

The Girl Who Knew Too Much

by Edward McArdle©

Prologue.

The planet Argonaut was the fourth planet in its star system, where the seventh planet was actually a second star. It meant that for part of the year the night was almost as bright as the day, but the planet was big enough that even with two stars, the atmosphere had not boiled away. Argonaut had a breathable atmosphere, but a slightly high gravity for someone used to earth.

It had seas, but they were shallow, and water was one of its scarcer resources. It was sparsely populated, with the centers of population around the few rainfall areas. The planet had been colonised long ago, by a race whose members bore some resemblance to very tough humanoids with tusks jutting out from their lower jaws. It was now a spaceport mainly, although farmers farmed parts of it, and miners tried to dig out its few valuable minerals. There were big cities, but they were far from the spaceport, with its occasional traffic bringing large groups from time to time, waiting to change over to another ship. One day a space station might be built there, and traffic on the surface would drop back to almost nothing, and the planet settle back into stagnation.

Today, however, the starship Enterprise was drawing near, and the group of colonists waiting to transfer to her waited in increasing expectancy. They were originally farmers and shopkeepers, and this was their great adventure, a tearing up of roots, a transplantation. Not used to variations in their lives, they were treating this stopover as a short holiday, but they were filled with an unfamiliar sense of displacement. Deep down they longed to be settled once more.

In a city far from the spaceport, a small shop stood, looking almost vacant. It had been there with its present tenant for only

a few years, and he often closed up altogether, and disappeared for months at a time.

"Is it safe to come in?"

The caller peered into the darkness of his host's house, which stood beside the shop, and was cheerfully answered, "Yes, come in."

The owner of the house had been watching a video screen. On it was a news broadcast, in which the local police corps had arraigned a "suspect" in a bank robbery. The visitor hesitated to interrupt his host. The two of them watched for a moment.

Crime, which was infrequent both because of the smallness of the population and the certainty and severity of retribution, was news. A single tusked member of the Planetary Corps faced a white-faced member of his own race. The man had a phaser, but seemed to lack the will to raise it.

"Harlick Vobos, you are charged with the robbery of the Varran Postal Office. Do you wish to dispute the charge?"

"Yes," cried the man desperately. "I am innocent!"

"Unfortunately, the evidence declares otherwise," observed the Planetary Corps member. "Fortunately, no one was harmed during your crime. You will serve four years in prison. Unless you wish to resist arrest, in which case you will be killed."

"No. No, I'll surrender," whimpered the offender, letting the weapon drop at his feet.

Darras switched off the set, and turned to greet his visitor more formally. He was a man of medium size, but with a natural confidence that let him assume a sort of command. His visitor was tall, but self-effacing, with an evasive manner.

"How are you, Jezakak?" Darras asked. "Have you a commission?"

"No," replied his visitor. "This is in fact a purely social visit. I heard on the grapevine that you were living here, as I was passing through, and thought I would drop in for old times' sake. I'm staying on the planet for about eight months, in the main city. And how are you?"

"Doing well," Darras smiled. "I have been getting the odd commission, and I charge enough that an occasional commission is enough. Otherwise, it is a life of leisure."

"A life of leisure for you generally means about twenty hours a day work," Jezakak smiled in return. "Have you any new toys you can show me?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," said Darras, getting to his feet. He led his visitor through a hidden door into a well-set-up laboratory. Electronic equipment seemed to lie about at random, but Darras knew where every item was.

"I'm amazed you would choose to live on a world like Argonaut," remarked Jezakak. "It has one of the toughest justice systems I have ever come across."

"Actually, because the law is so tough, they don't expect to encounter much crime," replied Darras. "And in fact I don't commit any on Argonaut. I just build my toys. This is my latest pride and joy."

What he indicated was an amorphous pile of electronics.

"It's very compact," observed Jezakak. "I can't tell what it is going to look like, though."

"You are as near as I have to a friend, Jezakak," replied Darras, "but if you saw this in its final form I would have to kill you. I wouldn't suggest coming uninvited into this house."

"I guessed that might be the case," his guest said, with a grimace. "I would never just walk in on you. You have a small

reputation."

"Only among the right people, I hope." Darras laughed humorlessly.

"Is it for a special purpose?"

"I do have a commission. This is my weapon. I think I have surpassed myself. As it happens, I don't have to worry about delivery. My customer, and his clients, are passing through here."

Jejakak poked around a little in the electronics, but disturbed nothing.

"You have always puzzled me," he said after a while. "You are, in my opinion at least, the greatest living bio-computer expert in the sector, if not the galaxy. You could have fame and fortune, but you choose to pursue your wealth through - your hobby."

"That's very sycophantic of you," said Darras with a smile, and Jejakak smiled back, taking it with the good humor intended. "But you don't have to use euphemisms here, old friend," laughed Darras. "I am certain the area is not bugged. I use some of my little-famed expertise to ensure it. I arrange assassinations. Very expensive, but very sure. And untraceable. My weapons are only used once, and terminate themselves after completing their assignments."

"And only you even knows what the weapon looks like!"

"And the purchaser. It is part of what they pay for."

"What if they decide to keep the.. weapon?"

"They can't. The weapon terminates itself. It can't be overridden by the purchaser. It's in the programming. Actually, this is my passion, the shop is my hobby."

"What are these?" asked Jejakak, pointing to a few smaller piles

of electronics. "Smaller editions?"

"Not all of my creations have to be for murder," said Darras with a laugh. "In one of my identities I make models for entertainment parks, toys, and so on. But they are just for practice. These are my darlings." He patted the inert pile of electronics.

"So you do this because you love the danger," suggested Jezakak. "It might be fun to work for you one day."

"Never work for me," said Darras. "I do not leave loose ends. But I would suggest that you have cultivated your friendship with me because you also like the frisson of danger."

"Perhaps," he admitted. "Still, you are very good at what you do. I think I like to associate with greatness."

"Thank you. In fact, I think I may have come fairly close to perfection with my latest toy. A pity to lose it afterward, but I can then try to get still closer with the next."

Jezakak noticed that wires of some sort ran from the 'toy' into the wall.

"What is it plugged into? If I may ask," he added quickly.

"It is reading in information. It has a huge memory capacity, but I am mainly providing it what it needs. A perfect understanding of human anatomy, and its vulnerabilities. A knowledge of all the martial arts on record. I'm also feeding it a lot of stuff from encyclopaedias Who knows what may be useful to it, and it's probably listening to us now, absorbing what we say."

Jezakak looked taken aback.

"Us? Now?" he said.

"Not to worry," laughed Darras. "You're not likely to meet again. It isn't you I have been hired to kill."

"Well, I hope we never meet again," said Jezakak formally to the

pile of electronic devices. It did not respond.

Jezakak and Darras drank together and talked over old times, then Jezakak rose to his feet to leave. "I'll see you soon," he said.

"Not too soon," said Darras. "I'm off to town for a while."

"Do you have much more work to do on your new toy?"

"Not much," said Darras thoughtfully, and half to himself. "The main problem now is getting it safely on the Enterprise."

Chapter 1.

Aboard the Enterprise, Captain Jean-Luc Picard sat, lost in reverie, on the bridge. There were only a few crew members present, including Commander Data, who sat methodically scanning space around them from his module. Commander William Riker came onto the bridge, and sat down in the chair beside the captain. After a few moments he spoke.

"A penny for your thoughts, sir?"

Picard jerked to attention. "Oh, sorry, Number One. I was just lost in thought for a moment. I have these occasional moments when I feel a bit of depression, but I know they'll pass."

"Depression?" asked Riker thoughtfully. "It's not something I notice about you much."

"Oh, very mild." Picard smiled. "I've never noticed it about you, either. No, just sometimes when I have nothing to do but sit for a while, something lowers my spirits momentarily. But it never lasts long."

"Anything in particular this time?"

"I think it's probably a mood that just comes and goes," shrugged Picard, "but this time I was thinking about our passengers."

"The ones we're picking up on Argonaut?"

"Yes. Over two hundred persons going off an enormous distance in hopes of finding their El Dorado. A story told a thousand times. They never find it. Usually just toil and danger, and the riches never come."

"I can't believe you," grinned Riker. "You, of all people, to pity people for going out to explore the unknown frontiers!"

Picard smiled thinly. "I know. But we keep going, looking at new things. They are going to be stuck on an unknown planet, an enormous distance from the main byways. They'll probably just farm and build, and the tourists and scientists they expect to make them wealthy will never come because it's too far."

"In other words," said Riker, "they'll be in much the same situation as humans were before we became aware there were other worlds out there."

"True," admitted Picard, "but they do know. There will only be a small band of them, technologically handicapped, and they will know that there is a larger universe, to which they will have only limited access."

"Do you know much about this world?" asked Riker. "It may be paradise."

"No," Picard conceded, "I haven't studied it yet. Our job is simply to take them there. It may be interesting to find out what I can. I believe that one of their hopes is to attract archaeologists, so it may be interesting to study while we are there. Actually, I may not be able to find out a lot. The science vessel which found the place suffered a minor computer breakdown, and had to return without investigating too deeply."

"A computer breakdown?" said Riker with a frown. "That's unfortunate."

He meant that it was disturbing. Computer breakdowns were very rare because they had reached a level of sophistication that included deep levels of redundancy, so there should always be backups. But computers had become so complex there was always something could go wrong that had not been considered by the manufacturers, and a computer breakdown could leave a ship helpless. Even a small malfunction would have led the scientists to abort their mission and return to a starbase.

"Anyway," he continued, "the best thing for a depressed mood is to get out and do something. What about a general inspection?"

"That would mean making the whole ship suffer for my mood," said Picard, "but it is a good suggestion. There are parts of the ship I rarely visit. A walk around would be useful. Would you like to come?"

"Certainly," replied Riker heartily. He traversed much more of the ship in the course of his duties than the captain, but he liked to walk around and keep an eye on things. "The colonists are going to be housed on the ship. Let's have a look at some suitable sites."

"It's Doctor Crusher's province to organize those," said Picard, "but it's as good as any. You have the bridge, Mister Data."

"Very good, Captain," responded Data, as the two of them left.

Picard always enjoyed any part of the Enterprise, but tended to avoid those parts with children. As he and Riker strolled along a young girl came around a corner, scowling to herself, and nearly walked into them. She jerked to a halt, looked at Picard in alarm, and fled past them.

"Well, it's nice to know I make some impression on the passengers," said Picard with a rueful smile.

"We have a shortage of trolls, hobgoblins and boogeymen on board," grinned Riker, "so parents have to use you. 'If you don't

behave the Captain will get you'!"

"It's reassuring to know that I still have a useful function to perform on the ship," said Picard sardonically.

Alfred Simpkins was one of the civilians aboard the Enterprise. A qualified teacher, he had applied for the position of schoolmaster aboard the Enterprise on a whim, and was startled to win it. After his few years in regular schools he found this job remarkably easy, for the most part. In fact, it tended towards the boring. The children of Enterprise personnel tended to be highly intelligent, and very focused on achievement, so discipline was easy. This was a great positive for him, as discipline was not his strong suit, and he was very good at all the other aspects. As the number of children aboard was not large, there were few schoolteachers. He had a mixture of grades three to six.

The other unusual aspect of the job was that he was in constant contact with the parents of his students. In Ten Forward he had instituted an informal rule that he would not discuss students as he sat with their parents socially, although he was always interested to hear any gossip about them. He was a rather reserved person, and found that he tended to keep to a small group of friends, rather than mix with everyone, which reduced the problem.

He stood now, with the class waiting expectantly, looking at the last empty seat. He sometimes thought the job a bit boring, but there was always a Celeste Moulton to keep him on his toes. She exploded through the door, slightly late, and stumped to her seat. It was not worth the trauma of reprimanding her, so he began the lesson. She sat alone as usual, but school on the Enterprise was not a social occasion, so it was simply a choice she made.

The lesson was on English, and in this case consisted of some formal grammar, and studies of poetry. He had a sufficiently

small class that he was able to keep the level of work up to the abilities of the individual students. The grade six students were able to grasp quite good poetry, and the younger students were studying some of the forms and techniques. As focused on success as they were, they were 'learning' poetry rather than enjoying it, but he knew that the enjoyment would come later for some.

Celeste was not disruptive. It was a difficult class to disrupt. But she stubbornly worked alone, and volunteered nothing, and did no more than required. She was a challenge, but he felt he was making little progress. Still, she had been with them only a few months.

The formal work was generally done in the mornings. When they were finished they put away their padds, which were all tied into the central computer, and prepared for lunch.

"After lunch we are going to continue in the holodeck, and we'll experience some of the times relating to earth's earlier religions. Later we'll be investigating vulcanology in a volcano, actually recorded on Erebus 2."

"Which holodeck, Mister Simpkins?" interrupted Celeste sweetly, and the other students looked at her tolerantly.

"The same holodeck we've been going to for the last four months, Celeste," he sighed. "Number three."

"Just checking," she said.

Serena Moulton finished Security duty in the medical section of the Enterprise, and sighed as she strolled back to her quarters. Celeste would still be at afternoon school, and she had a half hour to herself before her daughter flounced into the room and began making demands.

Why had David volunteered for the mission on Brandis? Celeste needed a father, and now she did not have one. And somehow

she blames me for it. Why don't children come with an instruction book? she thought, unoriginally. David had been gone three years now, and it might be time to look around, but she was aware that, in her late thirties, a bad-tempered young nine-year-old daughter was not an inducement to romantic approach.

She sighed again, and blamed herself for thinking so about her beautiful daughter. It was not Celeste's fault. She was just a bad mother.

The Enterprise had an intercommunication system which was used for ship-wide announcements, but which was not over-used. Her ruminations were interrupted by the voice of Commander Riker.

"Attention all hands! As you know, we will soon be at our destination, the planet Argonaut. We will be remaining there ten days, while some diplomatic sessions take place, so all hands will have some opportunity for extended shore leave.

"You are aware that all planets are autonomous, and Argonaut has a very simple legal system. It is not a full member of the Federation, so we have no redress if you get into trouble with the law. They have a group called the Planetary Patrol, who are the law. They have absolute discretion. There are no judges and juries or appeals. If they decide you are guilty they put you in jail, or execute you on the spot, if it's that serious. It is not as bad as it sounds, because they are very efficient and scientific, but don't do anything wrong. If you have a problem, stay in the Enterprise compound where we have our own jurisdiction.

"When we leave we are taking two groups of colonists to Regula IV, so that will be our next destination. The trip should be about two weeks. The colonists are already on Argonaut, so you'll have a chance to meet them socially planetside. We are having all non-essential personnel take shore leave, while the ship is

overhauled. Riker out."

Serena tidied up the room, which didn't need it, and put on some quiet music. Her peace did not last long, as Celeste stormed in. Fortunately one cannot slam a sliding automatic door.

Celeste was potentially a very attractive nine-year-old girl. She had her mother's blonde hair, and had inherited her good looks, but her face was always in a pout or a sulk. On the bright side, she did not scream or have tantrums. But she was not a happy person.

"How was school, dear?" Serena asked. It was one of those form questions she used in trying to establish some intimacy with her daughter.

"We were doing something about early religions on earth," said Celeste exasperatedly. "Stories the old people used to tell about the creation of the earth. The Bible, the dreamtime, and some others. What do they matter when you're stuck out in space? And we did more poetry. Mister Simpkins does all this complicated stuff that spoils interesting poems."

"What sort of things?"

"Parts of speech, similes, and so on. I'm having trouble just reading the words, and we have to analyse things!"

This did sound somewhat advanced for fourth grade, and Serena resolved to approach the teacher about his expectations. Meanwhile, she asked whether Celeste had any homework.

"I have to call up a poem and look for metaphors."

"Any poem?"

"I got a list. It'd be easier if it was similes. You just haveta look for 'like'. Metaphors are hard."

Serena relaxed a little. If Celeste understood the difference,

obviously it was not too hard.

"I'm not using my terminal tonight," she said. "You can have it any time. Do you want to go to the play area later?"

"It's still just a room on a space ship," said Celeste sullenly. "Even on the holodeck, you know it's not real."

"I'm sorry, dear, if you don't like this life. But it's what I do. I've worked hard to get this position, and I want to do well. It's only a few weeks so far. You may come to like it."

"Never!" said Celeste determinedly.

Serena decided that a session with Counselor Troi might not go astray. Her daughter and she had been aboard four months now, and Celeste had not made friends. She thought this was probably unnatural for a nine-year-old, although she had little knowledge of psychology.

"At least we can go ashore for a couple of weeks," she commented. Celeste looked interested. The broadcast had been shipwide, but Celeste had shown the innate ability of the young to totally ignore announcements.

Celeste went to the computer terminal and called up a description of Argonaut, after Serena had told her the name. It was a non-descript place, with an atmosphere able to be breathed by humans, but not comfortably. It was slightly more massive than earth, so she would be slightly heavier. But it was off the ship. She cheered up a bit. She did not study its politics or law.

