, and beamed it into a stationary spot within reach of the wormhole. I knew we would have to stay in this vicinity, or come back to it. The Romulans must have picked up the signal. I guess they

could detect radio signals, even if they couldn't detect shields.'

'Well, I was trying to hold off blasting them,' said Riker. 'I've destroyed enough for a lifetime. But I guess fate stepped in. We'll never know if they were planning any treachery.'

Sela was still on the bridge. She had been sitting, brooding. Deanna was sensing building anger beginning to displace her feelings of despair. When she spoke her voice was as calm as ever to begin with. Only Deanna could sense her depth of emotion.

'I don't understand,' she said. 'You are an emotional man. I would have expected you to have destroyed them out of grief or anger. I would have expected you to destroy me by now!'

'I don't feel anger,' he said wearily. 'I just feel... dead.'

'You should execute me,' she said desperately. 'I deserve it!' Had she not been Romulan, she might be in tears by now. The others on the bridge were all surprised by the intensity of her speech, and this sudden view of a different side of an implacable enemy.

'Sela,' interposed Deanna, 'you are overwhelmed by the guilt of what you have done. You are coming to realise that humans are not the devils you have always thought of them as. But that is how we are. We recognise contrition. We may even forgive.'

Sela had regained control.

'It is not logical to spare us,' she said. 'We are merely a hindrance to your plans from now on.'

'We do not kill people for being a hindrance!' said Beverley Crusher.

Only Selar seemed to have remained calm through everything.

'We all have to survive,' she said. 'The history of earth has been changed, and there is nothing we can do about that. But we need to change history again, somehow.'

'We have a number of humans on board. We will have to get them safely to earth. I don't think there is another habitable planet within range of this ship.'

'In fact there is,' said Data. 'Soronis Minor II. It is less habitable, but well within parameters of survival. My data is from sixty five millions of years in the future, of course.'

'Earth is the natural habitat of humans,' said Lieutenant Selar, 'so I think we should take them there and drop them together. We can find Revi and Pachek, given a little time. Then they and our two Romulan passengers can be taken to Soronis Minor. We do not have any other pairings, so the rest of us will have to live out our lives on one planet or the other.'

Glock, Mendon and Gr'h Arrg looked disconsolately at each other.

'Wait a minute,' interrupted Beverley. 'Spock is a Vulcan-human hybrid. Surely you could come with us.'

'I doubt it,' said Selar. 'Spock's birth required sophisticated technology. It would not be available on a primitive planet. Besides, I am closely related to the Romulans.'

'I will go where Deanna goes,' said Worf. Riker gave him a sharp look, but said nothing.

Deanna said, 'We may not be able to have children, but.. yes. Perhaps that is best.'

Selar interrupted. 'Who has children by whom will have to be decided by the community. Counselor Troi and Mister Worf may choose to cohabit, but all of the women will have to mate with the various men to attain genetic diversity.'

All of the women looked taken aback at this.

'In fact, since Ensign Smith is the only totally human female certainly young enough to have children, it would be desirable for her to mate with each of the human men, whichever one she chooses to cohabit with. Counselor Troi is half human, so presumably her progeny would become indistinguishably human after a few generations.'

Mary Anne was pink again. Her mind whirled. She glumly tried to reconcile her mind to the prospect. One husband seemed a good idea. Three seemed overkill! What would the nuns at the convent think of all this!

The men also considered the idea. They were not so averse to it. However, Beverley and Deanna were not among the converted. They were old enough not to have been overwhelmed by the excess of authority figures, as Mary Anne was.

'This is all so impersonal,' cried Beverley Crusher. 'I don't know that I'm still young enough to have another child. And I don't know if I could. I'll never see Wesley again.' Tears welled in her eyes. 'We should just set up our community, and see who settles down with who.'

'What a piker!' said Deanna drily. 'And I was going to

nominate you to be in charge of the rosters! Now, I'll have to work out the timetable myself.'

'i don't know that a timetable will be essential,' said Selar seriously. 'Mating may be allowed to occur somewhat informally. I believe that is the established human custom.' Mary Anne grinned in relief. Deanna and Beverley were rejecting the idea! And Selar was unable to detect the 'Mickey' being taken out of her, as Malcolm's expression had it.

Geordi suddenly stood up.

'I don't understand this. Those two Romulans fled to earth with nothing. But we have technology in abundance. We can land this thing on earth, and use its resources. And we have Data. He is my friend, but he is also technology. I don't think we would have all that much trouble with birthing technology. I suggest we all go to earth and create a big family to start with!'

'Perhaps not, Geordi,' said Deanna quietly. 'It doesn't seem like a time to be talking psychology, but if we have two genetically incompatible races on the one planet, eventually one will wipe out the other. We might start with small but technologically advanced tribes, but as they spread and grow so will ignorance and superstition. Eventually they will crowd each other, and conflict will escalate.'

'Mathematically, the choice of two venues is superior,' added Data. 'If we have two different worlds populated there is double the chance of one proving viable, and so altering history in some fashion.'

'Yes,' said Geordi, 'if you want to bring in mathematics, can I remind you that we deliberately held back the number of humans on this trip. Apart from Doctor Crusher there are only four women on board, and only one is all human.' Sela had not offered anything toward the discussion. Selar had not made the obvious offer of her as a part of the human colony. Like Deanna, half her genes were human, and similarly, if she stayed and mated she would contribute diversity to the new world. But her Romulan genes would be swallowed up.

Presumably Selar was not confident that she would not continue her attempts to destroy the human colony. It was an intelligent decision. It would be more logical for her to go with Dovor, Revi and Pachek to the other world, and try to begin a new Romulan race, in which she would try to inculcate positive values.

'Two humans is theoretically enough,' said Selar. 'The rest are a form of insurance against the unexpected.'

Mary Anne grimaced to herself. She had been saying very little all trip, and feeling somewhat that she was the unimportant one on the mission. Now she had become the most important, and she trembled at the thought.

All the Romance holostories she had experienced flowed through her mind. The mousy little heroine suddenly becoming the focus of attention of the handsome hero was a general theme, not that many women were unattractive these days. But who would be the handsome hero? Would it be... all of them? This was a brand new world. Maybe she would have to accommodate to new ways...

Sela had been considering the prospect of mating with Dovor with some distaste. She looked around for him, and saw that he was sitting very quietly, remaining inconspicuous. He beckoned her, when he realised she had seen him.

Worf had allowed his customary vigilance to lapse at the news that he was the lone survivor of his race. His stoic face hid a deep sorrow. As there was no other Klingon to mate with, he resolved to live with Deanna, assuming she were as willing as he believed, and perhaps die gloriously defending his home from some tyrannosaurus or suchlike predator.

Sela sidled surreptitiously across to Dovor, and sank into a seat next to him.

'They are planning on setting up another Romulan race,' she remarked. 'The four of us starting a new dynasty. I do not find the idea attractive.'

'Nor I,' he said. 'You are, after all, not entirely Romulan genetically.'

She flushed, without changing expression. Would it be possible to raise a gentler, better race with Dovor as its progenitor?

'I prefer our original plan,' he said. 'It will be cruder, but they can still be destroyed.'

'How do you mean, our original plan?' she asked curiously. 'They can still be destroyed with a sudden coup!' he snarled quietly. 'Worf cannot concentrate on me forever!'

Meanwhile, the others had sadly decided to split up between the two planets.

'it's all very well to have all this technology,' said Geordi, 'but getting it down to the surface could be tricky. These tubs are made for space, and it would fly like a stone if we took it into an atmosphere. Even a starship has a bit of aerodynamic capability, because someone thought it looked pretty, but this ship is round!'

'Yes, I don't fancy trying to hover it down on its jets,' agreed Riker. 'And it's not designed for operation in planetary gravity. The rooms point in all directions.'

'We can take one of the shuttles down to earth and leave it there,' said Geordi, 'and Data can take the other one to the other planet. We can strip a lot of stuff and take it down in shifts. We'll have to decide which parts go to earth and which to the Romulan planet.'

Interesting, thought Sela. We will start off both the Romulan and human races sixty five million years early. Will that only exacerbate the problem. Will the humans develop quickly enough to stop the Romulans going bad? I will teach my children peace, she resolved. So, no doubt would Selar. But what about the other three.. psychotics. She trembled to have thought the word.

Dovor was being watched very carefully now by Worf, but he remained calm.

'Since you seem uninterested in executing me,' he said to Riker, 'and have plans which involve me, I would like to cooperate. Your idea seems an excellent one, and acceptable to all of us. I will assist you in your manual labors if you will permit me.'

Riker looked thoughtfully at him. He did not trust him an

inch, but every hand helped, and there were plenty of people to keep an eye on him.

'All right, Dovor,' he said grimly. 'It seems just that you should do some of the work, since this mess is your fault.'

'We may as well all go down and get your group started,' said Dovor, 'and then those of us going elsewhere can leave with Mister Data for our own little habitat.'

All were startled at Dovor's offer, including Sela. Has he relented? she thought. Unlikely. Riker, however, took him at his word.

'All right,' he said. 'That's a good idea. The first thing we need to do is find those other two. Data?'

'Very well, sir,' replied Data. He brought the starfighter over the isolated continent, and scanned. 'I cannot find them,' he announced after a while. 'Either they are underground or dead. Strangely, I cannot detect the phasers either. If we had access to the Enterprise's computers, we could locate the phasers even underground.'

In fact, they were simply underground at the time, sleeping in their cave.

Dovor thought, the Enterprise's computers would only locate them if they looked in the ship's storage compartment, where he had secreted them.

'Well, we haven't,' said Riker. 'I guess they're dead. I suggest we land in that area that Ensign French knows. His knowhow about the place may give us a start.'

They set the starfighter into a stable orbit, and set off in both shuttles. All of them landed in an open area, near water and fertile ground. It was a part of Australia which

seemed to offer a lot. It was land which had been volcanic, which meant it would be fertile, and it had adequate water both above ground in the form of lakes, and underground in a large water table, in case of drought. It had grasslands, trees and easy access to the sea. While they might not need all these immediately, their descendants would. All of the humans and part-humans watched the approaching land with new eyes. This was going to be home.

They had taken both shuttles, although only one would remain. As the hatches swung open they stepped out into the harsh bright light, and looked around. There was a grove of trees nearby, but otherwise the land was relatively clear of dense vegetation.

'We can build here,' said Mary Anne. 'It seems safe.'

'It's the middle of the day,' said Malcolm, 'and we've only been here a minute. The animals will appear around dusk if there are any. With water this close I'm sure there are. Our landing would have scared them off, but they'll be back.'

'We'll use the replicators to produce some buildings,' said Geordi. 'Some houses would be a good safe start.'

'I'd suggest we just put up something temporary for a start,' said Malcolm. 'The replicators are not going to last long here, so we should be sure what we want.'

'So what's first?' asked Geordi.

'I reckon, get some big leaves, and make little shelters to sleep in,' he answered.

The whole group looked around, and found some timber. Deanna trimmed it with her phaser, and they made a very primitive lean-to.

'That's probably not the best idea,' said Malcolm. 'It'd be better to use the phasers to shape some stone tools like hammers or axes, then use them. The phasers won't last for all that long. We should save them for emergencies.'

'It's a start,' said Riker. 'But I agree. We could use the replicators on the starfighter to make better tools, though. Keep the phasers as long as possible. They won't hold their charge forever, anyway.'

They found large leaves and made it into a shelter. Malcolm had decided upon a spot, not in a water channel, but sheltered. Dovor obligingly carried over some of the stores he had picked up in the storage area, trying not to lean forward and reveal the outlines of the two phasers stuck in the back of his belt, especially to Glock. He had offered to trim the wood, but Worf had not let him have one of the other phasers. He offered to fetch firewood, and stashed the two phasers where he could find them easily. Even Sela was pitching in, perspiring with the effort, as were all. Early earth was hot, at least here. They had not checked which season it was, thought Beverley. She must check that soon.

'I guess we need to decide who is going to stay here,' remarked Riker after a while. 'And I guess it's time to stop calling each other Commander and Lieutenant. There's no Starfleet any more. I'm William.'

'Thank you, William,' said Dovor. 'Though I notice you have called me nothing but Dovor since we met.'

Riker still felt slightly repelled by the Romulan, but he forced a smile. They would be going off forever soon. It

should be possible to be civil for that time.

'Shades of the Admirable Crichton,' said Malcolm ruefully.

'What's that?' asked Mary Anne.

'It was a classic play I studied in university,' he said. 'In ancient times, England had very set social classes. The so-called upper class ran everything and the lower classes were servants. A socially stratified group is shipwrecked, and all the old roles are reversed. The butler turns out to be the natural leader.'

'What's a butler?' asked Arrg.

'A personal valet,' answered Malcolm.

'Malcolm,' said Riker, 'can you catch us some sort of animal to eat? We have food from the ship, but I think it might be a good idea to keep it until we need it. It might be the only non-perishable food we have.'

Malcolm climbed to his feet, took a phaser, and went scouting. It was getting late, and animals had begun to appear. He shot a small dinosaur, and they cooked it.

'I know crocodile tastes OK,' he said, 'so this might be tasty. I guess I'll have to start making a few simple weapons soon. The energy weapons won't last indefinitely. Spears and boomerangs could be fun. I think I can manage them.'

They ate around a campfire, getting used to using each other's first names.

'Which planets are you three going to?' Malcolm asked the three odd crewmen.

Mendon had decided to try his luck with the Romulan group. He hoped that the other planet might offer a more

breathable atmosphere. Arrg decided to stay with the humans. He had rarely been accepted, so he would stay with his new friends.

'The trouble is,' he said Gloomily, 'I am going to run out of anti-pheromone. when that happens I will have to go and live alone.'

'Maybe not,' said Malcolm cheerily. 'I reckon we can get used to it, then you can keep away the nastier animals from our doors, if we ever have any.'

Beverley thought that it was unlikely that they would soon 'get used to it', but she held her peace.

'You would be welcome to go with us,' said Sela. 'We are capable of ignoring the effects of your pheromones.' But Arrg decided to stay with his new friends.

Glock said, 'I guess I'll go with the others. Now I'm not in Starfleet any more I have to think in terms of profit again. My people may not exist yet, but I can gain honor by becoming rich.'

'But why go with them?' asked Malcolm. 'We've become friends.'

'When I was an ensign it was all right to have friends,' Glock replied. 'Now I'm just a Ferengi again, it would get in the way of profit.' He lowered his voice so that only the humans might hear him. 'The Romulans are so sure that they are brilliant they are easy to.. err, trade profitably with. You humans are a bit too..'

'Canny?' asked Malcolm.

'That sounds right, whatever it means.'

'Well, good luck, Glock,' said Malcolm. 'It's been a

pleasure to know you.'

'Glock, why do you need to chase profit now?' asked Deanna. 'There are no other Ferengi here. Why not just stay with us?'

'The Ferengi may not exist yet,' he replied reverently, 'but the gods do.'

'The gods?' replied Deanna, startled.

'The gods of profit,' he said. 'They still exist. I suppose I should say, already exist. I still have to think of my soul.'

'You have to make a profit for your soul?' asked Mary Anne incredulously.

'Our people have always believed this,' he said. 'Don't you have gods?'

'Well, yes,' she said. 'A lot of humans have believed in gods. But nearly all of ours have told us that we should help others, look after the poor, and so on. Not get rich ourselves.'

Glock was amazed. But he knew other cultures had weird beliefs.

'How do your gods tell you this..' He tried to think of a better word than 'garbage.'

'Well, one of our religions believes that God came to earth as a man, and told us,' said Mary Anne. 'He told us to love one another, and help the poor.'

'We had something just like that!' exclaimed Glock. 'The philosopher, Radnir. He said that it was all right to help someone else make a profit, as long as you made a profit yourself!'

'I don't think it's exactly the same,' floundered Mary Anne,

to Deanna's amusement.

'What happened to Radnir?' asked Malcolm. 'Proph.. philosophers on earth usually didn't do too well.'

'He was persecuted,' said Glock, 'and made to,' he shuddered, '..give all his money away. He died of shame.'

'Is there a book about this?' Deanna asked. 'There is one about the Christian faith.'

'I'd like to read it,' Glock said. 'I'd like to compare it to our holy books. I'm sure they're the same. The gods must be the same everywhere, fundamentally. They just adjust their messages a bit for different cultures.'

'It's called the Bible,' said Mary Anne. 'There's one in the shuttle. You can read it if you like. While the batteries last.'

'You have a bible in the shuttle?' asked Deanna in surprise.

'There's a group called the Gideon Foundation,' replied Mary Anne. 'They have managed to have a bible chip put into every computer in the Federation. They started putting them in as viruses, so the manufacturers decided it was easier to just let them supply the chips. They don't take much computer space.'

'You learn something new every day!' exclaimed Deanna.

'So we have a book with the history of what happened on the earth, before we stuffed it up!'

She immediately felt a wave of anguish from Will Riker, and regretted her flippancy. She hurried over to console him.

Glock went inside with the others, and Mary Anne called up the chip.

'It's in English,' she said. 'Use the translator.'

'It's Ok, I speak English,' he said.

'You speak English?' she asked in surprise.

'Any Ferengi can learn any pronounceable language in two weeks,' Glock said proudly. 'It's an important tool of commerce. If you speak the customer's language and he doesn't speak yours, you have a natural advantage.'

They left him to browse and went back outside. Malcolm lay back on his own and stared up at the stars which were just beginning to appear. Why are the stars so much more beautiful when seen from home? he thought. And the air is so clean. It has never been polluted yet.

'Well,.. William,' said Selar, 'you will have to decide your habitation arrangements soon. It would be best to determine them civilly, lest animosity arise and people are killed. You cannot afford unnecessary deaths.'

'Well, I guess Mary Anne, Deanna and Beverley will have to choose how they want to live, and we'll have to go along with it,' said Riker. 'I don't imagine we have too much to worry about killing each other over it yet.'

'Um, do I have to decide to actually marry someone,' said Mary Anne doubtfully. 'I guess it'll be Malcolm.'

'OK, er, Mary Anne,' said Riker. 'Mis.. er, Worf intends to live with Deanna, and Beverley?'

'Can't we let this all.. develop?' she said desperately. 'We're going to be here a long time. We don't know who will turn out to be...'

'The Admirable Crichton?' offered Malcolm.

'Yes,' she agreed. 'Look, let's just wait to see what happens. I'll set up my hut over here with all our medical stuff. Let's

let things develop.'

They finished their meals, and began to think of sleeping their first night on their new world.

'OK,' said Riker, 'while we still have the shuttles here, we may as well make use of them. I suggest we have a roster for guard duty, in case any animals decide to invade, since Malcolm said they were mostly nocturnal. The ladies can sleep in the shuttles, and we can..'

"As soon as we get back to prehistory you turn sexist!" exclaimed Deanna.

'Well, you are our most valuable commodity now,' grinned Riker, the first time he had smiled since his trauma.

Glock immediately fell into thought. They were commodities now. Perhaps there was some sort of profit to be had from them. But humans did not trade in women. Still, in this situation, perhaps he could be some sort of.. agent?

'Hmm, they are commodities now,' he half-muttered. Deanna heard him.

'Don't even think about it!' she laughed.