Finally she opened up her diary, and entered her highly colored, and in some parts fictitious, account of the day's events.

In the briefing room, Captain Jean-Luc Picard sat with his senior staff.

"Good morning, everyone," he said. "It is time to bring you all up

to date with our mission. As you have heard, we are picking up colonists for Regula IV. The planet has been opened up for colonization recently, after surveys. There were no native animals, but plenty of vegetation. There seems to have been an earlier civilization which died out completely, in some sort of ecological disaster, but the vegetation seems to have recovered. The colonies will concentrate on setting up farming and textiles, but the immediate interest in the place will be archaeological, and they will anticipate making their living for some time from visiting teams."

"Why are there two sets of colonists?" asked Counselor Deanna Troi, as Picard paused for a moment. "That seems unusual."

"It is," admitted Picard. "Two planets put in bids, and they were almost identical which would have made it necessary to arbitrate, except that the planet has two large continents on either side. So they decided to take both, each on one continent. There will be an overall council, selected from both camps."

"Such an arrangement could be a bit unstable," commented Deanna Troi. "Two separate civilisations on one planet are likely to come into conflict. Are they both the same species?"

"Both are human," said Picard. "They have developed different ways, but both are still genetically the same. I share your concern, but we are simply a taxi service in this instance."

"Close to two weeks layover should get us up and running perfectly, at any rate," said Geordi La Forge. "The Argonauts have sophisticated technology, and we shouldn't have a problem refitting."

"We can take over two separate decks for the colonists," said Doctor Crusher. "They may have to get along together on Regula, but they don't have to live in each other's shadows there, so we might avoid too much propinquity here."

"What sort of numbers are we talking about?" asked Riker, for the benefit of the others.

"About a hundred in each group," replied Picard. "The Enterprise is going to be a bit crowded for the trip, but it won't be long. We may have to leave most of the recreational facilities to them for the time. We won't make any restrictions on their mixing, unless some problem arises. But if they want to keep themselves to themselves, Doctor Crusher's idea seems sound."

There was more discussion, and the group broke up, and went about preparing their areas. Commander Data had not contributed to the discussion, and Lieutenant Worf was concerned simply with organising extra security in case there was any conflict between the groups.

The Enterprise duly arrived at Argonaut, and took up orbit. Transport in this case was by large shuttle, as the number of people transporting was so large it would have been an unnecessary drain on energy resources to have beamed them all down. The shuttles were also more useful for transporting back all the colonists and their equipment.

Serena and Celeste gathered at the shuttle bay, with a group of other Security officers. Celeste had met them occasionally when she walked with Serena to work, on her way to school, but here they were different. They were simply waiting around, and were more relaxed. She noticed that her mother was less rigid, and was slightly more.. girlish? She focused on the catalyst for this erratic behavior. It was Andrew. She didn't know his other name.

Andrew was flirting with her mother, she decided, although he did not pay Celeste much attention.

If I was dead, she thought with interest, he might marry her. This did not imply any inclination towards suicide. She had a romantic idea of death, and daydreamed of herself dying of some fashionable disease - few of which still existed outside the

holosoaps - with her weeping parent and friends gathered about her as she smiled her last brave smile. The friends in her daydreams were somewhat nebulous, as they did not exist yet either.

Celeste and Serena said goodbye to Andrew, walked from the shuttle and looked around. The air was a subtly different color from Earth, where they had come from. They struggled for a moment to breathe normally, then their lungs adjusted. Like snorkeling, thought Serena.

They had landed in an airport, and it was the usual featureless flat plain used for that purpose.

The town was large, but not a major city. The spaceports tended to be away from large population centers, and were usually also flat because they doubled as airports. Spaceports did not require large flat areas, as shuttles could generally land vertically, but the passengers would then want to spread out over the planet, so requiring aeroplanes of some sort.

Beyond their immediate confines they could see some spectacular ranges of mountains, quite high considering the stronger gravity. Trees grew in the distance in some profusion, but not much in the township itself.

They had not brought too much with them, and they moved into a small room. After they had unpacked, and put everything in its place, Serena began to explore her surroundings almost immediately, a reflex from her time as a security officer. She walked down the main street with her daughter, and explored the shops. All of the things they saw could be created in the replicators, if you had the specifications, but it was a different pleasure to walk around actual shops, and see things you might not have thought of. As well, Serena had a built-in desire to get to know the layout of her environment immediately.

Some of the shops were remarkably cheap, and Celeste soon

found a place with a variety of toys and dolls. Some of the other children from the ship were there, as well as some other human children, whom Serena assumed were from the colonists. She noted with some concern that, as usual, Celeste did not mix, although they made tentative overtures.

The shop owner was quite a handsome man, though a bit older than she, and he noticed her look of concern.

"Your child?" he asked, and she nodded. "what's the matter?"

We have a tendency to open up to strangers, on trains, in foreign places. Perhaps it is because we know we will never meet them again to be embarrassed by our revelations. Serena found herself gossiping with the stranger about her fears for Celeste, and her own problems. Like a bartender he appeared to be sympathetic and let her pour out her worries. Just to keep us in his shop, no doubt, she thought somewhat cynically. But she enjoyed the moment of release.

"She has no friends," said Serena eventually. "It's not natural at her age."

"It's nothing," he assured her. "Some people are by nature solitary. She may not need friends."

"Everyone needs friends," said Serena. "I think I may take her to the ship's Counselor."

"That might do more harm than good," he suggested. "It may give her an idea that there is something wrong with her."

"Perhaps," said Serena. "But she is rejecting me, too. She doesn't like even me to touch her!"

"That's not pathological, you know," said the shopkeeper. "Some people don't like physical contact. They are the observers in life. They live perfectly happy lives, preferring to be always in the background. Sometimes the manipulators, sometimes just the

watchers. Perhaps she will be a writer."

"It isn't right for a small child," said Serena doggedly. But she was a bit happier.

"You're quite welcome to leave her here while you shop," he said. "A lot of the children spend hours in here. I'll keep an eye on her."

Serena thanked him, and Celeste seemed happy to stay. She left Celeste with the other children, and did some of her own shopping, then came back for her after a few hours. The others had left, but Celeste was still exploring the shop.

"Well, enough for today, young lady," she said cheerfully. "You have nearly two weeks to explore, so you can come back if you want."

Celeste looked at her watch.

"Wow! I didn't think I'd been here so long."

"Is there anything you couldn't find?" asked the owner. "I could get it."

"I'd love to have a Kritonian panda," said Celeste.

"I might manage a toy one," he said. "I doubt I could get the real thing!"

"Oh, could you?" she said. "I'd love it!"

"Pop in later in the week," he said. "I'll see what I can do. Is there anything I can get for your mother?"

"No thanks," Serena smiled. "If you can make Celeste happy you'll make me happy."

He smiled, and went off to fuss over his shop. Serena and Celeste moved out, and a figure moved out of the shadows.

"You don't have to hide, you know," said Darras. "You have

every right to be in a shop. Slinking about just looks suspicious."

"Ah, well," said the other, "I like to feel safe, and I haven't made my appearance yet. How is the merchandise going?"

"I am about to put the finishing touches to it in the next few days. It will be ready by the time you leave. Our problem then is to get it aboard. I think I have that in hand."

"Doesn't it bore you, running a dinky shop all day?" asked the client.

"Not at all," replied Darras. "It is an excellent cover, and I enjoy it. Besides, it's not dinky. It's a good shop. I'm proud of it. It has its little challenges, like coming up with rare presents for discerning customers."

"I am a bit surprised you deal with your customers in person," commented the client. "I thought you might have preferred to be more anonymous."

"I would distinguish between clients and customers," laughed Darras. "They have no cause to remember me. In your case, you wonder that I would reveal myself to you? I assure you, you have no idea what I really look or sound like. Do you think I would be capable of creating life-like androids, and not be capable of altering my own appearance? After all, you may be just talking to an android now!"

The client looked sharply at him.

"I doubt that," he said. "I can't see you putting your own personality into an android. Something might go wrong, and they'd have you."

"You may know me too well already," smiled Darras. "You're partly right. It's because there is still planning to do, and I wouldn't want my surrogate doing my planning for me. All the fun is in the planning, and seizing the opportunities."

Chapter 2.

The discerning customer and her mother returned home. There was something exhilarating about the chance to get real dirt on you, and to need a real, water shower. They were both unusually tired, probably because of the slightly high gravity, and both went early to bed, luxuriating in the unfamiliar open space. The houses they had were all detached, with little gardens. This surprised Serena, since they were presumably only used to house a stream of transients. She wondered if some local inhabitants had been moved out of their houses for the travelers. In any case, she did the "right thing" by doing a little gardening, which may have done more damage than good.

During the next few days Serena was on duty some of the time as a Security agent, accompanying some of the senior officers, or guarding the area they had been allocated, but this was light work itself, and allowed her to make a few new contacts, and gave her plenty of free time. In that time she made a point of mixing with the colonists, and was pleased to see that a few of their children made the effort to cultivate Celeste's acquaintance, and she did not reject them.

At least she'll have some friends for a few weeks, Serena thought. She went out for a walk in the woods near the house, and was surprised to meet Andrew Black.

"Hi, Andrew," she said with a smile. "I didn't pick you for a walker."

"Oh, I like to get exercise when I can," he said cheerily. "Want to walk together for a while?"

"Why not?" said Serena with a smile, but warily.

They chatted for a few kilometers, and found themselves back at the shops. Andrew took the plunge.

"Um, Serena, would you like to have dinner with me tonight? There's a great restaurant on Seal Street."

"Well, fine, if Celeste can come," she said with a slight frown. "I don't like to leave her alone on a strange planet."

"She's looked after herself all day today," he said. "Couldn't you get someone to mind her tonight?"

"I don't like to," she replied. "Well, we'll just forget it."

"No!" he said hastily, "I'd love to have her along."

"Ok," she said. "I'll meet you there. When?"

After they had organized themselves, Andrew sighed and made his way back to the house he was sharing.

"Doing any good with the iron widow?" asked his flatmate curiously. "Have you managed to break through her force field?"

"I'm going out to dinner with her," said Andrew, a little gloomily, "but she's bringing her kid."

"It's a start," said the other. "It's the first base you've hit."

"Yeah!" said Andrew, brightening up. "I'll wear her down eventually."

"I don't think being abrasive is the answer," said his friend.

Andrew laughed, realizing this was a joke, although he didn't understand it.

Jean-Luc felt his duty required him to meet the leaders of the colonists quickly, and both lots at once. It was always possible to have people take offence at imagined slights, and if he met one group first it might alienate the other. Unlikely, but a chance easily avoided. He invited the leaders to dinner on the first night, and discovered that this included five from each party.

The guests wore their most formal dress, but this was mostly

fairly simple. Picard momentarily regretted having dressed up very formally, but decided that they would have expected it of him, as captain of a starship. He noted immediately that some of the males wore identical Van Dyk beards, and assumed they were of the same party.

The group was more heterogenous than he had expected. They were two different races, virtually, and he had expected them to form two groups. Instead they gathered in a single group and gossiped, before he called them to the meal. He felt a spark of pleasure. The trip was going to be a happy one.

For a while the group simply ate the courses as they were offered by the tusked waiters. Then Picard made a formal speech welcoming them to the Enterprise, and remarking how pleasing it was that they seemed such a united group. When he had finished, one of the Tolian men, Felix Lattif, rose and thanked him.

"It is we who should welcome you, Captain," he said. "You come to take us to our destiny, whatever that may be."

The meal finished, and conversation became general. There were only three women among the ten guests, and two of them were very quiet. Picard realized that they came from farming communities where women tended to stick with the "traditional" roles. The third, Etilia Braz, was more extroverted. He found himself talking to her and one of her fellow Ardurians.

"This is Amerbrec Zatof," she said. "Possibly the premier citizen of our group."

"Well, that will have to await proper elections," he said with a slight smile.

"I don't know anything about your plans for government," said Picard. "I gather you ten are it, but I know nothing more."

"I don't know whether you know the set-up on the planet,

Captain Picard," Zatof said, and taking it as a rhetorical question, went straight on. "The planet has two large continents, at either pole, and large mysterious buildings at the poles. It was decided that both our groups could settle, one on each continent. They would be like independent states, or countries, but with an overall governing council. We decided to start arbitrarily with ten members, five from each group. The whole thing can develop from there, but it's a structure to start with."

"As the population grows, it could be expanded," interposed Etilia.

"Our basis will be a two-party political system," went on Amerbrec. "We'll have a nominal opposition for a start, but they'll just be there to stop us doing anything silly at first. After our first five-year term, we'll have real elections, and maybe real political parties."

"I doubt the politics will be too deep for some time," remarked Etilia. "Our people are generally unsophisticated at this time. But leaders will emerge."

"It sounds to me as if a couple of good leaders have emerged already," remarked Picard. "I hope the others are of your calibre."

Suddenly there was a shaking of the building, and most people grabbed for some support. It stopped after about thirty seconds, and the silence turned back to excited babble.

"An earthquake?" asked Picard tensely.

"Yes, it's quite an unstable planet," said Amerbrec. "We've had a number of tremors while we've been waiting. We've tended to get used to them. The buildings are very well built. I suppose the most dangerous place would be out in the open, if the ground opened up beneath you!"

"It's not something I think I could get used to," said Picard with a

wan smile.

"You get used to anything," observed Etilia.

After some desultory further conversation he felt he should mingle more, especially with the other group, so he excused himself and moved on. He had a good discussion with Felix and Ambrasia Lattif of the Tolians, and more cursory gossip with the others. He managed some conversation with everyone present.

Later he spoke with Will Riker.

"A pleasant evening, Number One," he said. "There appears to be no friction between the leaders, at least. It augers well for the trip."

"How did you find them as leaders, sir?" asked Riker. "A lot will depend on them."

"Well," said Picard more doubtfully, "there were some who seemed very good. I have to admit that a few of them seemed a bit slow on the uptake. I suppose with only a hundred to choose from you won't find many leaders, and the community may be a little inbred perhaps. But a few leaders is all they need for now."

"Did you notice that quake, sir?" asked Riker. "It gave us a stir, but apparently they happen all the time."

"I noticed it very well," said Picard. "I am not fond of earth tremors."

Riker himself had to meet the colonists, and he organized this for the following day. He and Beverley Crusher arranged to meet the Ardurians first, and then the Tolians. Serena Moulton was assigned Security duty with them, though it was just a formality. Celeste and some of her new acquaintances went off to play somewhere together.

The meeting took place in a hall. The hundred colonists fitted in comfortably, and Riker introduced himself. He welcomed them to

the Enterprise, told them something of the conditions in which they would be living on board, and introduced Doctor Crusher. She told them a bit more, and asked them to make themselves available later for a thorough medical checkup, just a formality. They had been staying on a strange planet, and may have picked something up, and being from a single community they might carry diseases for which they themselves had developed immunity, but which might spread through the ship.

There was something of a question and answer session, then the bulk of the group left. The Ardurian leaders stayed behind to thank him.

"A very welcoming manner you have, Commander," said Jarran Dezic. He was an elderly, but very fit man, and his wife Arandnia seemed very full of energy as well. "I feel that the two weeks aboard the Enterprise may be the highlight of our trip."

"Our stay on Argonaut has been very pleasant, though" said Arandnia. "The accommodations have been first class, and the Argonauts very good, though I suspect that they do not have any particular fondness for humans."

"This must have been a difficult decision for you," remarked Beverley. "To pull up roots and go so far away?"

"Brildan talked us into it," smiled Etilia Braz. "He has the soul of a salesman. He has made it all sound so exciting."

"Brildan?" asked Beverley.

"Brildan Furr," Will Riker answered for them. "He was on the original survey ship, and he liked the place so much he talked his people into going."

"He thinks it will be a Mecca for archaeologists and tourists," said Fillat Bleek, a small, rotund man, who had not spoken previously. "He was the geologist on the ship. He says the planet has an adequate supply of all the common minerals, beautiful

plants, and fertile soil. Even if nobody comes, it has the potential to be a sort of Paradise."

"I understood that the computers failed," said Riker. "They lost all the visual records, and a lot of the other findings too?"

"But there were people on board," said Bleek. "They remembered what they saw, and some pictures had been printed out."

"Enough to win both us and the Tolians into wanting to live there," said Amerbrec Zatof, with a smile.

"It's a wonder Furr isn't one of the ruling council, then," said Riker. "He would be the best informed of all of you."

"We tried to convince him," said Etilia. "He refused, but we got him to accept a place on the Opposition benches at least."

"He's not sure he'll stay," explained Bleek. "He's our wanderer, our black sheep, if you like."

"Is he here?" asked Beverley. "I'd like to meet him."

"No, he's en route still. We expect him any time now, though," said Amerbrec. "There are still a few to arrive. The two biologists, and the archaeologists."