Dovor began to become very alert as the evening drew on. His time would come when all but two were asleep. Even better if he were allowed on guard duty. With everyone asleep, it would be a simple matter to slaughter all the humans and Worf.

Although it grew late, nobody had gone off to sleep. The women, except Sela, had gathered in one group, and the men were scattered about.

'As we seem to be staying up late, and the fire is

dwindling,' said Dovor, 'I shall collect more firewood.' He went to the glade.

'Well, here we are,' said Geordi. 'A crowd of Adams and Eves! Not enough Eves, unfortunately.'

Sela sat alone, some distance from the others. She was wondering whether the humans would accept an offer from her to stay with them. If they found Revi and Pachek, there would be more women than men among the Romulan and Vulcan group. Here there was a shortage of a woman. It was more logical to remain, but her Romulan genes would be severely diluted. Then again, the fledgling human community would be enhanced by them.

'The worst part is that we'll never know whether we succeed!' exclaimed Beverley. 'We'll live out our lives like primitive tribes, and we'll never know whether it changes things. Whether our descendents will survive, whether they'll - change anything!'

'Not necessarily, Doctor,' said Data. He had observed the eating of the animal, but had not partaken. 'I can return to the future, then come back through the wormhole and tell you whether the future is different.'

'You won't have time, Data,' said Malcolm. 'By the time you settle all of us onto two planets, the wormhole is likely to be closed.'

'It was not my intention to do so,' said Data. 'By flying back through the wormhole I might somehow invalidate the timeline. I intend to fly at high speed out from this plane of the galaxy, turn and accelerate back, arriving at the correct time to meet the wormhole. The computers

should be capable of such a calculation.'

'Data, it's sixty five million years,' said Deanna. 'I know you're built to last, but.. wouldn't you at least get a bit bored!'

'Even at maximum warp it would take millions of years,' said Malcolm, 'and you don't have that much fuel!'

'You are so used to warp drive,' said Data, 'that you forget its purpose. Continuous impulse acceleration can bring the ship up to a high fraction of the speed of light. But if one travels at near the speed of light, time and distance are affected. One might fly out into space and then back, and find that generations had passed, and everyone one knew had died. The warp engines enable us to fly great distances quickly, and return at what appears to be the normal flow of time.

'In this case, however, the impulse engines would supply what I want. As time and length are distorted, it might appear to me that I have flown out only a few million miles, and only a few years have passed, but when I return sixty five million years would have passed - if I can get close to the speed of light for much of the way in each direction.'

'I will go with Mister Data,' said Ensign Mendon suddenly. They looked at him in astonishment.

'I cannot live indefinitely on your planets,' he explained.

'My breathing apparatus will not last indefinitely. You might find a planet with a suitable atmosphere for me, but I would be all alone. I would prefer to take my chances with Mister Data. He is agreeable company. Whatever future we

find, I will be with a friend. If it is a better future I may choose to stay there.'

'Why, thank you, Ensign,' said Data, much flattered.

'I too, will go with them,' said Gr'h Arrg. 'My supply of antipheromone will not last long. Ensign Mendon has his breather, and Data will not be affected. And I am used to being alone.'

'But you would need an enormous amount of fuel,' said Geordi, embarrassed that he had not seen all this himself as soon as Data proposed it.

'All I need of the ship is the engine and the shields,' said Data. 'The rest of the space can be filled with asteroids, which I can use as matter to be converted to energy. As far as energy creation is concerned, one piece of matter is as good as any other.'

Riker uttered an expletive.

'I'm stupid!' he exclaimed, jumping to his feet and kicking over the embers. 'It's like Glock's Rule of acquisition! If you don't have what the customer wants, sell him something else!'

The others stared at him as if he had gone mad. Glock tried to think how the rule might apply. Sela asked Selar drily, 'Is this rough language some reversion to the prehistoric?'

'Data,' he said, 'have we got much time before that comet should have hit earth? A day? A week?'

'No, much more,' said Data.

Suddenly there was an interruption.

Dovor suddenly appeared behind Sela. He produced the two phasers he had secreted. He quickly set them both to

'kill', and tossed one to Sela, who rose to her feet in a fluid movement.

'Don't move, anyone!' he commanded as Sela eyed him curiously.

'What the hell are you up to?' said Riker angrily.

'I was hoping you might just have stayed here to decay, while we went off and outbred you,' said Dovor. 'Or I might have waited until you were all asleep and destroyed you at my leisure. But you seem to have leapt to some solution. I can't allow that.'

'Good,' thought Mary Anne. 'Keep the maniac talking. It's what they do in all the adventure books.'

'What are you going to do?' asked Riker angrily. 'You won't get us all.'

'I'm going to kill the women,' he sneered. 'The rest of you will kill me, but you won't spread like some virus through the galaxy again!' He had his phaser pointed to the women, who had conveniently grouped together as they readapted to primitive ways, and were having a gossip. They nervously began to edge apart.

'Don't be stupid, Dovor,' said Sela quietly. 'Did you see what Romulus had become in that future?'

'The superior race!' he shouted. 'Are you with me?'

Suddenly Malcolm flung himself through the air, catapulting Mary Anne away, and desperately rolling to fire his phaser at Dovor. It seemed a futile attempt, because Dovor already had his phaser aimed.

'Against you,' Sela said calmly, shooting Dovor, who fell heavily against a tree. He sagged against the trunk, and slid

down unconscious.

'I must be catching something from you all,' she said, giving the phaser back to its owner, 'I set it back on stun.' Mary Anne grinned as she picked herself up from the ground where she had fallen.

'I'm sure Beverley and Deanna will forgive you,' she said to Malcolm. 'Picking out the young and fruitful one to save. The good of the community is primary!'

'It seemed like a good idea at the time,' he said. 'Ouch, I've twisted my ankle!'

'I'll take you to the medicine hut,' she said, stooping and picking him up, 'my valiant hero!'

Chapter 12.

Beverley had already set up a small hut, and had her medical set-up functioning. Mary Anne ducked down, and deposited Malcolm on the make-shift bed. Beverley quickly examined his ankle, announced that it was a mild sprain, and quickly removed the pain. He was able to walk again immediately.

'Take it easy for a day or so,' she said. 'Try not to fling yourself around too much.'

'Well, I think that definitely entitles you to be number one husband,' observed Mary Anne flippantly, as they returned towards the fire. 'We have to start these pecking orders early.'

'So I get to be the man on page three?' he asked.

'It sounds like I get to marry every man in the book,' she said, a bit glumly. 'Not really what I was looking for.'

'I'll fight them all,' he said with a laugh.

'Wow, we're really back on primitive earth!' she said with a smile, and a kiss.

Dovor was still unconscious, and there seemed no immediate need to restore him to consciousness. He was securely tied up, and stored in the shuttle for the moment. Afterwards the group reconvened around the fire.

'You may gather I am not going to mate with Dovor,' announced Sela drily. 'I suggest that I go with Revi and Pachek, if we can find them still alive, and perhaps Lieutenant Selar, to this other planet. Three women and one man should prove sufficient to start off a planet, if we

can find them. It should be an interesting experience.' 'He's not much use to us,' said Deanna. 'You may as well have him. One of the other females might accept him.' 'You haven't considered staying with us, have you?' asked Geordi. 'You are half human, you say. It would balance the numbers.'

'I thought of it,' she admitted, 'but it may be best that I do not. I have done all of you great harm, and it would be resented eventually. There are other things I have done in the past, too.'

Geordi paused to consider her answer, but they were all distracted by Will Riker. Now that he had a moment to think, his mind had begun to race furiously.

'Mister Data, how long was it before the comet would impact upon earth?' he asked.

'Approximately one hundred and twenty thousand and forty two years, sir,' answered Data, having learned that more accurate replies produced a curiously negative reaction.

'A hundred and twenty thousand years!' echoed Riker in astonishment.

'And forty two,' corrected Data. He noted that he had reverted to Mister Data.

'This was all a fluke,' observed Sela. 'When the science report arrived that there was a wormhole which traveled back sixty-five million years, I knew that there had been a comet impact about that time, which eradicated most of the dinosaurs, and allowed man to evolve. I examined the report they had made about earth, and found that it was still

populated by dinosaurs. I gathered our little group of earth-haters together, and we came through the wormhole to see whether we could locate that particular comet and destroy it. You arrived before we could do anything.'

'A hundred and twenty thousand years,' repeated Riker, relaxing a bit. 'It just shows how a mind-set can work.

When we thought that the Romulans had altered its path, I assumed they would have set it to crash into earth immediately. when we found out that wasn't the case, I never thought to change the timetable! Well, at least it gives us a bit of time to try something.'

'What are our chances of finding another comet of the same size?' asked Selar.

'Negligible,' answered Data. 'That was the largest comet in the solar system. Building another is virtually impossible. A large component is gas, which is difficult to build with. This ship would not have the facilities. It has weapons.'

'Data, do we have all the information on the comet?' asked Riker. 'Its mass, size, exact trajectory?'

'Everything, sir. When we examined its path earlier, all information was permanently stored.'

Let's get back to the ship,' said Riker. 'Ensign Smith, you take Shuttle One, and Commander Data the other. Ensign French, organise the supplies back on board. Doctor Crusher, get your equipment back on board.'

He assigned roles to the others, and they sprang to their duties, even Sela.

'What happened to 'Malcolm' and 'Mary Anne'?' said Mary Anne to Malcolm as they carried all the supplies back to

the shuttle.

'The play came out the same way,' he said.

The two shuttles took off with everyone crammed aboard again, and delicately slipped back into their slots in the curve of the starfighter.

'Well, let's try some building blocks,' said Riker grimly, when they were back in the operations center. Dovor had been locked up very securely. 'I don't know whether this will work, but we're sure going to try.'