"They're not your own people, then?" asked Riker.

"Bock is, originally," said Bleek. "But that's a coincidence to some extent. We advertised for specialists, and he answered. He's one of the biologists," he added. "He left our planet years ago."

"How long have you been on Arduria?" asked Beverley.

"A couple of hundred years, now," answered Bleek. "It's coming along nicely, but it is still somewhat primitive. This sounded good in comparison."

"But we're used to roughing it if necessary," added Jarran Dezic.

"The Enterprise may be a bit of a shock to the system," said Riker, "after living in the open all your lives. I hope nobody is too claustrophobic."

Jarran laughed. "We're not all hayseeds, Commander," he said. "We have a few bureaucrats and shopkeepers, and mechanics. We have already had some confinement on a much smaller ship, and we survived it."

"If you have any trouble, you can go into the holodecks for a while," said Beverley with a smile.

Serena returned home and had lunch. Celeste came in to eat, in a good mood for once. She had met some children who were going to try to teach her tennis, and then go and play in the toyshop again. Serena told her when to be home by, and went off to work in an unusually good mood herself.

She was still with Commander Riker and Doctor Crusher. They repeated much of what they had said and done with the Ardurians, and met the leaders of the Tolians this time. Felix Lattif was obviously the driving force among them, and tended to dominate most of the conversation.

As they talked, there was another quake, and Riker looked upset. Lattif smiled at him. "Don't worry. There are quite a few tremors around here. They're not expecting anything big. They won't hurt you."

Riker recovered himself, and the discussions continued. He and Beverley Crusher heard more about the arrangements on the new planet. Each continent would have a group of four in charge, with a president elected between them.

The small numbers in the two towns would mean that there was no obvious reason for conflict between the groups, but they were not going to be a bunch of primitives. Each town would have

modern technology. There would be one or two specialist technicians with each group, but a limited amount of spare parts until they began to mine the planet.

Both groups had been on Argonaut for a few weeks, and had become quite well settled in, but it was more in the way of a vacation. They would not be here long, or again. They had the local knowledge, however, and for this short time were able to treat the Enterprise crew as their guests. Serena and Celeste found themselves mixing with both groups, and Celeste had to mix with the children.

This was no hardship. She disliked the restrictive world of the starship, and was less her self-centred self here, enough to pick up acquaintances, if not friends.

She was shown around the town by a boy named Eric and his sister Shauna. They were Tolians, and often met in Darras' shop, or played at fishing for the creatures that lived in the streams. As on most planets which had native life forms, water was abundant near towns, but it was not easily drinkable for humans. There was not enough of it generally.

That meant, of course, that any fish they caught might have been poisonous to eat. Since they caught none in the few days they were there, no problem arose. Celeste was unusually relaxed during this time.

Serena, however, took the opportunity to have a talk with her teacher, Mister Simpkins. She found him walking alone in the light forest near the small city. As she approached he looked up, startled out of his ruminations.

"Ensign Moulton," he said. "how are you? Are you a walker?"

"What?" she asked, then, "Oh, no. I'm more of an aerobics person. I rarely get out onto the surface of a planet, and the Enterprise is not a great place for long walks!"

"Are you just trying to escape the pressures of the big city, or were you after me in particular?"

"I was wondering if I could talk to you a bit about Celeste," she began, and he smiled and said, "Any time. You can talk to me on the ship, you know. But I'm quite glad of your company. You don't mind if we keep walking?"

"Oh, no," she said. "I enjoy walking. I just don't seem ever to do it!"

"What was your particular concern about Celeste?" he asked.

"I'm worried about her." Serena frowned, not quite sure how to express herself. She had the curious shyness many have in the presence of a teacher, some holdover from childhood, and the suspicion that this person might possibly know her daughter better than she in some aspects. "She hasn't adjusted at all to shipboard life. She hates it. She has no friends. Now she's on the planet she has picked up with a small group, but I worry about her."

"She has a strong character," said Mister Simpkins doubtfully. He was in the dubious position for a teacher of always being in proximity to the parents of his charges, so that it did not pay to be too blunt. He would refrain from the words "little bitch", as this would reduce useful communication with the mother. He chose his terms carefully.

"She is rather slow in her reading, but I feel it is part of a more general disdain for learning. Her mathematics is poor, but she does have quite an eclectic general knowledge. If she is not reading at home, she must be watching a lot of video."

"She does," admitted Serena. "She doesn't seem to mix at all. I wish she had some friends."

"For her age, she is rather selfcentered and doesn't have a lot of time for others," he said, in some embarrassment. "I think she

regards herself as highly intelligent, and somewhat above the others. She's -er- wrong. She is above average intelligence, but the children of the Enterprise are generally well above average. They reflect the genes of their parents. They are just as intelligent as she, but they have settled in to life on the starship. She hasn't. I must admit, the children aboard are not a typical cross section of society."

"Thank you," said Serena. "I've been thinking of asking Counselor Troi to have a look at her, but I don't want to waste her time."

"It wouldn't be wasting her time," he said in surprise. "That's her job. She likes to know about everyone. You could make an appointment for yourself, too. You have the problem as well."

"A single mother?" she said.

"Well, I meant the problem of having a difficult child," he said with a blush. "But Deanna is quite happy just to have a chat with you. As I said, she likes to know everyone."

The two of them walked for quite a distance, talking about Celeste, and whatever else came to mind.

Serena felt ridiculously hesitant about approaching Counselor Troi. She put it down to her position in Security. A Security officer has to feel unusually self-reliant, and admitting that she was having some trouble with her child would be tantamount to admitting a weakness in public. She analysed the thought, then pushed away her shyness. Deanna Troi was living in a comfortable apartment. Not one to welcome the chance for bushwalking or generally roughing it, she was making the most of her planetside stay, seeing the sights of the town, and the nearby capital city, but happy to spend her leisure time at home. She had organized times for her regular counseling sessions,

and did this in the comfort of a very-well apportioned living room. Serena knocked on her door, and it opened quickly.

"Hello, I'm Deanna," was her welcome. "Come in and be comfy."

She went in, and Deanna immediately made her feel at home. She wriggled somewhat nervously, though, and Deanna produced a cup of tea.

"How did you know I drink tea?" asked Serena curiously.

"Her teacher mentioned that you might be coming to see me," said Deanna with a smile, "so I looked up your records. The computer knows all about everybody."

"I suppose he mentioned why I might come?" queried Serena.

"Your daughter, Celeste," said Deanna. "He told me something about her, but I'd like to meet her myself. I like to start from scratch."

"Oh, then when can I make an appointment?" asked Serena.

"Now would be as good as any time, if she's around."

"She'll be at the shop, or somewhere with her friends."

"The shop?"

"The toy shop in town. All the children hang around it. I was talking to the proprietor, and he seemed to think Celeste was behaving quite normally. You know, a particular personality type. But I worry."

"Go and get her, and I'll see what I think," said Deanna. She waited in the room.

She had her psychic guards down at home, and felt the approach of Serena and Celeste, both apprehensive for different reasons. She waited politely for them to ring the door alarm, then opened it. She smiled warmly.

"Hello, Celeste," she said, stepping aside to let them in. "Hello, Serena. Don't be alarmed, Celeste, it's just going to be conversation."

"I'm not alarmed!" said Celeste indignantly, but blushing. "Are you going to read my mind?"

"That's not a very polite greeting, dear," said Serena. "Counselor Troi said Hello."

"Hello, Counselor Troi," said Celeste sulkily.

"Please call me Deanna," said Deanna. "I'm not a doctor. We're just going to gossip. I hope we can be friends."

"Oh, yeah?" thought Celeste sardonically, then blushed scarlet as she thought, She can read minds! "Hello, Deanna," she said feebly.

"I'm not going to read your mind," continued Deanna, in what seemed an inspired guess. "I don't have that ability. I sense emotions. I'll turn on my shields if you don't want me to do even that."

"What are your shields?" asked Celeste in wonder.

"It means I can cover up my abilities," she said. "It's like putting my fingers in my ears. I usually leave my shields up all the time I'm in public, unless there is some place my abilities are needed. All I get then is a background buzz. But we aren't going to talk about me all day. I'd like to hear all about you."

"Do you want me to stay?" asked Serena uncomfortably.

"No," replied Deanna, sensing her wish to go. "I'll see Celeste home afterwards."

Serena gratefully backed out the door, and Deanna asked a lot of questions about Celeste's life, her feelings about the ship and crew, her hobbies, and so on. Celeste found herself talking

fluently, flattered by Deanna's obvious interest in all she had to tell.

"Your mother told me you don't expect to get very old?" said Deanna eventually.

"What?" asked Celeste in surprise.

"You say things like, 'You'll be sorry when I'm dead,' and 'You'll miss me when I'm gone.' I'd like to talk about what you mean by that."

"I don't mean it," she whispered. "I just say it to make mummy..." She could not think of a way to finish the sentence.

"Pay attention to you?" asked Deanna sympathetically, and she nodded.

"It's something you shouldn't do," said Deanna. "It makes you sound like you.. don't enjoy being alive."

Celeste looked down.

"If I was dead, mummy might get married again. I know she thinks that, but she doesn't say it."

Deanna pulled Celeste close, to hug her, but she wriggled away, looking embarrassed.

"You mustn't think that!" said Deanna, not persisting. One problem at a time. "She loves you more than she wants another husband. And if a man wanted to marry her he would love you too. You haven't been reading stories about nasty stepfathers, have you? They aren't true."

"No, I don't read much," fibbed Celeste, inching a bit away.

They talked a while longer, then Deanna walked her back home.

"You don't have to come," said Celeste politely. "I know my way."

"It's Ok," said Deanna. "I want to see your mother for a while

too."

On the way back, Celeste talked a little more freely. As far as she was concerned, the interview was over, and this was just gossip.

At the house Celeste got permission to go down to the village, and Deanna stayed to talk to her mother.

"I don't think she's suicidal," she said. "So let's get that one over quickly. She's never actually done anything like that?"

"No," said Serena.

"It's to get attention. She's worried about your remarrying. She says she feels like she's in the way of it, but I suspect she worries about it happening."

"It's a problem, certainly," admitted Serena. "Most men don't want to become involved with a woman with a child. But it hasn't been an issue. I haven't had the time to look for a new romance."

Deanna felt she was lying about her lack of desire, but said nothing about that. She returned to Celeste.

"You were right. She doesn't like to be touched. I don't know that it's a problem. That shop owner you mentioned was right there. That can just be a sign of a particular type of personality. Some people like a very big body space. Not the ideal thing for a starship. She is not as emotional as she seems. She is very repressed, and depressed, but a lot of her emotional behaviour is quite calculated. She is quite self-centred, perhaps a bit too much for her age. She opened up a lot more when we were walking home."

"She doesn't seem to have friends," said Serena. "Although she has picked up with a couple of the colonists' kids."

"That can just be another facet of the 'loner/observer'

personality," said Deanna. "Or it could be related to her rejection of the Enterprise. She might be subconsciously refusing to make friends aboard. But I think we can just wait a while to see how she develops. I'll have a word with her teacher."

"Alfred Simpkins," said Serena.

"I know," smiled Deanna. "He did tell me his name. Actually we have met often."

Serena blushed.

"I didn't mean to embarrass you," said Deanna hurriedly.

"I embarrassed myself," replied Serena with a smile.

Some days later, Darras was visited again by his customer.

"Is it ready yet?"

"Yes," answered Darras. "You can have a look at it. Come into the sanctum sanctorum at the back."

They passed through the alcove into the workroom, and Darras called out "Open sesame." A panel opened, and the android was revealed, sitting as if dead.

"Open sesame?" asked the customer drily.

"It's my classical education," responded Darras cheerfully. "It's quite ready. All I have to manage is its introduction on board the Enterprise. This is your owner," he addressed the android. The client looked at it in surprise, even wonder. "You will obey his orders, and when your mission is complete you will destroy yourself, attracting as little attention as possible when you do so."

He turned to the client.

"If you wish you can give your instructions now. It is perfectly ready. It will absorb all you tell it. This way it will not be

necessary for you to have further contact."

The other thought carefully, and said, "I want you to kill the following people." A list of names followed. "The essential thing is that you must only do it when I am somewhere with a foolproof alibi. It does know the meaning of 'alibi'?"

Darras nodded. "It has a huge knowledge database. Anything might be of use to it in its work, and it's easy to fill a computer with information. It has a human consciousness as well, imprinted over everything else. It will understand anything you tell it."

"If we meet again, you do not know me," the client said. "If you are caught, you do not know me. You do not know why you are doing this."

"That is true," said the android unexpectedly. "I do not know. For the rest, it is in my programming to erase my memory completely if caught, and fuse my circuits to conceal the genius of my creator."

"It is also programmed not to be used against me," commented Darras, mildly taken aback at what might be sarcasm in his creation, "but apart from that you can pretty well command it as you like."

"It's uncanny," said the client. "How do you do it?"

"Well, it's my secret," said Darras, "but speaking vaguely, I create the exoskin in a similar way to the way a transporter recreates a traveler."

"Oh!" said the client, none the wiser. He looked again at the android, and shook his head in wonder. He must stop thinking of it as "it".

Captain Jean-Luc Picard enjoyed his stay on Argonaut. There were wine-growing areas, and he browsed through them, and

thought of home. But he soon began to itch to be back in space, and to count the hours until takeoff. Will Riker was running the loading, and he had little to do but "bear responsibility" at this time. There were a few stray members of the contingent who had not yet appeared, but otherwise everything seemed to be under control.

He had met the leaders of the colonists socially, but had not found any particularly congenial soul-mates. He still awaited the arrival of Lar and Gramm. They were acknowledged experts in their fields.

The days passed, and the end of the Enterprise's stay approached. Celeste and her friends haunted the shops, and the playground. Serena began to pack, and sighed. The stay had been quite pleasant, and Celeste had been reasonably happy...

She looked around for a bit of help, and went out. Someone had seen Celeste going down to the shops again. She walked downtown. As she came near Celeste staggered out of the shop.

"It came, mummy!" she said excitedly, struggling to balance a large package.

"What came?" said Serena in irritation. "I didn't give you permission to go out!"

This was somewhat unfair, as Celeste had been allowed a lot of freedom, but she had had a sudden panic, because they were about to leave.

Celeste stopped in confusion. "Mister Darras got in the Kritonian panda! He sent a message. I should have asked you! I got too excited, and I wanted it before we got packed!"

Serena sighed. They would soon be safe back on the Enterprise, so she did not pursue the matter. As they walked up the road Eric and Shauna ran up and joined them. Celeste looked around her package at them, and said "Hello. We're

going onto the Enterprise now."

"So are we!" said Shauna. "When we get settled in, can you come down and see us?" She glanced questioningly at Serena, as did Celeste.

"I don't see why not," said Serena with a smile. "But Celeste has to come with me now to pack."

There was a sudden movement of the ground under their feet, and they struggled to keep their feet. It was quickly over.

"What was that?" asked Celeste in panic.

"Just another earthquake," said Eric, with a touch of scorn. "You asked yesterday when there was one, too."

"It wasn't so bad yesterday," she said defensively. "That one was big!"

Serena asked Eric, "You've been here a bit longer than us. Do they have many quakes? Celeste was upset by yesterday's one too."

"It's a bit shaky here," grinned Eric. "It's a crusty zone or something."

Serena noticed that the supplies from the colonists were being stored in large crates, which were at present piled in stacks. They seemed like skyscrapers in contrast to the buildings of the Argonauts, which were generally only one storey high.

Serena and Celeste went back home to pack. They collected all their belongings and they were put on the shuttle. Celeste went off to mix with her friends again. She put the panda, now out of its container, in with the other luggage. It leaned loosely against a wall of the shuttle. Serena did not pursue the matter with Celeste. She knew someone would store it safely. There would have to be a number of flights, as there were too many containers stacked up for the shuttles to fit at once.

"Be here at 1350 hours," warned her mother, and she nodded. Celeste looked hesitantly at her friends. "Which of you wants to choose what we'll do?"

"Eric always chooses," laughed Shauna.

"I'll choose a walk in the forest," he said. The others affected wincing, but went happily down the street with him. As they walked Celeste heard her name called, and turned to see Counselor Troi waving to her. She looked hesitant, and replied, "Oh, hello, Counselor Troi."

"I asked you to call me Deanna," said the Counselor with a mock reprimand, and Celeste answered, "Oh, you mean, all the time? Hello, Deanna."

"Hello, Celeste," responded Deanna, "and Shauna and Eric. Enjoy your last romp."

"How did she know our names?" asked Eric as they skipped on down the street.

"Oh, she doesn't have much to do," hazarded Celeste. "She might spend her time learning all the names. She has to know everybody."

In the meantime, other humans had begun to appear. One of the expected archaeologists had arrived, but he seemed to have come from nowhere. He said he had been beamed down from the Agitator, which had stopped briefly out in space, then continued on. He introduced himself to Riker.