The first thing was to salvage the tractor beam from the Romulan freighter. Fortunately it had not drifted far, and they soon found it, and transferred the equipment to the Pinball Wizard.

The starfighter had its own tractor beam, but it was not as strong, nor as efficient, as capable of being focused. It was merely an afterthought, something that might have an occasional use as a weapon, or to pick up debris after a fight. The freighter's tractor beam was capable of selecting one object from among others and of very fine placement of that object.

Luckily, one of the attributes of a starfighter was a facility for modification, and the tractor beam was able to be easily slotted in in place of a range of phaser banks.

Next, Data and Geordi weighed the still intact freighter, to the nearest milligram. It was much lighter than the comet. Although the comet had been composed mostly of ice, it was solid, and large, while the freighter was mostly a shell. Its use was carriage, so it required a lot of space. However, it was useful as a base for building on, and did have a

significant mass.

The fragments of the Romulan ship which had failed to negotiate the wormhole had continued on into space, but only at a low impulse speed, and they decided to chase this. The Romulan fighter had exploded comprehensively, and was spreading outwards in a sphere. The bigger ship was still in one group of debris, and easily captured.

They were still nowhere near the required mass, but there was no shortage of large and small asteroids, and they had virtually infinite time to work with.

They gathered the remains and dragged them to where the freighter hung in space, the tiny engines of the starfighter striving manfully. As the Romulan ship was largely in one piece, though open to space, and those few bodies still in it were frozen, they were able to salvage some of the technology, especially weapons, which were totally unknown to them. They did this hurriedly, though. Nothing would matter if they never returned to their own future.

Riker said, 'It's pretty easy to work with the ships, but it's going to be tough gluing asteroids together.'

'That will not be necessary, Commander,' said Data. 'If we put all this matter together it will travel as one.'

The work was easy enough in concept, but quite time-consuming. Traveling to asteroids, snaring them, and then returning them filled a few days. When the 'new' comet was all in one spot, loosely held together by its minuscule gravity, Data and Geordi again weighed it exactly.

'It requires another 243 micrograms,' announced Geordi. He had the replicator produce exactly that amount of water,

and transported it across to the conglomeration.

'At least, 243 micrograms of it is the right material,' he remarked.

'Well, its not the right shape,' said Riker, 'but if we give it the right mass and velocity, it may do the trick.'

'Our imponderable is the amount of gas that the sun would have driven from the comet in the time,' said Data. 'It may not be much. In the comparatively short time, astronomically speaking, not much may have been driven off, and it is likely that during the passage far from the sun, those molecules would drift back slowly under the influence of gravity.'

When they had finished it was an impressive conglomeration, a sphere about eight kilometres across. It was smaller than the original comet, which had been mostly ice. This one contained mainly iron-nickel. The starfighter which had been dragging it together from all over the solar system was like a dot in comparison. The calculation of the asteroid's orbit was not easy, even for the computers, as the movements of all the nearby solar system bodies had to be taken into account, but even a difficult computation does not take a computer long. 'Something is wrong,' said Data in puzzlement. 'Our chronometers are out by a few hours. However, the computers have taken new readings of all orbits, and this asteroid will strike earth at exactly the same time and place as the original.'

The tractor beam slowly and gently eased the mass into the correct orbit. To those on board it did not appear to be

moving, as they were moving with it. They looked at it silently for a few minutes. All the hopes of humanity rested with it. At Riker's command, Data slowly eased the Pinball Wizard away. In an atmosphere their movement might have disturbed its trajectory, but out here in the vacuum, they had no effect. When they were a good distance away, Riker broke the silence.

'Well, I guess we can't hang around here for a hundred and twenty thousand years,' he said grimly. 'The only way we can find out if we've made any change is to go back again. Ahead full impulse Mister Data. Ensigns Smith, Mendon and Btt'h, attend your stations.'

'Back to Ensign Smith,' Mary Anne complained mockingly to Malcolm, as they moved briskly from the bridge, 'and we never really got to the Mary Anne and Will stage.'

'Wait and see what's in the future now,' he said grimly, 'and hope we don't have to run back again!'

Chapter 13.

What Revi and Pachek knew was quickly lost after their deaths, but their mode of life lasted a long time. Their people were a tribe of primitive thinkers, not doers.

The huge predators and the low fecundity of the Romulans made progress slow. The Romulans were quite long-lived by earth standards, and not naturally an adventurous people, but after a few thousand years they had developed a stable civilisation. True to their heritage, they did not spread out in a swathe of exploration, but consolidated where they were, gradually building into a strong but compact little Romulan empire.

The continent they were on did not connect naturally to any others, and the seas in those days were inhospitable. When the community had grown a little there would be an ice age, which would cut their numbers back decisively. Over the centuries they would develop housing able to withstand the cold, usually in caves, but as the ice retreated and it became warm again, they would revert to simple lean-tos again, until the next ice age suddenly appeared and cut them back again. As a result they spread only slowly through the inhabitable part of the country, which was named New Romulus.

Nobody knew why the country was so named. Revi and Pachek never managed to invent a method of recording language. Without pads they were forced to rely on verbal communication, so that their stories became 'oral tradition' and changed greatly over the centuries. While the

philosophy of Romulus and Vulcan was carried on, resulting in a fairly unadventurous populace, it took a long time for real building to develop.

But eventually architects were born, and a great civilization developed, all on the one continent. True to the tradition of their ancestors, the people simply populated the area in which they were comfortable and safe. By this time they were able to repel the marauding dinosaurs, and even tame them.

The cities of New Romulus were first brick, and wood, until the discoveries of the metals. They had not yet discovered any sources of energy, but clever uses of glass and insulation enabled them to heat and cool their buildings, which were thus able to become quite large. The country was subject to severe earthquakes, and had many volcanoes. While these were dangerous, they provided heating and fertile soil.

Over the years a few adventurers set sail from New Romulus, whether accidentally or by design, but none were heard from again. In most cases they were killed by the sea, and in others did find refuge elsewhere, but had no women on board, and were unable to reproduce. Two groups did survive, however, and set up their own little communities far away.

One of these groups found its way to the area which would one day be called the Gulf of Mexico, and set up a city which slowly grew around that area. They never returned to their original home, because their departure was inadvertent. They were blown along by gales and survived

on fish and water, so that when they finally made landfall they were exhausted, and had no idea where they were. The city did spread slowly, and had expanded to some hundreds of square kilometers after about one hundred thousand years.

Unfortunately they were exactly in the path of a large asteroid which struck the earth at that time. It destroyed all life in that area, including all the Romulans, and threw up a huge cloud of dust over the earth. Temperatures dropped, and earthquakes and storms were precipitated. Among the other casualties were the dinosaurs of the planet, and the small Romulan empire which became completely covered in a kilometer of ice, something which even the most ingenious of their scientists could not find an answer for. The other outpost was on a large island. This group also descended from a group of explorers who survived dreadful sufferings before finding a haven. They found it was fertile, and had good fishing at its boundaries, as well as many natural crops which they could harvest. The island was somewhere in the middle of an ocean, and they sailed some distance from it at times without finding other land. But they had everything they could want, and in the time-honored manner of their ancestors they expanded to comfortably fill their surroundings, and stayed that way, for a surprisingly long time.

They survived the great cloud, which was what had destroyed New Romulus, though with difficulty. Over three or four million years they developed a highly advanced society, and did explore some of the world, without settling

it. They found no other intelligent life, and returned home instead of beginning new settlements.

This preference for remaining with their companions, and their luxuries, instead of going out to fight the wilderness, was an inefficient survival technique, and, it must be said, therefore illogical. When an enormous earthquake caused the entire island to suddenly sink beneath the waves it left no more Romulans to populate the planet. Any small pockets which may have remained may have been wiped out by the barbarian mammals which began to move over the planet in succeeding millenia. However it happened, there were no traces of the Romulans remaining when man began to build cities.

The continent which had housed New Romulus was gradually swallowed up as it was subducted by the movement of continental plates, and the sea eventually covered it.

Chapter 14.

Once the personnel were back in their positions, Commander Riker sat back in his chair, and ordered Data to set course back to the wormhole, and head there at full speed. Deanna sat with him, while Lieutenant Selar and Beverley attended to setting up the sick bay again.

Riker switched on the intra-ship communication, and said, 'Attention, all crew. We should find a different future than we left. It would be too much to hope that such a major change in the past would have no ripple effect, but with luck it may be a future in which humanity exists again. If it's too bad, we may have to come back again, and perhaps have a really good search for Revi and Pachek, to make sure they are dead, or take them back, but I'm hoping we may see a recognisable future. I'm afraid we may all have to find new places in it, though. I doubt anyone we know will still exist.'

'You may be overly pessimistic,' observed Data, as he switched off. 'The artificial comet did contain exactly the correct mass. It would all be converted to energy when it struck.'

'I hope so,' said Riker, unconvinced. He had a thought. 'Worf, is there any sign of those other ships Beverley saw last time we were going back?'

'None,' replied Worf, after a scan. 'If they are about, they are nowhere near here.'

'Did they come from our time, or an alternate future?' Riker mused.

Mary Anne sat in her seat idly reading a book, when there was a knock on her door. She hastily hid it, put her feet on the floor, and opened the door. It was Glock.

'Shouldn't you be in your turret?' she asked.

'There's no need till we go through,' he said. 'I did a wordsearch on your bible. It's like I said. The message is the same.'

'What sort of a wordsearch?' she asked suspiciously.

'I looked for 'profit',' he said. It was there forty four times.

Look, here are some. 'Isa 30:5 They were all ashamed of a people [that] could not **profit** them, nor be an help nor **profit**, but a shame, and also a reproach!'