"I'm Zetopek Lar," he said. He had a flat, unaccented voice, and an air about him that Riker characterized to himself as 'droopy'. Riker shook his hand, and was surprised by the firmness of the handshake. Lar noticed his surprise, and said, "Excuse me. I am more of an excavator than a theoretician. Years of work with the pick and shovel have made me strong."

"You still work with a pick and shovel?" said Riker in surprise. "I would have thought sonic instruments, and rock radar would have made them extinct by now!"

"They are used for delicate work," said Lar flatly, "but in a harsh climate a simple tool that needs only the strength of your arm is best. The batteries remain strong!"

"What happened to your associate?" asked Riker. "Professor Gramm?"

"He had an unfortunate accident," replied Lar gloomily. "He was killed in a rockfall recently. It is unusual. This is not a dangerous craft."

"You're staying with the Tolians on board," said Riker, after the appropriate expression of sympathy.

"As I am here," Lar answered. "They are my employers."

"What is the interest in Regula IV? It seems to be some sort of Paradise for archaeologists," said Riker. "We may have to prise Captain Picard away with a crowbar. He's an archaeology nut."

This rather disparaging remark about his superior officer did not seem to mean anything to Lar, and his expression did not change. He answered as if there had been no comment.

"The planet, interestingly, has two large continents. In fact, the two groups of colonists will inhabit one each. What is fascinating is that each continent seems to have been inhabited by a different society. The ruins on one are completely different than those on the other."

"Did the advance teams learn much about them?"

"They didn't stay long," said Lar. "They established that there was a magnificent civilisation to investigate, then that the planet could support human life, then returned. You might ask Brildan Furr, of the Ardurians. He was actually on the survey mission. I

suspect he was the one who convinced his planet to bid."

"I will," said Riker. "I have to meet him properly soon."

"I am looking forward to seeing the Enterprise," said Lar. "It will be interesting to speak with Captain Picard. He is not unknown in archaeological circles."

"You'll probably enjoy meeting Commander Data, too," said Riker.

"Why is that?" asked Lar, and Riker thought to himself, Why did I say that? Because this guy is about as emotional as Data? Aloud he said, "Because he is unique."

"Ah," agreed Lar, "true! I am always interested in machines that think."

This apparently seemed like a good exit line, as he turned and walked away with no more ceremony. Riker grinned at his behaviour. Diplomatic relations throughout his career had inured him against offence at anyone's discourteous behaviour, which was generally not intended to be so. Well, that's nearly everyone met, he thought. About time to relax for a day or two.

He had not finished, however. Two more arrivals met him, both employed by the Ardurians, although they would serve the whole planet of colonists. They were biologists, one a specialist in plant life, the other in microbiology. He took a greater immediate interest in Illana Borzovska, the microbiologist, as she happened to be spectacularly beautiful, while Brendan Brock, the other, was a stolid male. Serena was impressed when Illana took the trouble to greet her as well. Security staff were often treated as part of the furniture. Many of them preferred it that way, but not Serena. Riker welcomed both with equal warmth. They were introduced by Etilia Braz, who seemed to be the most sociable of the Ardurians. As they spoke there was a notable seismic shake, and they looked around apprehensively, but Riker

reassured them.

"It happens all the time," he said. "Nothing big. The buildings are made to withstand it. Have you both just arrived?"

"We're not together," said Illana, somewhat stiffly. "We happen to be working together, and we have done so before, but I have actually been here a few weeks. I took the opportunity to do some walking in the forests. I always try to find places to walk and swim."

Riker asked Brendan for some information on the planet Regula IV, and Brendan began to tell him what little he knew. A new figure came walking down the street, and came across to them. Riker noticed from the corner of his eye that this newcomer also appreciated the charms of the beautiful but cool Miss Borzovska.

"How are you, Illana?" he asked. "I always look forward to seeing you again."

Serena stood nearby, but he did not notice her, captivated apparently by Illana's beauty. She was used to not being noticed while on duty, and regarded this as a valuable attribute in her job. Riker was immersed in discussions with Bock.

"And I you, Brildan," said Illana with a warm smile. "Did you enjoy your trek?"

He looked momentarily taken aback, but replied, "Oh, very much. I love walking through the scrub, especially where it's beautiful. I didn't see you."

"I was swimming when you passed," she said, "au naturel. And I was enjoying the solitude."

"We never know what we are missing," he sighed. "I heard you were in the party."

"Are you to be our leader in this foray?" she asked.

"Oh, no, no," he protested, "I leave the leading to..."

He broke off as there was a cry and a crash simultaneously. The group ran in the direction it had come from, and they and others saw a figure prone beneath a large packing case. Some children ran in from different directions, and Illana ran to meet them and head them off.

"Something bad has happened," she told them. "Go back to your quarters and wait."

Celeste was curious to see what had happened, but she did not press. Eric asked her, "Did you see what happened?"

"No, I was still on my way back," she answered. "I think something fell. It must have been the earthquake."

Illana had used her body to herd them back, and she stooped to bring herself down to their level. Her voice was soft with concern. She put her hands on the shoulders of Shauna and Celeste. Celeste felt a momentary concern, but Illana quietly told them that there had been an accident, and they should go back to their homes on the planet, and wait for their parents to come to them.

They moved off, reluctant to miss whatever was to be seen, and momentarily gathered at the first corner. Celeste could see Serena involved in the thick of the investigations. One of the Ardurian girls who had been gathered into their group, said, "Isn't she nice?"

Celeste was startled out of her chain of thought.

"Who?" she asked, and the girl answered impatiently, pointing to Illana, "That lady."

"Yes, she is," answered Celeste. "It was very kind of her."

"And she's so pretty," sighed the girl. "She's so slim. I'll never look like her!" She was plump, but not unattractively so.

"I'll never look like that either," thought Celeste with a pang which surprised her. She looked down at her own figure reflectively.

"But you're pretty, Beryl," said Eric. "You don't have to look like a twig to be pretty!"

Beryl looked a lot happier, and the children went to their homes. Celeste went obediently to her house, and waited, curiously, for Serena to return and tell her the details of what had happened. While she was waiting she opened up her diary and read through her records of the last few days.

Lieutenant Worf appeared as if from nowhere, and had Serena and the team seal off the immediate area. Riker asked Brildan Furr his identity, as he was a stranger, and after he had identified himself, added, "A terrible introduction to the group, Mister Furr. Would you mind waiting outside the barrier?"

"Of course," said Furr. He found himself standing beside a beautiful woman with black eyes, but he was too much in shock to take an immediate interest. He had not expected anything like this! Who was it? Deanna Troi felt his shock, and sympathised.

The case was removed carefully, but a quick check by Doctor Beverley Crusher showed that the victim was dead. The case had fallen on his head. Amerbrec Zatof was brought in by Will Riker to identify the victim, and said, "My god! It's Felix! How awful!"

"And only the other day he said an earthquake couldn't hurt you," said Riker grimly.

They moved outside the barrier while the medical team waited for the local authorities to arrive before they could remove the body. Furr was agitated, and cried, "Who is it?"

"It's Felix Lattif," said Riker, and Furr asked, "What happened?"

"The quake must have shifted the top packing case," said Riker, "and it fell on him."

"Of course, the quake!" gasped Furr. "That's it. It shifted the crate somehow, and it fell!"

"He's quite upset," observed Deanna quietly to Riker. "He must have been quite close to the victim. He seems shocked."

The Planetary Patrol had arrived and were scanning the area.

"You're the officer in charge of this lot?" asked a huge trooper, and Riker identified himself. "Looks like an accident all right, although it was a bit careless to stack things so high in an earthquake zone. Still, I suppose you off-worlders wouldn't think of that. No recent traces of any sentient beings up top. A tragedy. Well, I'll leave you to attend to details. Rites and customs and so on."

Then he was gone, and Riker was left with the 'rites and customs' to look after.

Chapter 3.

"What was the idea of that?" asked Darras angrily. "You are not supposed to commit a crime on Argonaut. You were there when I told Jezakak that."

He had sought out the android, and ascertained they were unobserved.

The android looked at him without expression, its eyes unblinking. "I am now the instrument of another, so it is not your responsibility. In any case, what crime?" it asked. "There was a tremor, which shifted the cases. The man was there. I saw an opportunity to fulfil my function. I lowered my ambient temperature to leave no heat signature, pushed the case, and left. There was nothing to lose. If the man had survived he would have been unaware there had been an attempt on his life."

"Nevertheless," said Darras, "you are to wait until you are offworld before continuing. And do not return to my shop again before you leave the planet."

"That would have been unlikely in the circumstances," replied the android, and Darras left it where it was.

Captain Picard had called the leaders of the groups to his temporary quarters.

"We will delay our departure until tomorrow to give you time to bury your fellow," he said at the end of their talk. "If we can assist with whatever rituals you decide on, please let us know."

Felix Lattif was buried, as that was the custom on the planet. It had not become crowded yet, so burial space had not become any sort of problem. All of the members of the two colonies could not attend, but a lot did, including Eric and Shauna. Celeste went with them. Serena thought it just as well that she experience the rituals of death, but hoped it would not intensify her own fascination with it. The ranking officers of the Enterprise also attended, and Celeste eyed Deanna Troi curiously. Deanna must be finding the outpourings of emotion overwhelming.

Deanna was, but she noted to herself the way Celeste herself had blanked out her emotion. Then she realised that Celeste had never even met Felix, so she was unlikely to be affected by his death. She raised her shields again, and tried to concentrate on the ceremony. Others seemed to be emotional holes, too. The archaeologist, and the flower biologist were simply observing what happened. She looked around for the other biologist, but could not see her.

In an ancient custom the survivors buried the dead and had a party. Zetopek Lar calmly observed the gaiety around him, and simply noted it as a student might note the behaviour of laboratory animals. He was interrupted by Brendan Bock.

"Read any good hieroglyphics lately, Zetopek?" the latter asked.

"You know my first name?" he said in surprise.

"We met on Ararara Tau," said Brendan, mildly peeved to have been forgotten. "You were investigating the ruins there."

"Oh, yes," he said. "The planet with the tongue-twister name. One only finds hieroglyphics on earth, technically..."

"A flippancy," sighed Brendan. "I should have known better. You were always somewhat pedantic."

"Thank you," acknowledged Lar. "I pride myself on my accuracy. It is good of you to recognise me in that."

"So, you two have met?" asked Brildan Furr, joining them.

"Once, on Ararara Tau," said Brendan. "We were both on a settlement team. They eventually decided the place was not worth colonizing, but it was interesting."

"Yes," agreed Lar. "The reasons the previous civilisation had died off were likely to kill off any new ones as well."

They gossiped about the place for a while, until Brendan moved off.

"I must admit, I don't really remember him at all," admitted Lar, "but I have a poor memory for faces. But I can identify any old building I have ever seen!"

Brildan laughed briefly, thinking Lar had meant it as a joke, but broke it down to a polite chuckle when he realized he had not. He soon excused himself and turned to move on. Eric ran into him, and looked apologetic.

"Oh, sorry, sir," he said in mild dismay. "We shouldn't have been running!"

"That's all right, son," he said. "We'll be running into each other a

lot for a while. You're all with the Tolians, I guess."

"Yes sir, except Celeste," said Eric. "She's from the Enterprise."

"How are you, Celeste?" he said. "We must get to know one another. We'll be shipmates for the next fortnight."

She looked at him appraisingly, and wondered what he intended, but she said, "I'll probably be at school most of the time, sir."

"Call me Brildan, kids," he said. "Or Mister Furr, if you want to be formal. We'll see each other on board, I'm sure."

"I don't think that's a good idea," she said firmly, and he looked taken aback, but then grinned.

"I didn't mean anything by it," he said with a smile. "I just enjoy the company of children. But I guess you could be right."

"That was a bit rude!" expostulated Shauna after they had left him. "I'm sure he didn't mean any harm."

"My mother says not to talk to strange men," said Celeste primly. "If he gets to know my mother, I'll talk to him."

"If you're trying to cook up a romance with your mother," said Shauna with a grin, "he's not much use. He'll be leaving with us in two weeks."

"Why would I.." began Celeste, but she stopped, thoughtfully. It wouldn't do any harm to try to fix Serena up with a beau. Speaking of whom...

"Time to go home, honey," said Serena, appearing from the crowd. "Have you got your bear?"

"I put it in the luggage on the shuttle," said Celeste. "It's on the Enterprise already, I guess."

"I see the shop is closed already," said Serena.

"What shop?" asked Celeste.

"The one where you bought the bear," said Serena. "He must have decided there was no more business to be got from the Enterprise, so he's moved on."

"He didn't sell it to me," Celeste said. "He gave it to me."

"Oh!" said Serena. If the shop had still been open she would have gone and made enquiries, but they were almost back on board, so she did not pursue it. She might have found Darras hard to find. He was already ready to beam offworld, drumming up some business for his next creation.

The accident had thrown off the schedule, and things were slightly rearranged. When the group arrived at the shuttle stop, one of the ensigns was waiting to divert them. The alterations to the schedule meant that they would be beaming aboard, instead of flying up.

Celeste immediately turned to her mother in dismay.

"Mummy, I don't want to be transported like that!" she said. "You know I don't like them!"

"They're quite safe, dear," said Serena with a sigh. "Safer than shuttles, even."

"But in a shuttle you just go all the way, and you're yourself," said Celeste desperately. "I don't want to be disassembled."

"I think the word you want is disassembled, dear," replied Serena. "The best word is discorporated. But I'll be with you, don't worry."

Mothers! thought Celeste. Her daughter is in fear of her life, and she teaches her grammar! But she had no way to protest further, and it would only make herself the center of attention to create a scene, and she had no desire for that, so she gave way with ill grace.

Zetopek Lar, on the other hand, was showing no disinclination

from creating a scene. He was shouting.

"I will not go on one of those infernal machines! How can my soul stay with me? I will wait for a shuttle! I do not want my atoms scattered throughout creation! I will stick with the atoms I have, thank you!"

Brendan Bock sympathized with him.

"It's Ok," he said. "If you really feel that bad, I'll stay with you. There's one more shuttle this afternoon. We can stuff ourselves on it. It'll be a bit crowded, but it won't be that long."

Lar calmed down, and the ensign reluctantly agreed, after confirming the request with the Enterprise. Celeste wondered if she should ask to go with them, but knew Serena would certainly say no. Mothers are a real nuisance sometimes, she thought.

They were to be transported from proper transporter tubes, and she relaxed a little. The prospect of being picked up at random, so to speak, from the landscape had troubled her. Some machine had to identify, somehow, which set of atoms to pick up, and it might miss some of her! This way, at least all of her should go! She felt she might be due for a short life, but a more romantic termination would be preferable than to be split asunder by a computer misreading! She realized she knew very little about transporters, and resolved to find out more.

The transporter terminal was a large area which could handle big crowds, and at one end were a small number of platforms with circular inserts. All of the others seemed unconcerned by the mode of travel, and were climbing on and disappearing in groups of eight. Celeste and Serena eventually climbed on in their turn, and Celeste found, to her internal amusement, the phrase, "A short life but merry," floating about in her mind. She must have heard someone say it.

There was a moment of what Serena had called 'discorporation', and she found herself on an identical platform, but in a much smaller room. She looked around at the operators, but they were unemotional, bored by the simplicity of their tasks. It was all routine to them, and she thought, "Worried over nothing, after all!"

Serena took her hand, and she did not pull away, for once. Serena noticed, and a thrill of pleasure went through her. She took a bit more pleasure in holding on to Celeste's hand a bit longer than necessary, and felt a closeness she had not felt in some time.

"So, how was it, worry-wart?" she said.

"It was a buzz!" exclaimed Celeste. "It's the only way to go!"

Lar and Bock came up with the shuttle later in the day. Lar seemed nervous, and Brendan calmed his fears, at the same time somewhat amused. While they were waiting, Illana passed by.

"Are you two part of the cargo now?" she asked in amusement. "I know we're not important, but...!"

"Zetopek doesn't like transporters," said Brendan. "We're taking the shuttle instead."

"Are there any seats?" asked Illana coolly. "I wouldn't want to stand for a sub-orbital trip. It would be worse than a bus, and not even any straps to hang on to."

"What's a bus?" asked Brendan in puzzlement.

"A primitive people-mover," replied Lar. Now that they were to travel by shuttle, he was calmer. "They have room for passengers to stand as well as sit."

"That's very well-informed of you," said Illana with respect.

"I am a historian," he said with pride.

"Any way, there are a few seats still," said Brendan. "It's a bit of a struggle to get in them with all the cargo packed in, but we'll manage."

"I might join you, if there's room," she said thoughtfully.

"What on earth for?" asked Brendan, then hurriedly withdrew the question. Maybe she wanted to be with him! That icy shield might hide a secret longing! "You're welcome of course," he added quickly.