She looked dubious. He said, 'I don't know why they wrote words in brackets like that. Here's another. This one is pretty straightforward. 'Isa 48:17 Thus saith the LORD, thy Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel; I [am] the LORD thy God which teacheth thee to **profit**, which leadeth thee by the way [that] thou shouldest go!'

'I don't think it's really the same,' she said doubtfully. 'What about, 'What doth it profit a man to gain the whole world, and lose his soul?'

'I didn't understand that one,' he admitted.

Soon the wormhole was right ahead. Beverley Crusher had returned to the bridge, more interested in what lay ahead than in the organisation of sickbay.

'No sign of those ships you saw before,' said Riker.

'Oh!' she said. 'I don't know if that's bad or good. I'll explain later. It's not important for now.'

'How are the shields?' asked Riker.

'Not good,' answered Worf. 'They are at only thirty per cent capacity. They could be recharged in another day.'

'The Romulan ship came through with no shields at all,' said Riker. 'I can't wait to know. Let's do it. Mister Data, set course through the wormhole!'

'Course set,' replied Data.

'Go!' said Riker, his heart beating faster than the norm.

'If we had waited another day,' observed Data, free to gossip once more, 'there is always the possibility that the wormhole may begin to contract. The better chance lies in going back now.'

'No, it's not about to contract,' said Beverley absently.

'How do you know that?' asked Riker incredulously.

She smiled wanly. 'Intuition. I'll explain that later too.'

There was no time for more discussion. They were in. The starfighter had turned and suddenly they were in the familiar state of timelessness.

Once again there was a disjointed feeling, and they felt a short period of being displaced, although the artificial gravity, and in some cases their seatbelts, kept them in place. The pattern of stars changed.

'Intriguing,' observed Data. 'Although there is a feeling of time passing, the ship's chronometers and my own register zero passage of time as we passed through.'

'Check the star maps,' said Riker. 'Make sure we are where we started. And at the same time.' A shiver ran through him. He would almost have preferred to be attacked instantly than to continue in ignorance.

Data fiddled with the computer for a few seconds.

'We are, sir,' he said. 'According to the star charts, this is the time and place from which we began. Computation is somewhat inaccurate because there are no stars nearby.'

'Well, I guess we head back for where Federation space should be, and see what's there,' said Riker, his breath oddly short. 'Set course for starbase 44. Where it should be, anyway.'

The Pinball Wizard set out at Warp One, still hoping not to attract attention while in the Neutral Zone, but this was not to be.

'We have company,' commented Worf after a few minutes. 'It is a Romulan starship. Of standard configuration. They are hailing us.'

'Onscreen,' said Riker.

'Federation starfighter,' said the Romulan captain, without wasting time on pleasantries, 'can you give me one good reason why I should not blast you to atomic particles for this unauthorised intrusion into Romulan space?'

'Well, those two minutes of peace were nice,' sighed Deanna.

The Pinball Wizard hung in space like a table tennis ball in front of the huge but gracious bulk of the Romulan warbird.

A feeling of joy welled up in William Riker's soul. This was recognisable peril. He might be in a fight in a few moments, without any useful shielding, and be destroyed along with his crew. But it was normal peril. If he lost, the galaxy would go along as normal, and Worf, at least, would go down happy.

In her cubicle Mary Anne's heart leapt too. She kept one hand on her weapon, but put a call through to engineering. 'Malcolm,' she said, 'we're home. If we don't manage to get ourselves blown out of the sky, you can get to be husband number only! If you're interested.'

'I think we could discuss this at some length,' he said. 'I'll talk to you later.'

'Would you believe that we entered a wormhole near earth,' Riker asked, 'and it came out just here?'

'I would find that difficult to believe,' answered the Romulan, 'since I have no information of a wormhole anywhere near.'

'Well, would you believe that I don't much care what you believe?' Riker felt that the Romulans had no intention of actually attacking, or they would have done so by now, but never trust a Romulan. 'If you feel like blowing us to bits, we will try and stop you, but we would just as soon be on our way.'

'Commander Riker?' asked the Romulan suddenly. 'Of the Enterprise? Have they realised how out of your depth you were on a ship that size, and given you this bathtub to command?'

'Sarel?' exclaimed Will. The two had had a confrontation near the Neutral Zone once, while Riker was temporarily in command. After some huffing and puffing both had gone on their way. Riker's heart leapt. Here was further proof that the Universe was back as it ought to be!

'I did refer to you as Commander Riker, in deference to your new... command. You might give me my due as

Tribune Sarel. I see they have found something small enough that you might be able to manage it. Now, will your first act as commander of this rowboat be to surrender it to me?'

Riker knew that this was byplay. Sarel knew of the armed might of the starfighter, although his lieutenants would probably have analysed the poor state of his shields by now. He had no particular desire to fight, but he knew that, apart from the general odium involved in surrendering a craft, surrender to the Romulans was likely to lead to extended torture and degradation. The Romulans regarded pain and its incitement as normal for prisoners.

'You may find this hard to believe, Sarel, sorry, Tribune Sarel,' he said with a smile, 'but I will die quite happily in battle with you. My crew will back me up.'

'Hear, hear!' echoed Worf heartily.

'Speak for yourselves,' muttered Glock unhappily.

'Yes, speak for yourselves,' echoed Sela, moving into view of the Romulan captain. 'We don't all agree with your macho posturing.'

'Yea, tell them, sister!' agreed Mary Anne, with her communicator turned off of course.

'Lady Sela?' said Sarel in surprise. 'What are you.. I mean, what you are doing there is your business, of course. Are you a captive of these brigands? What would you instruct us to do?'

'A week ago I would have instructed you to blow us all out of the sky,' she said, 'but things change. As a matter of fact, not only am I not a captive, but these humans.. saved me.'

Escort us to the edge of Romulan space. I will remain on board here until then, and transport over to you at that stage. There is also a Romulan named Dovor on board. He will return with me. How is it,' she continued, 'that you do not know of the wormhole? It was discovered by the Vardan Rak some weeks ago. I would have expected its existence to be known to all ships in the area.'

'The Vardan Rak is certainly in the area. I will contact it instantly, and confirm what you say,' Sarel replied.

The Vardan Rak was on its way back to Romulus. At Sarel's call, Tripeg appeared.

'Tribune Sarel,' he said, 'to what do I owe this pleasure?'

'I have received some information which I would like to confirm Tribune Tripeg,' replied Sarel.

'With pleasure. What do you wish to know?'

'I have heard that you have discovered a wormhole,' said Sarel without further preliminaries. 'Is this true?'

'Communications must be very efficient!' exclaimed Tripeg. 'We have sent a message to that effect to the High Command only fifteen minutes ago!'

'One likes to be in the forefront of information,' replied Sarel. 'My thanks for your information.' He said his farewells, and turned back on the communication with the tiny starfighter.

'My lady,' he said, 'the Vardan Rak say they have just recently concluded their explorations here, and have just sent the report to the High Council a few minutes ago. It is only a short time since they have made the discovery.'

'Impossible!' said Sela with a frown.

'No,' said Beverley Crusher, 'I think I know what has happened. Do you remember that the Romulan fighter came out of the wormhole before us after entering after? And when we were coming back we saw three ships? I think they were us, and the two Romulan ships! In fact, I'm sure. We sent a message when we were leaving, and I received it after we went back! I think that the two ends of the wormhole are traveling through time in opposite directions!'

'How can that be?' asked Mary Anne. 'Do you mean that if we go into the wormhole and return, we arrive back before we left?'

'Exactly,' said Beverley. 'In fact, I've been doing a few calculations, and if I'm right, the Romulan ship that discovered the wormhole would have arrived in the past after we left! That's why I was confident it wasn't about to close. I wonder whether they recorded a big asteroid or a comet?'

Sarel had become intrigued by all the happenings, and was quietly anxious to find out all that had happened. However, he was too polite to insist in the presence of Sela.

Riker and Sarel continued discussions but the hidden venom had died out of their byplay. Riker gave him only a vague outline of what had happened, but he was clearly intrigued.

'Before we depart for Federation space,' observed Sarel, 'it would be advisable to record what else we can of this wormhole. It may disappear before others arrive to investigate.'

Both ships flew through space to the appropriate coordinates and turned their attentions to the wormhole. For a few hours both scientific teams accumulated data about it. Then Riker contacted Tribune Sarel.

Chapter 15.

'Tribune,' Will Riker said, 'I think we've found as much as we can about the wormhole. I'd be grateful if you would escort us out of the Neutral Zone. The Enterprise will be waiting for us back at Starbase 44.'

'Just a moment, Tribune, if you please,' interposed Beverley Crusher. She turned to Riker. 'You haven't been paying attention, have you, Commander?' she asked sweetly.

He looked startled. Apart from not being used to being interrupted on the bridge when he was in command, he could see that there must be something important he had missed. He had to admit to himself, he had been concentrating only on getting back home, once he had learned home still existed.

'You were pretty upset when you found out there were two Will Rikers in the galaxy, weren't you?' she asked. When some of the others looked questioning, she explained, 'Will was involved in a transporter accident once where he was duplicated. There are two of him around now. Well, there are three of him now, in fact!'

'What are you talking about, Beverley?' he asked in exasperation.

Lieutenant Selar intervened. 'We have not arrived yet,' she said. 'The Enterprise is still somewhere out there. We may be playing golf in the holodeck at this moment. All of us are in two places at once just now.'

'Well,' said Mary Ann, 'we could prevent all of this ever

happening. All we have to do is hang around for a while, and when we see a freighter heading for the wormhole we blow it to kingdom come!

Worf laughed suddenly. The whole affair had become amusing, now that the problem had been resolved. 'It would not even be murder,' he laughed. 'All who would be killed are with us here, or back on primitive earth.'

He stopped laughing and began to consider the paradoxes. 'I suspect that it might be better not to create too many new paradoxes,' said Data, almost echoing his thoughts. 'The situation has been resolved. It is better to do nothing.'

'We could do worse,' added Deanna. 'We could simply intercept the freighter, and stop it passing. Then we would have two of all of us, and two of Sela and Dovor!'

'An interesting concept, that not killing me is worse than killing me,' said Sela. 'You may be coming around to a more Romulan pattern of thinking. Two of me might be a bonus, certainly, but one of Dovor is too many.'

'So what do we do?' asked Tribune Sarel with some amusement.

'If your ship can spare the time, Tribune,' said Sela, 'we will have to wait here for some days until the Enterprise arrives.'

'I can think of nothing more interesting than observing this amazing encounter,' Sarel replied. 'If a member of the High Council wants me to remain here, how can I refuse? I will await your pleasure.'

He switched off, and the screen went blank.

Suddenly Riker uttered an expletive. The others looked at

him in surprise.

'Does Commander Riker utter an obscenity every time he thinks?' asked Sela, as Riker hurriedly reestablished contact..

'Only when he comes up with an original idea,' remarked Sela.

'Not often enough to worry about, then,' said Sela.

'Can we contact Starbase 44 from here?' Riker asked Sarel, when he reappeared.

'Of course,' said Sarel. 'The frequencies of the starbase are not too secret.'

'I need to contact them on a Federation frequency,' he said excitedly. 'Can you get me a line to Admiral Wrigley?'

Sarel ordered his communications officer to accommodate Riker.

Riker settled into the communications seat, and was quickly shown how to operate the controls. He knew the appropriate frequency, and hurriedly tapped the right buttons.

'Starbase 44,' Riker said to the officer who appeared on the screen, 'this is William Riker, Executive Officer of the Enterprise. I urgently need to speak with Admiral Wrigley now!'

He was quickly put through. Wrigley looked puzzled.

'Hello, Commander Riker,' he said. 'This is somewhat out of protocol. Where is Captain Picard?'

'Admiral,' said Riker grimly, 'I have urgent information. I can't tell you now how I know. On stardate 48333.7 a Bajoran assassin will attempt to kill Ambassador Gul

Lurgen, as he arrives at a religious ceremony on Deck Six at 0742 hours. The assassin has been surgically altered, and goes by the name Altarin G'Norg. He is armed with a plastic knife.'

'My god!' gasped Wrigley, who was about to pooh-pooh the idea that an assassin could succeed with a plastic weapon, 'that's in about twenty minutes! I'll get back to you!'

'If you get back to me,' smiled Riker, 'you'll find I don't even remember telling you! I'll explain it all in a week or so!'

Admiral Wrigley hesitated at this bizarre addendum, but the time was too close. He switched off and called Security. Riker also switched off.

Malcolm sat with Mary Anne in the small dining area of the starfighter. They had progressed to holding hands. Their romance was providing some interest for their shipmates. Arrg was almost overcome with emotion, which made him scary indeed.

'You make this very difficult for me, you know,' he said.

'Geordi and Glock heard your proposal, so I would be humiliating you if I refused. So, I guess as a gentleman I have to say yes.'

'How romantic,' she smiled.

'Glock was scandalized, I have to tell you. He's trying to fit in, but the Ferengi are unreconstructed male chauvinists. They think they are being kind to a woman if they don't beat her too often.'

'Ferengi women don't do any proposing, then?' she asked.

'I don't think they do much off their own bat at all,' he said.

'I doubt if the Ferengi even bother to ask them to marry them. It's just, 'Hey you, come here!' You do realise that romances forged in times of stress and adventure are notoriously likely to break down in times of peace.'

'Ah, well,' she sighed, stirring whatever was in front of her, 'we'll probably split up after forty years or so. If we stay on the Enterprise we won't see too much stressless living!'

Sela sat with Deanna and Beverley in the small lounge of the starfighter.

'Thank you,' she said, putting a small data disk in her purse. 'I have found myself somewhat changed for the experience, but I find myself still uncomfortable in human company.'

'I don't understand how you can hate humans so much,' said Beverley. 'Did you hate your mother so?'

'I understand,' said Deanna. 'Sela, I suggest you obtain some psychology books on the subject of prison camp experiences. Earth certainly has books on the topic. It is not unusual for prisoners in desperate conditions to identify with their jailers. When you were young it would have been necessary for you to identify with your Romulan heritage and reject your mother, in order to psychologically survive. But now that need is past.

'It should be possible for a Romulan to look inward enough to exorcise these fears. You may come to accept your human side.'

'My years of growing were all Romulan. I may not have a human side. But we will see. You are not entirely correct in your analysis. My hatred was most specifically toward the Enterprise crew, for sending my mother back to her death

and humiliation.' Sela was surprised to note within herself that she had not reacted with revulsion to the implication of a certain insanity in her behaviour. She considered Dovor's behaviour in that light.

'Ambassador Spock never came to accept his human side,' commented Beverley.

'Yes he did,' said Deanna. 'But he did not change his behaviour. He preferred to remain a Vulcan, but he became quite reconciled to his mother's heritage.'

'How do you know that?' challenged Beverley.

'Because I met him,' answered Deanna.

Sela rose to her feet.

'I will return to Romulus,' she said. 'If we meet again, it may be as enemies, but I will just be fighting for my world. I hope it may be in peace.'

'Perhaps Romulus will change its introverted ways,' said Beverley. 'You would make an ideal ambassador.'

The three moved off to the transporter room, where Riker waited. Sela went to him.

'Make no mistake,' she said, 'I am still a Romulan. But I have learned something from this debacle. Humans are not the ogres I had thought. Weak, indecisive, and often unintelligent, but not monsters.'

A smile flickered over her face.

'My moment of truth came when I saw what my people had become without you. In some mysterious fashion you have brought a sort of balance to the galaxy. You are one of the least intelligent of races, apart from the Klingons, but you seem to respond to challenges. In any case, we seem better

off with you than without you.'

'And best wishes to you, too,' grinned Riker.

She stepped onto the transporter. Dovor stood sullenly waiting. He guessed that Sela was relying on his silence about the matter, and that he would have to maintain it, if he were not to become a pariah among his people.

'In any case, a race that is capable of inventing a game like golf must have its virtues,' said Sela. 'A game designed to calm the mind and enhance peaceful deliberation.'

Sela disappeared in a shimmer.

'She never did see you play golf, Will, did she?' said Deanna.

Aboard the Romulan vessel, Sela stepped off the transporter platform. Sarel welcomed her formally. It was the first time they had spoken without human presence.

'Thank you, Tribune,' she answered.

'Do you wish accomodation with Dovor?' he asked.

'No, I think my association with Dovor is a thing of the past,' she answered. 'Our ambitions now diverge. My experiences on this little adventure have modified my views very much.'

'I understand that the humans pursued you into the past under the impression that you were about to commit some crime against them,' he said neutrally. 'I wonder that they had let you live this long. Perhaps our intervention saved your lives.'

'Not our lives,' she said, 'but perhaps our freedoms. We did intend them some harm, but as it was they... saved my life. Dovor, certainly, may have faced prison, for some actions

he performed against them. But I wonder whether their curious system of justice could have convicted either of us of any crime? An interesting speculation. It is curious that we may have escaped punishment if they judged us insane. I suspect that Dovor is. Perhaps I was.'

Sarel did not let his astonishment at this revelation show. 'Have you accomplished anything?' he asked. 'During your imprisonment did you manage to steal any secrets of, say, their technology?'

Sela opened her purse and took out a computer disk.

'Only this,' she smiled. 'It's about time the Romulan empire was introduced to golf.'

Sela had transferred back to living quarters on the Romulan vessel, but a curious informality developed between the two crews. Some days later a small freighter appeared, while the warbird stood in front of the Pinball Wizard, and cloaked them both. Both crews watched as it moved uncertainly, lined itself up, and vanished suddenly. On this occasion only Sela had the curious feeling of watching a vessel in which she knew she was traveling. She had a wish that they could have intervened, and stopped the ship, but realised that was impractical. Who knew what effect it would have?

After this bit of excitement, there was another period of waiting.

The members of the crew of the Pinball Wizard were given welcomes as guests of the Romulans, and some of the Romulan crew tried out the new game of golf. Mary Anne showed them her basketball game, but it was not subtle

enough for their tastes, so she was forced to spend her spare time competing against Malcolm and Arrg.

Playing Arrg was fun. It was also not very challenging. She would be surrounded by a team of snarling wolves who would instantly back off if challenged, and who were totally non-aggressive. But Arrg loved it.

Riker felt it only fair that all the scientific data recorded by the Pinball Wizard in the past, and of the wormhole, should be shared with their hosts, but he kept secret the arms cache they had obtained. Some Romulans were invited over to partake the hospitality of the starfighter, but the number was restricted, both for reasons of security and space. Sarel was interested, among other things, in Riker's collection of old earth music. Riker copied it for him.

Three days later, the advent of the Enterprise was detected. The Romulan ship moved off out of detection range, and waited. Sarel had been fascinated by all the proceedings, and had remained in very good humor. All of them watched from afar as the Enterprise dropped out of warp, and stopped near the wormhole. Now the others from the expedition had the strange feeling of knowing that they were on that ship over there. Sarel was unaffected by this feeling, but was intrigued by the happenings.

'I can't let them pass without offering a greeting,' he said jovially. He opened a channel, and hailed the Enterprise. 'Enterprise, how pleasant to see you visiting us. Have a good trip. I'm sure all will go well, Commander Riker. Don't worry, be happy. A member of the Romulan High Council wishes you well. No need to reply.'