"I like roughing it," she said, "and I prefer to avoid crowds."

Illana informed the supervisor of her decision, and he crossed her off his list to be beamed up. She sat with them as the door closed. If Brendan had been hoping for some revelation, or obvious thawing, he was disappointed. As they took off and soared towards the Enterprise, she maintained a very reserved demeanour. When they arrived she departed with a polite word.

The Enterprise's clocks had been adjusted to local time, as the stay was so long, otherwise there would have been a shipload of passengers with dislocated internal clocks, or jetlag, as it was first called. They were in different decks, and Bock made sure Lar was comfortable in his quarters before finding his own. He watched Lar key in his entry code, and move inside, then said his farewell.

In the small quarters allotted to him, Lar took a brief survey of the room, then, after assuring himself that his luggage had been correctly delivered, walked straight to the computer terminal and called up the research he had been working on earlier. He ignored the small meal that had been left for him.

Brendan Bock, meanwhile, walked through the corridors of his temporary new home, disdaining to use the turbolifts or other quick methods of transit. He wanted to get a feel for the place,

perhaps a bit of exercise as well. Perhaps he was stiff after the shuttle trip, and needed to stretch. Whatever the cause, he covered a good bit of territory quickly. He walked around a few decks, and noted where he was and was not allowed to walk freely.

On the bridge, Jean-Luc Picard found himself glad to be back in the restrictive uniform and space of the captain again. This was home, and the landfalls might be fun, and a diversion, but they were just vacations, and now he was back in his office-home.

He took the Enterprise out of orbit himself, although it was unnecessary. Any of his immediate juniors could have done it. The death of Felix Lattif was a misfortune, and he had met the man long enough to have decided he liked him. In fact, the man might have been captain material himself, if he had not decided to become a pioneer. However, one man was never irreplaceable, and they would soon elect his successor. When they were on their way he stayed for some time in his command seat, enjoying the feeling of being in the right place again.

Commander Data obeyed the simple commands, and brought the Enterprise into its path for Regula IV. They moved to warp one.

Serena and Celeste unpacked their luggage, which was reasonably modest in size, and she and Celeste went down to the shuttle bay to fetch her Kritonian panda. It had been lying loose in the shuttle, probably too awkward a shape to be packed away. It had been sitting in an unused chair, and Celeste had greeted it with, "You can stop supervising everything now, Teddy."

"Teddy's not very original," said Serena, "but it'll do."

Serena was surprised at its size. It was almost a meter tall. She picked it up, and it was light enough for a young girl to play with. It looked heavier. She passed it to Celeste.

"It's a lovely doll," she said. "And he gave it to you?"

"I got the idea he was pretty rich," said Celeste. "I think he just does the shop like a hobby. The way he talked."

"Can you move its arms or anything?"

"Oh, it can move a bit. It's voice activated. Clap your hands, Teddy."

The two hands of the panda came together slowly, with a slight whirring sound.

"It's a bit noisy," thought Serena. "Perhaps it wasn't good enough to sell. But it's a beautiful gift for Celeste."

"It knows a whole lot of commands," said Celeste. "It's keyed to my voice. He did it in the shop. Would you like it keyed to your voice too?"

"No, but show me how, in case," said Serena, with interest.

Celeste told her the method, then played with it for a while. She started to set it walking back to the cabin, but it was too slow. She started carrying it, but Serena ended up carrying it most of the way. Back at the cabin, Celeste gave Teddy a few commands, then sat him down by her while she downloaded her diary into the main computer.

Security on the Enterprise was mostly a formality, and the various officers either patrolled set areas, or waited in their ready room for some alarm, drinking non-alcoholic beverages, reading or studying, or simply gossiping. However, the two new groups represented unknown quantities, so security was increased in their areas. It might be lowered again if no disturbances occurred, but probably not, since two weeks of extra duties was not an onerous load.

Serena apologised to Celeste for the extra hours she would be left alone, but surprisingly Celeste was unperturbed. She simply

asked if she could go and play with her new friends. She left her new toy sitting in pride of place at her computer, and skipped off down the corridors.

The Tolians had a deck allotted to them, and were in comfortable quarters. Married couples and their families were up to four in a unit, and singles were in groups of two or three, depending upon the size of a room.

There was an atmosphere of gloom in the Tolian area, and Celeste was surprised to find herself feeling uncomfortable. She began in a quiet way to ask how the death of Felix affected them, and was upset when Shauna cried.

"I haven't had much to do with people dying," she said. "My daddy died when I was young, but that's all. Mummy cried a lot, but it was his job. It was always a chance he could die. I guess that's why I hate Starfleet."

"Felix was such a nice man," wept Shauna. "It's not fair that it should have been him. His wife is distraught."

"At least he didn't suffer," said Eric.

Celeste shifted unhappily, and changed the subject.

"Why are you going there?" she asked. "What's so good about Regulus IV?"

"Well, I guess we're going because our parents are taking us," said Eric. "They want to live somewhere where they are their own bosses, out in the open."

"It's supposed to be just perfect for humans," said Shauna, wiping away her tears. "The weather and the air are just right, and so is the gravity. Maybe they go together."

"But they won't be their own bosses," said Celeste with a frown. "There'll still be someone in charge."

"But they'll have their own farm, or business," said Shauna eagerly. "They just have to make it run properly, and nobody will bother them. We just have to make a town, so the scientists can come and explore the ruins."

Something of the same subject was being discussed in Captain Picard's ready room. Zetopek Lar had come calling.

"Good day, Captain," he said, peering around the doorway after it had opened. Picard looked questioningly at him, and repeated, "Come."

"Commander Riker said I might speak with you," he began. "I am Lar."

"Yes, of course," said Picard warmly. "I had hoped to catch up with you and Professor Gramm on Argonaut, but you only arrived at the last minute. A tragedy about the Professor."

"Indeed," said Lar. "I know something of your own work, Captain. I saw your report on Denexis in the Proceedings. Very thorough."

"Thank you," said Picard, a warm flush of pleasure suffusing his face. "I was very impressed with your writings on Deneb."

They gossiped animatedly for the best part of an hour, interrupted occasionally by some minor decision Picard had to make by intercom. Eventually Lar asked, "I would very much like to be able to study all the archaeological data in the Enterprise's computer files. Especially your own. Is it possible that I might be granted access?"

"I see no reason why not," said Picard with a smile. "I'll see that you get some access codes delivered."

Lar then departed with his usual distracted air.

Celeste walked alone along the corridors, taking in everything around her anew. She became aware that Mister Furr was

hovering ahead of her. I wonder if he's waiting for me? she thought uneasily, and moved off in another direction. Better to avoid him, she thought. She sighed, and went off to have a look at the other lot of settlers.

The Ardurians had settled in similarly, but the atmosphere here was quite different. They had not known Felix, so there was not the same overlay of sadness. She was greeted by some of the children she had played with, and their parents. She gossiped happily with them.

The Ardurians were more like farmers than the Tolians had seemed. Perhaps it was because they were still behaving naturally, not bowed down by unexpected sorrow. She met Beryl and Belinda, two girls who showed her around.

The Ardurians generally found the accomodation luxurious. They had come from a rather primitive planet, and were used to a hard life. The children were treating the surroundings with glee, bouncing on the beds, generally doing minor damage, but still careful of such things as water, which was scarce on their planet. It was scarce on the Enterprise, too, but never wasted, as everything aboard was recycled.

Beryl introduced her around, and she met her parents, Jarran and Arandnia Dezic, and Belinda's father, Fillat Bleek. Jarran had the usual pointed beard, and was a rather stern and reserved man. His wife was also rather pinched, but they received Celeste with an old-fashioned courtesy. Fillat Bleek was a rather slow thinker, obviously going to be just a farmer, and not entirely comfortable on the starship. Belinda obviously managed to control him very effectively. Her mother had died years before, when she was very young. Celeste ran around with the children, bounced on beds with them, and startled them by doing a somersault from the bed to the floor.

"We have a gym on board," she told them. "You'll be doing

somersaults by the time we get to Regula IV."

She took a few of the children to show them some of the recreational facilities, including the holodeck.

"You can only go in there with an adult," she told them. "I guess your parents wouldn't know how to work it, though."

"They know about them," said one of the boys defensively. "We just don't got any. Maybe one of the Enterprise people might take us in?"

"I don't know," said Celeste thoughtfully. "My mother is working mostly. Maybe Counselor Troi, if you ask her. She's nice."

Brendan Bock and Illana Borzovska, like Lar in the other camp, were each entitled to single rooms, because they were basically strangers, come in to give advice, but not part of the group. Brendan gathered his courage and dropped into Illana's room, and admired the amendments she had already made. The room already looked lived-in. She was in fact sharing, but her roommate was not there yet. Space was at a premium, so she had decided it would be best to share. She preferred to live alone, but her room mate would be out most of the day, when she would want to spend time on the computer. It should be possible to seem to live normally, without letting her room mate see too much of her.

"Have you met the brains trust of the group yet?" he asked. "I didn't get a chance to speak to you much on Argonaut. We arrived a bit late in the piece."

"Yes," she said calmly. "But we should get to know each other well on Regulus. We'll be pretty much the experts on plant life there."

"How did you get to Argonaut?" he asked curiously. "There weren't many ships in orbit."

"I got there long ago," she said with a smile. "I took the opportunity to arrive early and have a long holiday in the jungle there. It has a very interesting biosphere."

"You studied its microorganisms?" he asked.

"No, not really," she laughed. By god, she really is perfect! he thought. "I just walked with a backpack. I really roughed it. I didn't even take a small replicator."

"Do they make small replicators?" he asked in surprise.

"A small joke," she said in amusement. "I know enough to live off a jungle, even here. I did take some rations, though, just in case. I can survive fairly well. I'm an Aquarian."

"Oh," he said in surprise. "I'm a Libran, but I don't take too much notice of astrology. It's not all that popular today."

"Nor do I. It's nonsense. I meant I'm from Aquarius. I was born there."

"Oh, were you," he said blandly, then decided to admit, "I have no idea where that is."

"It's a planet almost completely covered in water," she said. "We've developed underwater cities. I can live off algae if I have to. But I prefer a good steak."

He laughed, and they parted after determining to study the records of Regulus IV together. He mentioned that he himself was from Ardura, but had not lived there for a long time. When he had left, Illana sighed and went back to work on her computer. A nice man, and good-looking, but he would be repelled if he really knew her.

Serena enjoyed a few moments of peace while Celeste joined her friends, and decided to make a rare visit to Ten-Forward. As she walked in she realised that an older man had matched her step. Not all that much older, she thought, and not too bad

looking, recognizing Brildan Furr. He eventually spoke.

"Good day, young woman, are you going for sustenance?"

"For a drink, yes," she answered doubtfully.

"Would you mind if I joined you," he asked. "If you're alone. I don't see anyone I know, and I hate to drink alone."

Serena was flattered, and agreed. They ordered drinks, and took them to a table.

"It's flattering to be picked out of a crowd," she said with a tinge of sarcasm, which he missed.

"It's not entirely random," he said with a smile. "Your beauty makes you stand out. I hope you don't mind my saying that?"

It doesn't make me stand out so much that you noticed me in my Security uniform, she thought with a smile, but she said, "What woman would mind you saying that?"

"You're Celeste's mother, aren't you? I'm Brildan Furr. With the Ardurians."

"How do you know Celeste?" she asked in surprise.

"She was playing with our children on Argonaut," he said. "A lovely child. I see where she gets it from."

Serena was amused at the clumsy attempt to ingratiate himself. She was aware that he would be leaving the ship in a couple of weeks, so there was no prospect of a romantic dalliance, but there was no need to be brutal.

"I'm Serena Moulton," she said. "I thought Celeste was playing with the Tolian children."

"I meant 'our' in the sense of the group. This idea of splitting us up in case we didn't get along is nonsense. But I suppose it doesn't matter. We will be separate on Regula, at least spatially.

I have to admit I am a bit of a stranger to both sides. I am Ardurian, but I don't live there, and I only arrived on Argonaut the day they were leaving."

Did you, now? thought Serena curiously.

"Where is Celeste, by the way?" he continued.

"She's actually down in your area," Serena replied. "She's playing with the children again."

"I was hoping to say hello again, before we part company," he said, a bit diffidently. "For some reason I think she seems to be avoiding me. I don't know why. I'm worried I might have offended her somehow."

"Well, as you say, you won't be meeting again," said Serena, suspicion beginning to tinge her speech. He was showing more interest in Celeste than in her.

He realised he might have said too much, and hastily added, "Of course. I was just curious. But I would certainly like to speak with you again sometime soon. Just a bit of social intercourse, the pleasure of having dinner with a beautiful woman, perhaps?"

"Well, perhaps," she said, mollified, but still suspicious. "We'll have to arrange it later."

"I'm sure we'll run into each other from time to time," he said. "The ship is not that big."

"You'll usually see me in a Security uniform," she said. "I get all over the ship."

No harm in warning him that it might not be politic to mix too much with her daughter.

They parted politely after she had allowed him to buy her another drink, and she sat musing as Andrew Black pulled up a chair and joined her.

"Is that my competition?" he asked. "A man needs to know what he's up against."

"I'm not aware of any contest," she said with her eyes wide open in mock surprise. "Mr Furr has just asked me to dinner, that's all."

"I keep asking you to dinner, without much luck," he protested.

"You took me out to dinner on Argonaut," she said mildly.

"I meant just the two of us," he said.

"You'll just have to get used to not having any more luck," she smiled. "The pleasure of my company at work will have to do you."

Andrew grinned, and said, "You can't blame a man for asking."

"I might blame myself if I said 'yes' to anything," she responded tartly.

When he had gone, Guinan moved silently over, and asked, "Is he troubling you?"

Serena looked up in surprise, but smiled. "No, thank you though. Luckily he does take 'no' for an answer."

"But he keeps harassing you."

"I don't mind. I don't think he knows how to talk to a woman without propositioning her. He may be getting some 'luck' elsewhere, but he's not with me. But he doesn't press too hard. He's not too bad. He just lacks all the social graces."

Guinan smiled. "I guess I'll have to take him in hand and teach him gentleness and compassion."

"Well, get him to wear a name-tag afterwards," grinned Serena, "so I'll still recognise him!"

In the meantime, Celeste had returned to her room. She turned

on the computer, and began by opening up her diary. Soon a highly colored version of the day's events was typed in and saved. She began to play around on the computer, with the panda sitting on its own chair beside her, its eyes seeming to take everything in.

The Enterprise flew silently on.

Chapter 4.

Worf supervised all the settling in of the colonists, and made a point of meeting the respective leaders. He was pleased to detect no hostility between them, only a quietly simmering excitement about the adventure they were all undertaking together.

Andrew and Serena were not required on this particular duty, as they had both put in a lot of extra time on the planetary surface, so Serena retired to her quarters, and Andrew went to Ten-Forward.

Deanna and Beverley soon joined Worf in his duties. Deanna was anxious to meet the group who would be among her charges for the next two weeks, and Beverley was technically in charge of their accommodations. All of them began to relax when they found out that there was no obvious tension between the groups. It was obvious, however, that of the four experts they had hired, Brendan, Illana, and Zetopek Lar had no real inclination to mix with the colonists, and the three latched on to Deanna and Beverley unobtrusively, and accompanied them to Ten Forward at the end of the formalities. The fourth, Brildan Furr, was quite at home among the Ardurians, and melted among them, although he was friendly enough to the crewmembers.

When they had settled down, and Guinan had supplied them with their non-alcoholic drinks, they relaxed and gossiped. Although the synthehol in some of the drinks had no intoxicating

effect, it gave a psychological boost to relaxing.

After some talk about what they had heard about Regula IV, which was surprisingly little, Deanna asked them their plans. Did they mean to stay long?

"We have to stay at least eighteen months," said Illana with a small smile. "That's when the next ship is organized to bring supplies. But I'm hoping to stay about five years. That's long enough to get to know a place really well, and start to tire of it."

"I don't have any fixed idea," said Brendan. "If I don't like the place, or they don't like me, I might leave again on the first ship. We're hired to give our expert advice and assistance. If we've done all that in a year, I might go. On the other hand, if the place turns out to be really fascinating, and difficult to investigate, I could stay years. It depends on how much I'm earning my pay, I suppose."

Lar did not volunteer to continue, so Beverley Crusher asked him what he hoped to achieve on the planet.

"I may find that the ruins are impossible to enter," he said neutrally, "and leave soon. If they are a soluble mystery, and sufficiently intriguing, I may stay forever."

There was a pause as they waited for him to elaborate on this, but he did not. Deanna had her shields up, but even so, she noted that he was a remarkably unemotional man for a human. He seemed to feel some hiatus in the conversation, for he suddenly excused himself and left them.