He shut off. 'I don't think we need to tell Commander Riker that the member of the High Council is Lady Sela. He might not understand.'

'I'm sure he doesn't,' grinned Riker. 'Where did you get 'Don't worry, be happy'?'

'I discovered it in the music chips you lent me,' replied Sarel. 'Very pleasant.'

Once the other Pinball Wizard had split from the Enterprise, and vanished into the wormhole, the Enterprise turned about and began to warp away. Riker immediately called it and announced that he was back.

'Number One, is that you?' asked Picard in surprise. 'You just went through.'

'We were very quick,' said Riker with a grin. 'I'll explain it all later. We even managed to bring back a couple of passengers. One of them is your old friend Lady Sela.'

'This is all very mysterious,' said Picard, 'but I suppose our first priority is to leave the Neutral Zone before some incident occurs. We'll wait for you to catch up.'

'Not a problem, sir,' replied Riker. 'We are being escorted to safety by Tribune Sarel. We'll catch up with you out there.'

Picard was perturbed, because he did not know what was happening, but obviously Commander Riker was not troubled, so he took the advice, and the Enterprise moved up to warp six and headed out of the Neutral Zone. The Pinball Wizard and the warbird followed them, a strangely mismatched pair.

The *Enterprise* met the *Pinball Wizard* near the boundary

of Romulan space. The small starfighter descended easily in one of the huge docking bays, and the crew climbed out. The giant Romulan vessel stood nearby.

On the Enterprise the inhabitants of Ten Forward looked uneasily at the huge vessel hanging before them. But no alerts had been sounded, so they simply continued to drink their drinks and watch.

After the days spent on the small craft the expanse of the bigger ship was almost akin to stepping out into the open spaces of a planet. Each of the passengers moved apart from the others slightly, establishing a larger body space again.

Jean-Luc Picard was waiting on the bridge.

'Welcome back, Number One,' he said, as Riker, Data and Deanna and Selar entered. The others had made beelines for their particular kingdoms, to make sure that nobody had let things slide in their absences. 'I gather that something, at least, happened, since you brought back a pair of passengers, without their ship.'

'It's a long story,' said Riker, 'and it's probably the most traumatic experience of my life!'

'Did you succeed in what you attempted?'

'Well, success in this case was that nothing happened,' smiled Riker. 'I'll explain it all later. Your old friend Sela was there'

'Yes,' frowned Picard, 'a most mysterious person. She certainly looks like Tasha Yar. Perhaps that led her to her delusion.'

'She is certainly a student of human history,' remarked

Deanna. 'She knew more about it than Will. Perhaps she came across Tasha in her studies. Her traumatic experiences with her own mother may have left her looking for a substitute mother.'

'Perhaps that's it,' smiled Picard. 'Were there any other benefits to the trip?'

'From a scientific and philosophical point of view, the trip was very successful,' said Commander Data. 'We have photographed the surface of the earth extensively sixty-five million years in the past, revealing details of its surface still unknown to geographers. We have recordings of movements of the stars at that time, and have comprehensive astronomical photographs, as well as a pictorial record of a collision of a comet with the planet Jupiter. In addition we have resolved a number of time-travel paradoxes. If one travels into the past and alters one's history, one does not cease to exist, although one's origin is gone.'

'Don't remind me, Data,' said Riker, wincing.

'Very well, Commander,' replied Data, thinking to himself, *that must imply that he has a perfect memory of the event himself, thus needing no memory stimulation.*

'Shall I omit reference to the matter in my report?'

'No, Data, tell all.'

At that moment the doors opened and Ambassador Spock entered the bridge.

'Ambassador,' Riker said in surprise, 'I thought you were going back to Romulus.'

'Indeed, I am,' said Spock. 'Your return has been so quick

that I have not had time to depart, so when you signaled the Enterprise to come and fetch you, I decided to come and hear the results. Presumably nothing much has happened, since you have returned immediately.'

'But we haven't!' exclaimed Riker. 'We've been weeks. I can't get used to the time anomalies myself! All will be explained in everybody else's report. I don't know that I understand it all myself!'

'Were the Romulans up to no good?' asked Picard.

'Their intentions were bad,' said Deanna, 'but we got there before they did anything.'

'So they did nothing wrong?' said Picard.

'They told a few half-truths,' observed Selar. 'In this case, that was quite bad, but possibly hard to prosecute in a court of law.'

'Well, we don't have them,' said Picard. 'It would have been difficult to hold them when you were being escorted by a Romulan ship out of Romulan territory. In fact, I'm pleased they did not try to make an incident out of it.'

'I think they may have been embarrassed by the actions of the renegades,' said Deanna. 'In any case, they have been very cooperative.'

'Perhaps it might be diplomatic to invite the ship to starbase, and thank them formally,' mused Jean-Luc. 'They seem to be hanging about to see what happens.'

'Couldn't hurt,' said Riker. 'They seemed a decent lot.'

'So the result of your mission has been the status quo,' said Picard. 'Often a satisfactory outcome.'

'Actually, sir,' said Data, 'we have returned with quite a

wealth of - profit, as Mister Glock would say. We have a cache of weapons which have never been invented, we have astronomical data as I have mentioned, and a number of interesting theoretical time-travel paradoxes have been resolved.'

'I can't wait to hear the explanation of all this!' said Picard. 'I realise time travel involves anomalies, but it's so strange that you don't seem to have been gone more than a few minutes!'

'The photographs of the surface of the earth so far back should be of interest to a keen archaeologist like yourself, sir,' said Riker. 'Did you know that a comet wiped out the dinosaurs?'

'Of course, Number One,' he replied. 'About sixty-five million years ago. If it had not, we would not be here now. Actually, it was not a comet. There is some evidence that it was actually an asteroid, or metallic meteorite, which struck the earth somewhere around the Gulf of Mexico.'

'How do you know it was a meteor?' asked Riker in astonishment.

'There was a stratum of earth found which had far too great a concentration of iridium,' replied Picard. 'This led to the conclusion that an asteroid had struck, and later its impact site was discovered under the earth. This led to the whole theory of the extinction of the dinosaurs.'

'I wonder how they discovered it when it was a comet,' said Riker thoughtfully.

'What?' asked Picard.

'It'll all be in the mission report. I wish you had come on

this mission,' sighed Riker.

'By the way, Number One,' said Picard, looking about him, 'I have found that book I promised you.'

He handed Riker a tiny recording chip.

'What book?' asked Riker in puzzlement.

'About Atlantis. You remember, we were playing golf recently, and you asked about unsolved mysteries on earth?'

'You said there weren't any,' said Riker. He checked himself. 'Well, you said that to this me.'

Picard looked at him oddly, and decided to recommend some shore leave.

'No, I told you about Atlantis. This is Terran archaeology's greatest mystery. A civilisation which appeared and died sixty million years before humans began to walk upright. It was discovered below the sea in the twenty first century, when the complete satellite scan of earth's surface took place. They found remains preserved and fossilized for millions of years, with a genetic genotype different from anything else on earth. The scientist who solves that mystery will be a celebrity!'

'I believe you could become very well known in the field of archaeology,' said Riker, sitting back in his chair, 'if you were to instigate a DNA comparison between those remains and the Romulans. Just a hunch.'

Epilogue.

Picard was fascinated by the events described by Commander Riker and Commander Data. They were logged automatically as the two of them talked, and Picard classified them at top priority. This information would be available to only the most senior members of Starfleet. When they were finished, Data left, but Picard signaled Riker to stay. He switched on his communications screen, and said to Riker, 'Before you go, Will, there is someone who wants to thank you, even though you seemed to have no memory of saving him!'

The screen came to life, and a large Cardassian appeared. 'Gul Lurgen,' said Picard, 'I would like to introduce you to Commander William Riker.'

A smile broke out on the Cardassian's face.

'Commander,' he said, 'Do you still maintain your innocence in saving me? It occurred to me that someone may have masqueraded as you in order to save me, for some reason. It was a computer transmission, so imaging would be possible.'

'No, Gul Lurgen,' said Riker with a smile, 'I remember it all now. It's rather complex, but I went on a mission in time, and when I got back I remembered you had been killed. Since I was back before that time, I was able to warn the Admiral. It's all difficult to explain.'

'You mean, you altered time to save me?' asked the Cardassian in astonishment, his face grave. 'That was a noble thing to do!'

Altering time was generally something regarded as unallowable by the Federation, so he was very impressed. This would make an even more favorable impression on the Cardassian government. Riker felt he should ameliorate the sin, though.

'Generally, altering history is a no-no,' he agreed, 'but considering it was only a day ago I thought it would be allowable.' Especially after all the other alterations that had been going on, he thought.

'I certainly think it was!' said Gul Lurgen. 'A chilling thought, that I was actually dead!'

'Well, I'm glad that there was a positive outcome to our mission,' said Riker. 'We must meet on Starbase.'

'We must,' agreed the Cardassian. 'I must at least buy you a beverage. I believe you are a player of note at this game of poker. Your shipmates have been educating me. I may not need a retirement fund after all. We must play.'

'We must,' grinned Riker. 'Go easy on me!'

They said farewells, and Riker switched off the screen.

Picard said, 'I hope the goodwill you have gained by saving him isn't lost when he returns home impoverished! But seriously, Will, a good job.'

'It would never have happened if you'd been there, Captain,' Riker said. 'I nearly destroyed everything! But at least this makes the whole trauma worthwhile. I'd hate to have had the worst experience of my life just bring us back to status quo!'

As Malcolm and Mary Anne walked along a corridor, they

met Chr' Gyr'.

'Hello, Malcolm,' she chirruped. 'I see you have female company.'

'Indeed I do,' he replied. 'Not only did I not faint when she spoke to me, but I didn't faint when she asked me to marry her!'

'What did you answer?' Chr' asked.