The others continued the discussion, and Deanna noted that Brendan seemed cheerful, and looking forward to the journey with a touch of high excitement. Illana was subdued and cool. She participated in all the talk, but did not reach out to anyone. Very self-contained, decided Deanna.

In the meantime, Serena returned to her room and began

reading, then watched a holovid. Celeste was playing a complex game on the computer, but it suddenly occurred to her that Serena spent most of her spare time in the room. She never went out to mix with other adults.

It's because of me, thought Celeste. If I were not here, she would probably be down in the front of the ship socializing. I don't want to spend all my time sitting here at the computer with her keeping an eye on me. I need to get out of here.

Life is quite complicated, she thought, in one of those sudden expansions of awareness that enfold us from time to time. She would have to expand Serena's social life.

"I think Ensign Black likes you," she said innocently.

"I know he does, honey," said Serena, with a start of surprise. "But I don't want to go out with him, or anything like that."

Celeste considered an argument based on the fact that he had gone out with her on the planet, but did not know enough about it to argue well. She decided on another tack.

"That Mister Furr is quite nice," she said. "I saw him looking at you. I think he likes you too."

"Has he been talking to you?" asked Serena suspiciously. "I've told you not to talk to strange men!"

"No," sighed Celeste. This was all too difficult. She decided to be direct. "I just saw him talking to you. I'd like to go and play with Eric and Shauna, and some of the others. Do you mind if I go down there. It would give you a chance to go and have a drink in the bar."

"No," said Serena in surprise. She certainly didn't object to Celeste having some friends. "You can go and play with them. But don't be late for school, and be home for dinner."

School on the Enterprise became something of a struggle. Alfred

Simpkins was one of only three teachers, because there was not a large number of children aboard the ship. The colonists had a teacher each, but room became a problem. For this reason classes became less structured, and some time was given to intermingling the regular students with the strangers, in the hope that they might learn something from each other, formally and informally.

Celeste stuck with her Tolian friends. She associated with the Ardurian children, but was somewhat distant with Beryl. She did, however, visit the Ardurians in the company of Eric and Shauna, and over the next few days after departure became a common visitor in their area too. She was not the only one. A few other Enterprise children had made friends with the travelers.

Mister Simpkins was surprised at the change in Celeste. She seemed to have relaxed at last, and seemed happy in the company of her new circle of friends. They were not usually with her in school, but even there she seemed interested in most things, and had even turned into a keen, if laborious, reader. He found Serena in the bar one day, and asked if he could join her.

"Sure," she said. "What will you have?"

"Oh, a beer of some sort," he said. "I hope you don't mind my looking you up, but I had to say how much Celeste has improved lately."

"She does seem happier," said Serena. "I hope it's not just a phase. She actually seems to be settling in to shipboard life."

"Yes," he said. "My only worry is that it may be tied up with her new friendships. And they are only aboard for a couple of weeks."

"Well," she said doubtfully, "if it's only two weeks of peace, let's enjoy those two weeks. I hope it's not. She really seems to be taking an interest in everything at last."

Down in the Ardurian area Beverley Crusher finished talking with some of the colonist women who were pregnant, and was able to assure them that there were no problems with their children. She absorbed the air of the place, with some boys running around making a noise. The Enterprise was usually so reserved. The children who lived aboard did not run and shout. She loved it, but knew it might upset others of the crew, especially Jean-Luc. Shauna and Celeste were sitting and gossiping with the girls, while some of the boys hovered about their conversation as they played, on the periphery of the conversation. Beverley recognised Celeste as one of the ship's children. She had had to immunize her once, apart from her being dressed distinctively. Serena's child, she thought.

"Why do all your people try to look the same?" asked Shauna. "All the men have the same beards, all of the adults dress the same."

"It's because we believe that all people are equal," said Belinda. "If one dresses extravagantly that one is saying, 'I am better'."

"But some adults must make the decisions," said Celeste. "If everyone decides what they will do it'll be..." She struggled for an appropriate word.

"Chaos?" suggested Beverley, and Celeste looked taken aback at her interruption.

"Yes," she said without acknowledging Beverley otherwise. "Chaos."

"But the people who make the rules and laws are elected," said Belinda. "They're just the same as everyone else."

"As soon as you elect them, they're not the same as everyone else," said Shauna, but neither Beryl nor Belinda could accept this, and the small group argued on unsophisticatedly, to Beverley's amusement..

"Who are the elected ones?" asked Celeste. "Do they look different so you can tell them?"

"Well, we don't need to tell them," said one of the Ardurian boys. "There's only a hundred of us, so we just all know them. There's Elder McNamon over there. And Beryl's parents are both Elders. That's what we call them, Elders."

"Do they have to be old?" asked Celeste.

"Naw, it's just a name," said the boy.

Elder McNamon had noticed himself being pointed out, and came over.

"Did I see myself the object of your interest?" he asked, somewhat unctuously.

"The..." The boy tried to think of a term for the Enterprise children which would not give offense. "These girls were asking about Elders. How we run things."

"It is good to see young ladies show an interest in politics," McNamon said. "If you wish to discuss the intricacies of our system, feel welcome to come to my office for a talk. I have little to do until we reach the planet."

"Well, no thanks," said Celeste. "My mum wouldn't like that. But thank you for the offer."

"Your mother would be welcome as well, and your father," murmured the Elder. As he moved away Beverley felt moved to follow him.

"That's not a good idea, you know," she remarked.

"What?" he asked, puzzled.

"Inviting young girls to come to your office alone. You mean no harm, but others might form the wrong idea."

"I do mean no harm!" he exclaimed. "Do you think I would harm the young ladies?"

"Probably not," said Beverley, "but their mothers might not understand. It is not a good idea to do it."

McNamon looked nonplussed. "I had not thought of it," he said shortly. "I will do as you say. But there was no harm."

"You seem to be popular with these men," said Shauna drily, in the mean time. She was a few years older than Celeste.

"What do you mean?" asked Celeste.

"Mister Furr was looking for you the other day. Did he find you?"

"No," said Celeste, shortly.

"I've seen him looking at you," Shauna added. "I think he likes you."

"He must be a hundred!" exclaimed Celeste.

"Perhaps he thinks he might be your dad one day," grinned Shauna. Celeste laughed, but looked thoughtful.

They went on their way, gossiping, and Beverley joined them.

Celeste parted from Shauna at last, and who should she pass in a corridor, but Brildan Furr! He was, however with the Captain. She stood aside to let the two pass, but he spoke to Beverley.

"How are you, Doctor Crusher?" he asked, but before she could reply, he went on. "And hello, Celeste! I can't stop to gossip now. The Captain and I are going to talk about archaeology for a while. I could talk about it for hours, and probably will!"

Celeste grimaced at this prattling, and walked on without speaking. The man was an idiot! Beverley exchanged a short pleasantry or two with Jean-Luc, and found Celeste had gone ahead.

Captain Picard was a bit surprised at this outpouring, but he had already found Furr somewhat manic in his attitude, as well as garrulous. However, he had been on the original team to Regula IV, so no doubt he would have a lot to offer. He smiled at the young girl, with no idea who she was, and passed on. He did not recognise her as the young woman who had nearly run into him some days earlier.

"That's the daughter of one of your security personnel," said Furr, realising he did not know her. "Serena Moulton."

"Oh, yes," said Picard, glad of an anchor to remember her by. "A very good record. New."

They arrived at the Captain's quarters, and Furr accepted a cup of tea, which was of course Earl Grey. He liked it, although he had not tried it before.

"So, you were with the first team to Regula?" asked Picard as an opening formality.

"Yes, Captain," said Furr. "On the Minor Endeavour. We didn't have a chance to stay long, but what we found makes it one of the most interesting planets I've ever seen."

"The Minor Endeavour is a small ship is it not?"

"Yes, purely built for speed and exploration. I think the name is some sort of joke, but I don't know its history."

"So, what was so interesting about Regula IV?"

Brildan Furr shifted in his seat. He had become a little tense as he spoke, and Picard realised he was seriously dedicated to this planet.

"First, it has vegetation, and insects, but no other animal life!" He straightened up, and bent forward. "That's unheard of. There are insects of every size, to fill every niche, but there are no animal ancestors. The other thing is that the structures are huge, and

we have no idea how to get into them!"

"Like the Egyptian pyramids?" Picard ventured.

"Maybe," said Furr. "As I said, we had no time to investigate deeply. But our ship was equipped for very deep scanning, and we found no sign of rooms inside. I'm not talking of normal buildings, though. These structures are huge!"

"What scale are we talking about?" asked Picard.

"They go about two hundred kilometers into the air. To be more accurate, they go up past breathable air. To stand on top you would need a pressurised suit, or a force field."

"That's an unbelievable scale!" exclaimed Picard. "Have you any hypotheses about either mystery?"

"One suggestion is that the planet was artificially terraformed," replied Furr. "The flora may have been introduced as a garden, and it has simply spread in the millenia since the place was inhabited."

"So, you think it may have been a dead world, selected by some advanced race for colonisation, and they have since died out themselves?" Picard was deeply interested.

"That's the major theory," agreed Furr. "Based on a short visit, of course. The other puzzle we have no idea of. We have never encountered a civilisation which did not have doors of some kind!"

"Do you have photographs of these buildings?" asked Picard, intrigued.

"Yes, of course," said Furr excitedly, opening a folder. "These are hard copies which I find easier to examine than a computer screen."

Picard was a little surprised at this. A picture on a screen can be

enlarged, color enhanced, and so on. He himself, however, understood the pleasure of holding a real book, and he guessed it might be a similar feeling. Or, less likely, Furr might be one of those rare breed who still suffered from computer phobia.

The photos showed enormous structures, with blank metal walls. They had been taken mainly from ground level, but a few were from space. Each group of structures was in a comparatively small area, and the countryside around was completely bare of any trace of buildings, even crude huts. But they might have been completely obliterated over millenia. It may have been inaccurate to speak of groups of structures, as there seemed no spaces between them.

"When you say 'millenia'," Picard suddenly asked, "are you guessing, or have you dated the ruins?"

"Guessing," admitted Furr. "The metal is still uncorroded, but it is very stable in composition. It would not corrode in millions of years. The plants have obviously been growing a long time, though."

"Of course, the ruins are enormous," said Picard thoughtfully, "and they need only one door. It might be disguised. It might even be buried beneath drifting sands."

"That's unlikely," replied Furr. "Not much sand around. Inland it is all good soil."

"Without animal life?" asked Picard. "No worms?"

"There are insects, which may fulfil some of those functions," said Furr. "I don't feel there is a door, but I could be wrong."

"And your hopes for the colony?"

"Moderate," smiled Furr. "But we believe the place is sufficiently intriguing that scientists will want to study it, and we hope there may be a strong tourist trade. The tourists will probably only

come if we can get in. It's a bit far to travel to see gardens and metal walls."

"And if that doesn't happen," said Picard, "you will have a beautiful, fertile world to live on in peace."

"Exactly," said Furr. "I won't be too unhappy if we simply live there happily."

"There are tourists who will go a long way to see a good garden", said Picard encouragingly.

"It is a long way," said Furr.

"How is your system of government to operate?" asked Picard. "I understand you will have an overall parliament with two states, so to speak."

"Yes," he agreed. "We will be living in two separate locations, but in touch. We thought it best to operate independently for the most part, but we will eventually fill the planet, so we need to be one, for trade for example, or defence, if need be. We are going to have a proper government, and are going to have a nominal opposition, so that a true two-party system will develop. We don't imagine too much conflict while our numbers are so small, but we are setting it in place. The two parties don't even have any opposing policies yet, but doubtless they will develop."

"And you are not in the government? I would have thought your experience with the place would have made you an automatic selection."

"Well, I don't see myself in that role, but I have agreed to go on the Opposition benches, when we build some." He laughed.

"Who are your High Council?" asked Picard. "I believe that Felix Lattif was to be on it. He will need to be replaced."

"Yes, well his replacement will be from his people. On our side we have Fratrīs McNamon, who I hope will be the actual

President. He is a formidable intellect and a good organiser. He is old, but should have a few good years left to get the thing up and running. Actually, with Felix dead, I think he would be the obvious one. Our others are Etilia Braz and Jarran and Arandnia Dezic. All very competent people."

"So, you have plenty of good representatives," said Picard, thinking that Fratriss was not all that old. Furr was young. "A good start."

"We are lucky to have enough," said Furr. "We are a farming community basically, and most of the others would find running a government pretty hard going."

"Obviously you are not a farmer yourself," observed Picard.

"No, I was a bit of a black sheep," grinned Furr. "Our world is purely subsistence, and I got off it when I could. But when this opportunity arose I thought of them, and convinced enough of them to seize the opportunity."

"How are the resources?" asked Picard. "Are there ample minerals and so on?"

"We lost the computer records entirely," said Furr, "but we had seen the readouts. There are adequate supplies of all the common metals and minerals, and easy enough to mine. The plants are still an unknown. We don't know whether they will support us, or whether we will need to plant the seeds we have with us."

They talked on, and were nearing the end of their discussions, when Picard's communicator beeped urgently, and the voice of Lieutenant Commander Worf answered his acknowledgement with "You had better come down to the Ardurian area, Captain. There has been a death."

"Who is it?" cried Brildan Furr, and Picard repeated his question.

"It is Fratrīs McNamon," answered Worf.

Chapter 5.

Shortly before the discovery of McNamon's body, Serena was in her quarters when Celeste came in, and sat and watched her for a moment.

"Would you like something to eat?" asked Serena.

"No, thanks, mummy," answered Celeste. "I'm on a diet."

"Since when?" asked Serena.

"Just today," she answered. Serena realised Celeste had been eating fairly small meals lately, and did not have as many snacks as she had been, but it did not seem something to worry about. She was still eating a reasonable amount. Not bulimia as well! she prayed.

"Why would you diet, darling?" she asked. "Is there someone you want to look like?"

"Miss Borzovska looks nice," said Celeste diffidently. "She's slim and beautiful."

"The best way to be slim and beautiful is to eat the right foods and get good exercise," said Serena. "But you'll probably be slim and beautiful anyway. Both your father and I were slim, and you're already beautiful."

"Mummy," continued Celeste, changing the subject, "how did you join Starfleet?"

"Because I wanted to see the universe, I guess," answered Serena. "It's a job which requires fitness and intelligence, and I thought I could do it."

"No, I meant, how," said Celeste. "How did you join?"

"I put in an application from school," answered Serena. "My

grades were good, and my profile, so I got in."

"If someone like me wanted to join," said Celeste, "or just someone who didn't go to school any more."

"Well," said Serena, her spirits soaring, "you do go to school, so you'd just wait a few years, and if your grades were good enough, you put in an application. Your teacher would tell you, or I could help. But you have to do really well at school."

"If I decided later," said Celeste, "what would I do?"

"There's places you can apply, called Recruitment Centers," said Serena. "They are all over the big planets in the Federation. You just go in and fill in forms."

"Can I come and see you work?"

Serena frowned. Lieutenant Worf would not be keen, but she would ask. This was the first sign Celeste had shown of interest, not only of her work, but Starfleet in general. She pressed her communicator.

"Lieutenant Worf," she asked. "This is Ensign Moulton."

"Yes, Ensign," came the deep tones of her superior officer.

"My daughter would like to see what I do," she said. "Is it permissible to take her on my round?"

"She may accompany you to the wait room, and walk with you, but cannot accompany you on any emergency call," he said after a moment. "It is good that she is interested."

"Thank you, sir," said Serena gratefully, and signed off. "You can come with me now, if you like."

Celeste hopped off her chair, and waited while Serena changed, and the two of them went down to the Operations Room, one walking, one skipping.

As they walked in the small group who were spread around the room, reading, gambling or gossiping, looked in surprise at Celeste. They knew her by sight, in some cases, and by her mother's descriptions otherwise, but a visit was unexpected. Andrew Black came over.

"Welcome to the Castle, Celeste," he said. "Have you decided to join your lovely parent in security?"

"She's come down to see what I do," said Serena, "but that doesn't include repelling boarders. This is Ensign Black, dear. And this is Ensign D'Xarth, Ensign Balk,..". She introduced Celeste to all the Security staff, who were glad of a break in the tedium, and made her welcome. She shyly refused offers to play poker, billiards or chess.

Celeste immediately detected that Andrew Black had more than a passing interest in Serena, and spoke vivaciously to him. Serena, who had been wondering at her sudden interest in the ship and Security, suddenly began to wonder whether Celeste had a crush on Andrew. She's only nine, she thought. What age do girls start getting crushes?

Matters had gone no further when there was a sudden call, and Serena said, "You'll have to stay here, honey."

"What is it?" asked Ensign Balk. The voice on the communicator replied, "Computer reports a dead man on Deck four. Cabin 4333."

"On our way," replied Balk, and he and three others, including Serena and Andrew, made their way quickly to cabin 4333. Celeste was left alone in Security, and decided to go back to her cabin. The medical staff had also been alerted, and Doctor Beverley Crusher was already there.