'I'm still thinking about it.'

'Oh, I thought I had a more definite answer than that!' said Mary Anne.

'Well, it's true,' he said. 'I think about it all of the day and half the night.'

Chr' Gyr' looked taken aback.

'But you did not know each other until recently. I understood human mating rituals generally took more time.'

'Oh, I don't know,' mused Malcolm, 'we must have known each other at least.. how long, dear?'

'Oh, at least half an hour,' Mary Anne laughed. 'We've managed to get to know each other very well in the last half hour!'

Chr' Gyr' looked puzzled. She was on her way to the canteen for a meal, so they went along.

'It'll be good to get back to real imitation food, after having to eat dinosaur,' remarked Mary Anne, as Chr' moved ahead of them in line. Chr' Gyr' moved along the row picking an enormous amount of food to put on her tray.

'Whoever made up the expression, 'eating like a bird' hadn't met you,' observed Mary Anne.

'They hadn't seen emus feeding, either,' said Malcolm. 'That's something I'll have to show you, perhaps on our honeymoon.'

'You are up to planning your honeymoon?' asked Chr' Gyr' in surprise.

'Oh, he wants to go to some tinpot little national park,' said Mary Anne lightly, 'but we've been there already.'

'I thought you had never met before today,' said Chr', looking baffled. They relented and told her the story of their adventure, thus putting her on a footing with the highest levels of security.

'How did you know we didn't know each other?' asked Malcolm afterwards.

'I heard it from my roommate,' she said.

'That's me,' said Mary Anne. 'I told her everything I knew in the first hour I met her.'

'I may have to have you fitted with a turn-off switch!' said Malcolm in mock alarm.

'Once I'm married to you, I don't have to actually keep talking to you, you know,' said Mary Anne. 'I just march you around like a trophy until I get tired of you.'

'That's a nuisance,' said Chr'. 'I've just broken her in as a roommate. Now I'll have to go through the whole process again.'

'All of two days wasted,' agreed Mary Anne. 'Actually, we're just engaged so far. We do have a period called engagement, so we probably won't get married until the end of the tour of duty.'

'I thought 'engagement' was a term used about warfare?'

asked Chr'.

'That's what I'm afraid of,' sighed Mary Anne. 'Actually it's a time when the couple find out if they really get along. They make all their plans for the future, like where they're going to live and so on. Who is going to wash the dishes. You know.'

'Actually if you live on a starship,' she added after a moment's thought, 'there's not too much planning. We just change cabins, and there are no dishes. Let's go see the Captain and get it organized!'

'It's going to be tough keeping her in line,' remarked Malcolm, 'she seems to be a master of every martial art known to man! Her hobby is lifting houses off their foundations with her left hand.'

'I've told you a million times not to exaggerate, dear,' said Mary Anne.

'Well, that's the first time,' he said, 'but I'm sure you'll get there!'

'If the marriage doesn't work out,' said Chr', 'at least we'll get a good double act for the Comedy Festival.'

'If I can't get the last word, I'll just have to stop you talking,' said Mary Anne, kissing him on the mouth.

'So,' said Chr' Gyr', 'we're going to have to stop calling Engineering 'Bachelors' Quarters!'

'We?' he enquired, breaking the clinch.

'I am a girl!' she said, lifting her beak proudly. 'I can eye the bachelors with the best of them!'

Malcolm laughed. 'Would either of you like another cup?' he asked, and he took their orders and went over to the

counter.

'What happened to the big romance with Commander Riker?' asked Chr'. 'Proximity failed?'

'He failed golf,' smiled Mary Anne.

In Ten Forward, Commander Riker sat among some friends, regaling a few of his friends with the more classified version of the adventure. He stopped as he realised his listeners were staring across the room. He turned, and saw that they were looking at Ensign Arrg, who sat alone as usual looking at the stars flash by.

'I'll bet he could be really scary,' whispered one of the women.

'You're right there,' said Riker fervently. He called across the room, 'Ensign Arrg, come over and we'll scare up a few new friends for you!'

As Arrg looked around with a start, and rose to his feet with a ferocious scowl, one of the others said nervously, 'Won't he be offended?'

'Nonsense,' said Riker. As Arrg approached, he said, 'You're not offended, are you, ensign?'

'Oh, no!' said Ensign Arrg, enthusiastically. He paused. 'What does 'offended' mean?'

'It's a concept neither your people nor the Vulcans seem to have developed,' said Riker, 'and you can do well without it! Have a drink on me!'

Guinan had drifted across as if she had predicted the order. 'Hi,' she said, and pronounced Arrg's name correctly. The hair stood up on the limbs of the listeners. 'That's his name,' Riker offered to them kindly.

Guinan continued speaking to Arrg. 'How are you finding Starfleet? Did you enjoy your first mission?'

'It was wonderful,' he snarled. 'I made friends.' He was ferocious with emotion, and the others stirred nervously. Guinan and Riker remained unmoved.

'I'm sure you'll make lots more,' she smiled.

'Arrg was telling me he's a mean drunk,' said Riker to the others. 'Luckily we don't have alcohol on the Enterprise.' 'I don't recall...' began Arrg in surprise, but Guinan interrupted.

'It's what passes for a sense of humor in the Commander, Ensign,' she smiled. 'He's just lightening up the atmosphere. But don't let him drink tea, Commander.' She drifted off back to the bar in a swift movement.

'Was she joking?' asked Riker.

'I don't know, Commander,' said Arrg nervously. 'I've never drunk tea.'

'Well, we won't start tonight!' said Riker. 'I don't know if Guinan has a sense of humor! Folks, I'd like you all to meet Ensign Arrg, one of my shipmates on the mission.' Riker went on to explain to the gathering something of Arrg's history, and his need for the antipheromone. The others became quite animated, and Arrg began to relax and enjoy their company.

'What was it like, Commander,' asked someone, 'when the ensign lost his perfume?'

'You'll have to try it, Matthew,' replied Riker, 'but preferably not when we're in the middle of a fight with the Borg!'

'Well, anyway, ensign' said another, 'are you satisfied with your first real mission?'

'Not really,' said Arrg. 'I was supposed to be a gunner, but I failed when I was needed.'

'When did you fail?' asked Riker in surprise.

'When the animal attacked you,' said Arrg. 'The others were afraid, and could not act, but I was not affected. I was too slow in reacting. I could not bring myself to fire my phaser. I love Starfleet, but I am not cut out for artillery.'

'Oh, what were you thinking of?' asked Matthew.

'I thought I might try public relations,' said Arrg. 'Maybe one day I could be a diplomat, even an ambassador.'

There was a moment's silence.

'We'll think of something for you,' said Riker eventually.

Still later, in the Captain's quarters, Sarel and Sela were sipping drinks with Picard and Spock.

'This is quite delicious, Picard,' said Sarel.

'It's real,' said Picard. 'I keep a supply for big occasions. I feel that the Enterprise having a member of the Romulan High Council and a Romulan Tribune as guests qualifies as a big occasion. The replicators can exactly duplicate things, but sometimes it seems not quite the same.'

'It is a momentous occasion for me,' said Spock, 'to meet without rancor with someone who was recently a deadly enemy.'

'I have certainly changed,' said Sela. 'I am still Romulan, but not so committed against change. When I saw what Romulans had become in that other timeline, I realized that we will change, whatever happens. We have to make that

change the best possible. Perhaps some reconciliation with Vulcan is the best path. I will not actively oppose it.'

'But you will not join our underground,' said Spock.

'But it may not be the best path,' she said. 'I will just go home for the moment. I have to decide on a new path in life. That seems worth taking some time to consider.'

'I do find it somewhat off-putting,' remarked Picard, 'that everyone I know who is half-human regards themselves as non-human. Spock thinks of himself as Vulcan, Deanna thinks of herself as Betazoid, and Sela thinks of herself as Romulan!'

'It's like a joke,' said Sela. 'If one has to explain it, it was too difficult for you.'

Spock was startled, though he did not change expression. Sela had made a joke!

'Actually, that was one of the critical factors in my conversion,' Sela added. 'When we met the Romulans in the alternate timeline, they had no tolerance. In this time I have been completely accepted by the Romulans as one of them. The only missing factor was the humans.'

'As you have noted,' observed Spock, 'in that timeline the Vulcans and Klingons were also missing.'

'Point taken,' she said. 'But the humans were the catalyst.'

'I am really enjoying this gathering,' said Picard suddenly.

'I don't know that I am up to the intellectual level required, but I feel that our meeting like this is some sort of breakthrough.'

Sarel smiled. 'Of course, we may have some explaining to do after accepting an invitation like this. I may be hauled

over the coals for it, but I could not resist.'

'I ordered you to do it,' smiled Sela. 'I will walk the coals for you.'

'My crew were fascinated by the chance to walk the corridors of a Federation starship,' said Sarel. 'I told them not to steal too many secrets.'

'Any secrets they can learn by walking the corridors should not be too major,' laughed Picard. 'And if they try it will keep Commander Worf in practice.'

'It was interesting to see earth sixty five million years ago,' said Sela, almost wistfully. 'It would be interesting, from a scientific point of view, to see it now. Perhaps soon.'

'The Enterprise would be at your service,' said Picard. 'The chance to make a peaceful overture to a member of the High Command would certainly bend Starfleet Command to your pleasure.'

'It is somewhat assuring to know that my human heritage does have some legitimacy, so to speak,' said Spock. 'You have found humans to be a sort of yeast in the bread of the galaxy?'

'Yes,' smiled Sela, 'like little microbes giving off gas. I'm sorry, I should not be so insulting. A bad habit. Perhaps one day I will be able to refer to my human heritage without wincing.'

'I have almost reached that stage myself,' observed Spock. Picard laughed.