"What is the situation?" asked Serena. It was normal practice for Security to attend any sudden death or injury, which were

generally quite rare. Murder was not normally first thought of, for the simple reason that it was virtually impossible to commit a murder without being caught.

"Scan shows a blow to the head caused death," replied Crusher. "He may have fallen and hit his head on something. We'll know soon."

The crew of the Enterprise were chosen for stability and intelligence, so that the chance of sudden attacks or fights was negligible. However, the colonists were just passengers, so the possibility existed that some sudden fight had occurred.

Beverly Crusher continued to examine the surroundings.

"It looks like he hit this shelf," she said at last. "There's blood and hair on the corner. It matches."

"Computer," said Lieutenant Worf, who had joined them by now, "was there any person in this room with Elder McNamon before his body was discovered?"

"Specify time constraints," replied the computer smoothly.

"How long has he been dead?" Worf asked Beverly.

"About an hour," Doctor Crusher answered. "He must have lain here undetected for a while."

"How can you remain dead, undetected by the computer?" asked Andrew, puzzled.

Worf specified the previous hour and a half, and the computer replied that no persons had been in the room during that time.

"None?" asked Beverly. "He didn't have a visitor all morning?"

"He was visited by Elder Jarran Dezic three hours and fourteen minutes ago," replied the computer.

"It looks like an accident," said Beverly Crusher, "but I'll do an

autopsy."

"Computer, why did you take so long to report the death?" asked Andrew.

"I reported the death as soon as I detected it," answered the calm voice of the computer.

Beverley had the body beamed down to sickbay, and followed. The others returned to Security.

"This group is unlucky," said Andrew quietly. "Two dead in a few days."

"Yes," observed Worf. "It makes one wonder whether the death of Felix Lattif was an accident. Unfortunately that is both impossible to investigate now, and outside our jurisdiction."

"Yes, the crates would have everyone's fingerprints on them by now," said Serena.

"No they would not," remarked Worf in surprise. "They were handled only by machines, including their opening. I doubt that the killer would have used bare hands, but we will examine the crate involved."

The group split up, to go to their individual investigations. Andrew and Ensign Balk stayed on guard. Serena and Worf returned to Security, where Celeste waited anxiously.

"Making any progress with your wooing?" asked Balk cheerfully.

"We had dinner together on Argonaut," said Andrew. "She brought Celeste, but it was a pleasant evening. I think Celeste might like me, anyway!"

"Did anything else happen afterwards?"

"A gentleman never tells," said Andrew proudly.

"But you would," observed Balk, "so nothing happened."

"It's a step in the right direction, though," said Andrew philosophically.

Worf and Serena arrived back in Security. Celeste was waiting there again.

"What happened?" asked Celeste when she could speak to Serena.

"A man fell and died," said Serena. "His name was Elder McNamon. Did you know him?"

"Oh, I just met him yesterday!" cried Celeste. "He spoke to us while we were playing. Doctor Crusher was there, too. Did he hit his head?"

"It looks like it," said Serena. "Doctor Crusher is investigating. What did he say to you?"

"He offered to explain Tolian politics," said Celeste with disgust. "As if!"

Their discussion was interrupted by the arrival of Commander Riker and Commander Data.

"You've heard about the death?" asked Andrew.

"Commander Worf advised us," replied Riker. "Until the results of the autopsy we'll keep the room sealed. It seems all right, but two deaths in such a short time is a big coincidence. I've sent word to the Captain."

There was an air of excitement in Security. Not a lot happened out of the ordinary, and many were secretly hoping that a murder had been committed, so they could practise their craft.

Celeste looked at Data with interest, and whispered to Serena, "That man is a funny color."

"That's Commander Data," whispered Serena back. "He's an android, and I expect he can hear us, because he has very good

hearing."

Data looked around, and said, "Your conjecture is correct, Ensign."

Celeste looked taken aback, and Serena said, in a normal voice, "Don't worry. The Commander doesn't take offence. He is one of our most senior officers."

An android a senior officer! Celeste was amazed. How could that be? An android was basically just a computer. How could a computer hold a position of command?

A communicator beeped, and Riker answered.

"Commander? This is Crusher. It's not an accident. The blow was with something small and round, not the sharp corner of a shelf. It's murder, by the look of it. I've told Captain Picard. He and Counselor Troi are coming down."

"Counselor Troi?" asked Celeste.

"She's invaluable in investigations," said Serena. "She can tell when anyone is lying, so we have her around to question suspects."

"If the Captain's coming I guess I'd better get out of the way, then," said Celeste reluctantly. "I'm not supposed to be here, and he doesn't like kids. I'll wait in the room."

"Ok, dear," said Serena, kissing her on the cheek. "If you feel a bit cold, put up the room heat."

"I'll be all right," said Celeste crossly. "Why do you always treat me like a baby?" She stormed out.

The Security team, accompanied by Riker and Data, met Picard and Troi at the room. Worf took command, as it was his responsibility.

"The room must not be entered any more than it has been," he

said. "All those who have been inside will have to have their DNA checked against residual molecules inside, later. Our experts in this area are Ensigns Moulton and Black. They will take charge of the investigation."

Serena and Andrew both had a surge of adrenalin. It was very rarely that a security team had a chance to use their training in investigative techniques, simply because not many serious crimes were committed on a starship. They sealed off the room, and had their instruments record all traces of beings inside the room. These were traced, and in each case the person involved was found to have had an alibi for the time of death. Deanna Troi was present for each interview, and verified their claims to innocence.

The computer was consulted, but was firm that no one had been with McNamon at the time of his death. The security team repaired back to their headquarters, with Riker and Data. Celeste had been hanging around the area, and slipped into the room. Serena saw her, but did not stop to rebuke her. She was too preoccupied.

"We haven't had a murder before," she said worriedly. "There is a perception that the technology makes it impossible to escape capture. But if the perpetrator has the technology, they may use it to escape detection."

"Expand on that, Ensign," said Riker.

"If he or she has some weapon which kills at a distance, nothing would have been disturbed in the room. But this appeared to have been a simple case of assault, and some of the victim's blood and hair was found on a corner of a desk. So the perpetrator would seem to have had to be there, to have put some of the blood and hair there. But we found no record of another heat signature in the room, so nobody has been there recently but the deceased. But what if someone has a tool which

will artificially erase that signature?"

"What if someone on the Enterprise had access to the computers, and programmed them to ignore the presence of that person?" asked Andrew.

"It would require a very high degree of expertise," answered Data. "I or Commander La Forge could do it, I believe. However, there was still no trace of a heat signature."

"Would that apply if the murderer was an android?" asked Riker.

"Am I included in the suspects?" asked Data in surprise. "How interesting."

"No," smiled Riker, "except that every being on the ship is a suspect. I can't come up with a motive for you, though. But you have narrowed it down to yourself, you know. Geordi would have left a heat signature."

"I do generate a normal human body temperature, Commander," said Data with interest, "but it may be possible to shut it off. My electronics do throw out some heat however. This is very interesting. A real murder mystery, in which I do not know the solution."

"That is a suggestion, though," said Serena. "Can the computer be investigated to see whether it has been reprogrammed? There is the added problem, as pointed out by Ensign Black, that the computer did not report the death until some time after it occurred."

"Certainly," answered Data. "However, someone of that level of expertise, even an android, would presumably have erased such an alteration."

"You couldn't find a trace?" asked Andrew.

"It is always possible to trace an alteration," replied Data. "However, if the system has been returned to its original state it

may not be possible."

"Well, it should be possible to scan, then, for other life-forms including androids," said Serena.

"What do you think of all this, young lady?" Will Riker suddenly asked Celeste, who was standing half behind Serena. She was startled.

"It seems silly to me," she said. "If something could control the computers it wouldn't have to go and hit someone to kill them."

"The child is right," said Data. "However, it will not hurt to run a scan of the computer, and then the personnel. I have a complete manifest of shipboard personnel, so I shall run a complete check to see if anyone is invisible to the computer. I shall do so after the meeting."

"I thank the young lady for her pertinent contribution," said Worf, "but I do not feel comfortable with her remaining. We may have to discuss forensic material."

"That's Ok," said Celeste shyly. "Can I tell about this meeting in my diary, or is it a secret?"

"You may record that you attended, but no details," answered Worf.

"Perhaps even that would not be a good idea," interposed Data. "If someone does have unlimited access to the computer, they might come across the entry, and place the young lady in danger."

Celeste left them to their endeavours, and hurried back to her room. Her panda was sitting stiffly on the computer seat, so she hoisted it off, and took its place. Her brow wrinkled as she opened up the file.

Chapter 6.

Data and Geordi opened up the computers, and began to consider their options. First, they asked the computer for a self-diagnosis, then swept to find whether any being on board was hidden. In essence, Data asked the computer to locate each person who should be on board individually. The result was negative.

"Ok," said Geordi, "nobody is screened at the moment. But we have no way of knowing whether there was a temporary alteration, if someone was good enough to screen their work. And if someone is this good with a computer, they may be hard to find."

"We have to consider whether there is someone aboard who is not supposed to be," said Data, "so I must still examine the programming to see if there is a subroutine causing the computer to ignore any presence. This will take a long time."

"Well, let's finish the quicker tests first," said Geordi. "But you could be right. If someone is able to subvert the computer that well, they could get aboard through our security screening. Let's try for unfamiliar life-forms. Computer, are there any life-forms aboard which are different from what they are supposed to be?"

"Negative," replied the computer.

"Your question is ambiguous to a computer, Geordi," commented Data. "The phrase 'supposed to be' might have many interpretations. Computer, are there any shapeshifters aboard?"

"None detectable," replied the computer. "All life-forms aboard conform to the readings programmed into me."

"Are there any artificial life-forms on the Enterprise?" asked Geordi.

"Yes," replied the computer.

"Where?" asked Geordi.

"In Engineering and the quarters of Ensign Serena Moulton," answered the computer.

Geordi and Data glanced quickly at each other, and Geordi hit his communicator. They arrived at Serena's room moments after Worf. Worf hit the override and the three stepped into the room with phasers drawn. Serena looked up in astonishment, especially when Data scanned her with a tricorder.

"What is going on?" she said angrily. "I could have been undressed. Why didn't you knock?"

"Our apologies, Ensign," said Worf, without sounding at all apologetic. "The computer detects an artificial life-form here."

"Look," said Geordi, pointing at the Kritonian panda sitting at the computer.

Data and he scanned it, and Geordi said, "This is it."

"It's just a toy," said Serena. "Celeste got it on Argonaut. Oh, god! He gave it to her!"

"What?" asked Worf.

"The man in the shop. He gave it to Celeste, just before we left. I was going to confront him, but we were leaving, so I let it go! The perfect way to smuggle an android aboard!"

"Could this be it, though?" asked Worf.

"I got your bag. What's going on?" asked Celeste, her face turning white as she saw the group. She had walked in through the open door, with the bag she had gone to fetch.

"It's your panda," said Serena. "It's an android. They think it might be the one that killed Elder McNamon, and perhaps the other man."

"It couldn't have killed Mister Lattif," said Celeste. "It was in our luggage."

"No, it was lying loose in the shuttle," corrected Serena. "And it was quite near where Lattif was killed."

"It is a very sophisticated machine," said Data. "It is capable of speech, and complex movement. It has a very comprehensive neural net."

"It can't talk, can you Teddy?" said Celeste indignantly. To her astonishment it turned its head and replied.

"Indeed I can," it said. "You have not previously requested that I do so."

"Have you killed a man?" asked Data.

"Of course not," replied the panda, expressionlessly. "How could I?"

In spite of their experience with other life forms, all in the room found the blank stare of the panda creepy somehow. Its voice was as expressionless as its face.

"You might have programmed the computer to do so," said Data. "Or you might have killed him manually."

"I do not have access to the computer," said the Panda, "and I have not left the room. Manually is not an appropriate term, moreover. I have no hands."

"How could he use the computer?" asked Celeste impatiently. "He hasn't got any hands."

"You only press one key at a time," said Geordi grimly.

"Could the panda have accessed the computer verbally?" asked Worf.

"No," answered Data. "In order to use voice activation, one must have a voice recognizable to the computer."

"You underestimate me, Mister Holmes," observed the panda, in

an eerie imitation of Serena's voice. "I am an artificial construct with a variety of capabilities. But I have not used the computer."

The humans in the room found Serena's voice issuing from the toy's unmoving face somewhat disturbing, not least of all Serena, although her own voice was not as familiar to her as it was to others.

"All the same, McNamon appears to have been killed manually, as Commander Data puts it," said Worf. "Could this toy have wandered through the corridors of the Enterprise unobserved, and entered McNamon's quarters?"

"It has some echo-location components," said Data, completing a scan. "So it could have been able to wander and avoid people. It could have obtained the code to the room through the computer. We will have to recheck the programming of the computer to ascertain whether this android has been rendered invisible to it."

"The matter is easily resolved," said the panda. "If you lock me in a box, either the killings will stop, or not. If they stop, it may have been me, if not, I am innocent."

"Who programmed you?" asked Data.

"Whoever made me, I suppose," said the panda. "I exist. I have instructions built into me. I know no more. I am a toy."

Worf said, "The toy is correct. We will lock it up. Then we need to trace its maker."

"The shopkeeper," said Serena. "It has to be the man who gave it to Celeste. He has a shop on Argonaut at the stopover."

Worf asked to use her terminal, and instituted a search for the man. The team, including Serena, returned to Security and waited.

Eventually they had their reply from Argonaut. The shop had

been hired briefly, for about a year, but the man had disappeared, and the shop was empty. There was no clue to his identity.

"Well, we don't have any absolute proof," said Serena angrily, "but it looks like this panda is the villain."

"But do we have the right to box it up?" asked Geordi. "We don't have proof, as you say."

"It was the suggestion of the panda itself," noted Worf, "so it will not feel aggrieved. It appears to be entirely mechanical, so it is not a lifeform, and prolonged packaging will not hurt it."

"I'd like to get my hands on the man who gave it to her," said Serena grimly.

"We must keep in mind," said Data, "that it may have been a diversion. The real culprit may be elsewhere. We also need to be aware that if it did have access to the deep structure of the computer it may already have programmed in some other mischief. It certainly has had some access to the computer."

"How do you know?" asked Serena.

"It has made itself familiar with myself," said Data. "It obviously knows of my interest in the adventures of Sherlock Holmes."

"Didn't you run a self-diagnostic?" asked Andrew Black, who had joined them, and moved in near Serena, as if in support. Celeste noticed his attention, but not the subtle way Serena moved so that he would not put his hand on her. Celeste always did that herself, so she did not notice it as unusual. She also noticed that she had not been pushed out of the room. It was, after all, her room.

"We diagnosed that the computer has not currently been interfered with," said Data. "Whatever was done to it to enable the murder of Elder McNamon has been reversed and is

undetectable. However, it may have been programmed to carry out some seemingly harmless task which can cause mischief."

"Like a virus?" asked Andrew.

"That is one possibility," replied Data. "It would take a long time to go over every little command or subprogram in the computer. But the computer is highly intelligent. It should recognise any overt misuse."

"Could voice recognition be possible?" asked Serena, with a shiver.

"I doubt it," said Data. "Voice initiated commands are inherently more traceable than keyboard commands, so that anyone wishing to remain hidden is more likely to use keyboard only."

"Do you use the keyboard yourself, Ensign?" asked Geordi.

"Not much," said Serena. "I try to get Celeste to keep her diary through the keyboard. It's good for her spelling, and it's a lot quieter if I'm trying to watch a holovid."

"For the moment let us concentrate on the panda," decided Worf. "That can be done more quickly."

The panda was scanned and recorded, taken away, and sealed securely in an environment which prevented electromagnetic emissions. Serena went to Security to discuss the case with her fellows.

The Client was in his quarters when his computer screen suddenly came to life and the face of an old man appeared.

"Who are you?" gasped the Client.

"It's me, if you will forgive the grammar," replied the image, in a gravelly voice. "I gathered you want to contact me."

"How did you do that?" asked the Client. "Turn on my computer like that, I mean. And why do you look like that?"

"I have got in deep into the computer," replied the image. "I had to turn it all off for a while, but I believe it is safe to reinstitute all my protocols. I made myself invisible to the computer for a while, but I've.. You don't need to know all that. I thought I would send a variant image as security, in case you were not alone. I don't believe anyone can intercept the transmission, but better safe than sorry. I have a question, myself."

"Which is?" asked the Client.

"Am I able to kill others? It makes it simpler if I neutralise an area rather than a specific target, but I would rather not."

"No, just those I said," said the Client. In spite of his callousness, he found it mildly unnerving to speak with a machine designed only for killing without conscience.

"That's good," said the old man. "I don't like doing this."

"You can't dislike it," said the Client angrily. "You're just a machine. A machine I own."

"True," said the old man neutrally. "What did you want to contact me for? I was told not to contact you, after all."

"I want to add one more to the list. Illana Borzovska. She saw something she should not have on Argonaut. I need to have her terminated before she mentions it to anyone else."

"Why can't you say 'killed'?" sighed the image. "All right. But it becomes difficult. I will not be able to kill many more aboard the Enterprise without being discovered. I am lucky to be free still. the rest of the mission will have to take place on the planet."

"Will you be able to get onto Regula?" he asked. "Can you complete your mission there?"

"It will be perfectly natural for me to be on the planet. Once there I can eliminate those you require and seem to disappear into the jungles forever," said the image. "I do have to self-destruct after I

have completed the mission. It is in hand still, but I can fit in Miss Borzovska as well. I dare say I will know if you want to contact me again."

The image disappeared, and the client watched the computer turn itself off. He realised he was sweating, and mopped his brow.

Celeste walked down towards the Tolian area with a more downcast attitude than usual. She nearly bumped into Zetopek Lar as he came out of his room with a distracted air.

"Hello, my dear," he murmured.

"Hello, Mister Lar," she said. "You seem in a hurry."

"I'm off hunting, my dear," he said. "Er.. I'm looking for something."

"I hope you're giving your prey a sporting chance," she said with a smile.

"What a pleasant concept," he said. "What made you say that?"

"Mummy said you hunt in the jungles," said Celeste. "You're famous, she said."

"I hunt with a camera, my dear," he said with a rare smile. "It's wrong to kill. But at the moment I am only hunting for some files."

She stared after him as he stumbled off along the corridor. Then she found her small group of friends.

"You look a bit down today," offered Eric as greeting. Beryl and Belinda were there, and seemed to have recovered their equanimity.

"Something strange happened," she said. "You know my panda?"

"Yes, it's lovely," said Shauna.

"It's an android," said Celeste in wonder. "It can talk and all sorts of things. They think it killed Elder McNamon."

The two siblings were suitably impressed.

"Do you think it did?" asked Shauna after some discussion.

"No," said Celeste. "I can't see how it could of. How could a toy panda walk around the corridors without being seen?"

"At night, maybe?" suggested Belinda.

"No," said Celeste. "Security is always around. They have cameras in all the corridors, and if anyone walked down at night they'd notice. Especially a panda. No, I don't see how he could."

"And the Elder was killed in the middle of the day," said Eric.

"How do you know?" asked Celeste with interest.

"Everyone knows everything," laughed Shauna. "Not much happens to us. This is real news."

"I didn't think an android could be so small," mused Celeste.

"Why not?" asked Eric.

"Well, I just assumed that androids would all be human shape. So they could do things. A toy panda can't do much."

"It can walk around," said Shauna.

"And press the buttons on a computer," said Eric.

"So Data could be just a little thing?" said Celeste. "Intelligent, strong and little."

"Not really," laughed Shauna. "The whole idea of making him was to make him as like a human as possible."

"But he doesn't," said Celeste. "Not quite."

"Enough to walk about with humans and learn by experience, like humans," said Eric.

"I wonder why whoever made him, made him deliberately wrong?" mused Celeste. "Do any of you like sleepover parties?"

"What's that?" asked Belinda.

"When you have real houses, sometimes you have friends over to sleep for the night. We did that when we lived on a planet. You can't do that in a tiny cabin like ours."

"We could do it," said Belinda Bleek. "They've got us in a big room. Would you girls like to sleep over with us tonight?"

"I'll have to ask," said Celeste, and Shauna and Beryl said the same.

"It's not a very good room," said Belinda, "compared to your room. It's not really for accommodation. You have to go down the corridor to the washrooms."

"That's a pain," said Celeste, "but I'll rough it."

The others laughed, and she looked puzzled.

"It's luxury to us," explained Shauna. "We're farmers! Some of us didn't even have permanent electricity where we were, and some didn't have septic toilets!"

"What's septic toilets?" asked Celeste, wrinkling her nose questioningly.

They talked on, and eventually Celeste made her way back to her home. She noticed that Professor Lar was still out, and his room locked.

When she got home Serena was happy to give her permission, and communicated with the Bleeks. She skipped off to join them in a rather crowded room, and they gossiped until late.

That night, Arandnia and Jarran Dezic went to bed together for the last time.

Chapter 7

Next morning the girls breakfasted together, and gossiped eagerly until school time approached. Celeste ate quickly, and announced, "I'm going to put all this in my diary before I forget it!" They laughed, because her diary had been one of her main topics of conversation all night, but she scampered off, and the others delayed their departure as long as possible. The Enterprise being so compact it was possible for them to go straight to school before going back to their rooms, so they did not hurry. But before they had time to depart, a solemn visit from Deanna Troi stopped them.

"Sit down, my darlings," she said sadly. "I have some bad news."

They looked at her uncertainly, but she was focused on Beryl.

It was only when Arandnia and Jarran Dezic failed to arrive at an early daily prayer service that someone tried to rouse them in their room, and eventually called Security. Ensign Balk overrode the door code, and entered the room.

Husband and wife lay asleep in bed, but he noticed that there was condensation on the walls and furniture. Not a lot, but unusual. He tried to rouse the pair, but it was obvious immediately that they were both cold. He quickly summoned Doctor Crusher, and Lieutenant Worf.

Both arrived almost immediately, and Beverley Crusher took a quick scan of the bodies.

"Well, we know that's not right," she muttered, and added to Worf, "The tricorder reading says they've been dead about three days! And there is no mark on them."

"I may be able to save you a lot of analysis," said Worf grimly. "Ensign Balk observed upon entry that there was condensation upon the walls. It has evaporated now, with the door open."

Beverley quickly took the clue, and her autopsy concurred with Worf's analysis. The couple had been frozen to death.

"As I suspected," said Worf, aggrieved that another murder had been done before his eyes, so to speak, but pleased to have solved the mystery so quickly. Of course, Beverley would have made the same discovery when she performed the autopsy, but the exercise of detective skills pleased him. It made him feel that he might soon have the culprit. "Someone has programmed the computer to quick-freeze the room, then return it to normal temperature."

"Can that be done?" asked Beverley in puzzlement. "Why would a room be able to be programmed that low?"

"All rooms may be prepared for any species," said Worf. "Also, a room may be temporarily used as a refrigeration unit if necessary. This is an unfortunate result of having infinite flexibility."

"This should be traceable," said Data, who was now with them. "The computer could not have been programmed to carry this out. It will not perform any operation it knows will harm the ship's inhabitants. The computer must have been cut off from the room while the room controls were manually operated, then reconnected afterwards. We know the specific command we are looking for, and it should not take long to scan. The command must also have come from a specific console. I will begin my investigation now."

He communicated with Geordi, who immediately instituted a search. Commands to alter room conditions were routed through a particular circuit. The command to freeze the room no longer existed, but the command to raise the temperature back to

normal still existed, and so did the path from which it had come. The trail led straight to Zetopek Lar.

Lar was in his room when the small army of investigators arrived. He looked up in surprise at their arrival. Captain Picard had joined the group, which also included Riker, Deanna, Data, Worf and Andrew Black.

"Professor, I hope you will excuse our intrusion," said Picard. He had decided to join the group because of the Professor's interstellar reputation. A false accusation against such a public figure could have embarrassing repercussions. "It seems there is evidence to suggest that a murder has been programmed into the computer from this terminal."

"A murder?" gasped Lar. "By computer?"

"Two people have been frozen to death," answered Picard. "I would like you to answer any questions which Commander Worf may have."

"Well, certainly," said Lar, sounding most uncertain. "I will help however I may."

"First, if I may, I will scan you," said Worf briefly. He did so. "He is human," he said to the others.

"Well, of course I am," said Lar peevishly. "What did you expect?"

"Professor, when did you last use the computer?" asked Worf.

"Why, about two days ago," said Lar.

"I gave you deep access to the computer, Professor," said Picard. "Have you used it?"

"Yes," replied Lar. "That night I pulled out all the archaeological files I was after and downloaded them into my terminal. I printed them out as hardcopy. I prefer to read printed material. My eyes

are somewhat sensitive to light."

"He seems to be telling the truth," whispered Deanna to Worf. "He has no feelings of guilt or tension. A little anger and natural apprehension."

Data intervened. "There is an anomaly. The keys of the computer are entirely clear of fingerprints."

"That is impossible," exclaimed Lar uneasily. "I do not clean the computer keys!"

Everyone believed him. His room showed no evidence that he ever cleaned anything. In the short time he had been aboard he had managed to make a mess of the small room. Picard guessed that he probably knew where every item in the room was, but all of his belongings appeared to be dumped at random.

"If someone secretly entered your room," said Data, "and used your computer, they might have cleaned the keys to avoid detection."

"This would imply that the culprit does not have a computer terminal," mused Picard.

"Not necessarily," replied Data. "This was a direct command, so that it remains traceable until erased. The killer may have used a foreign terminal to cover the possibility that he or she might not be able to erase the command in time. I am inclined to believe the Professor's protests. One who is intelligent enough to be able to subvert the Enterprise's computer would be unlikely to make a mistake of that simplicity."

"Especially if the killer was locked in a box at the time!" said Andrew.

Nobody bothered to point out to him that a killer locked in a box would have a lot of trouble using its own, let alone someone

else's computer.

"There is always the possibility of what is called, double bluff, of course," said Data. "The Professor might use his own computer on the assumption that I would argue as I am."

"And as every detective story points out," added Picard thoughtfully, "the most complicated murderers usually make a simple error."

"But how could he, or it, get into my room?" asked Lar plaintively. "It was locked and coded!"

"If the killer had complete access to the computer," said Worf, "it would be child's play to find the code to your room."

"I meant," said Andrew rather aggrievedly, "could the panda have set up the computer earlier to look as if the command came from this terminal?"

"I do not believe so," said Data thoughtfully.

"But we don't know how long ago this was programmed?" said Worf interrogatively. "Could the panda have come here and done it before we arrested it?"

Picard smiled slightly in spite of the seriousness of the situation, at the concept of a Security team arresting a toy. He said, "I don't see that a toy panda could wander the decks of the Enterprise. even if it could sense the approach of others, it would be picked up by the ships sensors."

"Unless it had in fact programmed the computer not to see it," said Worf thoughtfully.

"The problem is," said Data thoughtfully, "are there any other innocuous-sounding commands built into the computer which we might overlook?"

"Find them!" ordered Picard. "Do a complete systems search.

You'll understand, Professor Lar, that we must still regard you with some suspicion, but it does seem at the moment that you are innocent. I hope you will pardon our intrusion."

"Of course," said the Professor, his manner returning to its usual imperturbability. Deanna detected, however, that his heart was beating quickly, and he was very tense and upset. "If the villainy emanated from my terminal, it had to be investigated."

"Do a complete systems search!" exclaimed Geordi, as he and Data returned towards Engineering. Data had informed him of the edict. "I don't think he understands how long it would take to investigate every little operation in the computer system!"

Around the starship the news flew quickly. There had been some attempt to stifle it, but too many people knew a fact or two, and rumors, accurate or otherwise, spread like gas molecules. There was a mild panic, because there was nowhere to flee, and if some fiend had control of the computers, who was safe?

Brendan had retired to his room, and cowered on his bed. He should not be cowering, he knew. If the killer was watching his room at the moment he might suspect he knew something, and destroy him, too. He forced himself to rise, and go about his usual routine.

Illana was sharing a room. She was entitled to a single room, but they were in short supply, and the warrant officer had been somewhat relieved when she had said she preferred company. Her roommate was an Ardurian woman, more a girl, who was not particularly stimulating company, but she was company. As a farmer's daughter, at least she could talk intelligently about plants.

"My father says the whole planet is fertile," said the girl, Zelia. "Maybe the plants there already will be worth growing."

"There's a lot to investigate," Illana told her. "We have to find out

a lot about the plants there still. They may not be edible. They may even have the wrong.. um, their molecules may not twist the right way."

"Molecules?" asked the girl with a frown. "They're something small, aren't they?"

Illana sighed, and turned down the level of discussion a bit more. "When we go on a new planet, we have to be careful not to bring in plants or insects which wipe out those already there. Your parents will have to try growing the indig.. the plants that are there first. If they do plant new plants, they will have to be in sealed areas."

"My parents are dead," said Zelia. "I'd be in a room with them if they were here."

"I'm sorry," said Illana. "did you know them? I mean, did they die recently?"

She had gathered from Zelia's lack of emotion that it might have been some time ago.

"No," she answered, "they died long ago. I was raised by my uncle and aunt. But this seemed such an adventure! And now, people are being murdered! It seems so unbelievable!"

"Don't worry about it," soothed Illana. "All those who were killed were Elders. We should be safe."

She shuddered as she said it. Who was safe, with a madman at work?

"Do you have a beau?" asked Zelia shyly. "I don't yet, but there's more men than women on the planet."

"No, I don't," laughed Illana. "Married to my work. I wander about too much to get married yet. Maybe one day."

"You're so beautiful," sighed Zelia. "I seen the men looking at

you."

"Oh? Any in particular?"

"Mister Furr. He likes you, I think. And Mister Bock. He watches you a lot, too, and Mister Ferris."

"Mister Ferris?" said Illana. "I don't even know him!"

"Well, he's a farmer. He's very nice. I guess a man can look at a beautiful woman even if he don't know her. You know the other two, then?"

"Oh, yes. I met them both on Argonaut, before we started. Brendan, that's Mister Bock, I know from a long time ago. We are both biologists, we work with plants."

"Mister Furr is nice," said Zelia. "He got here just before we left, and he helped everybody."

"Here?" asked Illana.

"I meant, on Argonaut," said Zelia.

"Oh," said Illana. "Didn't he meet you when you arrived?"

"No, he just arrived when we was leaving. He helped with all the packing and that. Not just his own."

"That was very good of him," said Illana neutrally.

"What do you think Regula will be like?" said Zelia, with a faraway look. "I think it sounds like a big garden."

"It has a lot of ocean," said Illana. "I'm most interested to explore that. The planet has no animals. I wonder what the sea is like?"

"Did you bring scuba equipment?" asked Zelia.

"I brought me!" said Illana with a laugh.

They talked longer, and then went to sleep.

Next day, Celeste went with her mother on her round. It was a day round, and consisted of walking around corridors, checking some doors, and looking into areas which were not supposed to have anyone in them. Nothing of interest happened and they returned to Security again. Serena unstrapped her phaser and put it into the cupboard with the others.

"Is that a phaser?" asked Celeste. "I've never seen you wearing it before!"

"I don't wear it off duty," smiled Serena. "It's too dangerous to have around the room with a little child there."

"I'm not a little child!" exclaimed Celeste indignantly. "I'm nine!"

"Well, when you were little," said Serena, "I was worried."

"I was nine when we came here!" said Celeste.

"And you would have tried anything I brought home," said Serena. "You know, you really have grown up this past week. I'm proud of you. Mister Simpkins says you have suddenly become a model scholar. Is it because you have made some friends?"

"No, not really," said Celeste, suddenly becoming sullen again. "I just suddenly got interested. I don't know why."

"Maybe we should go and see Counselor Troi again," mused Serena.

"Why?" said Celeste in alarm. "I'm not doing anything wrong!"

"She's just a friend," said Serena. "But if you don't want to, we won't."

"Can I look at your phaser?"

"All right," said Serena, taking one out. "But you mustn't press any buttons."

"What does it do?" asked Celeste with interest. "What are these

switches?"

"We usually have it set on 'stun'," said Serena. "That makes it send people unconscious. It sort of turns off part of their nervous system. But we only use it if really necessary. It can still be dangerous on 'stun'. Just hitting someone softly can sometimes kill or injure a person. So can a phaser stun. The other settings are for kill, and to use it as a sort of cutting tool."

"When do you use 'kill'?"

"Never, I hope," shuddered Serena. "I never have had to, and I hope I don't. You should never have to kill anyone these days. But sometimes you have to do things you don't want to."

"I know what you mean," said Celeste fervently, and Serena smiled indulgently. She put the phaser away, and keyed in the code to lock it up. "I have to go to school," grunted Celeste. "That's one of those things."

Celeste went off to her lessons. She entered grumpily, and was uncooperative for the rest of the day, but the others just ignored her and went on with their work. Alfred Simpkins sighed. He hoped this was a temporary remission from her recently improved behaviour. It might be to do with the trauma of her friend's parent's deaths. Shauna and Eric tried to work with her, but she shrugged off their overtures, and they recoiled offended. She noted uneasily that Beryl Dezic had still not come to class. It would have been very uncomfortable being with a grieving daughter, but she would have to go and see her eventually. This was not the sort of thing she had envisaged having to do. Death in literature had none of this unpleasantness about it.

But by recess Celeste had thawed, and she offered to make up with them, and they set off to play. Belinda joined them, though she was still despondent. Celeste resolutely resolved not to become emotionally involved, and led them to a door, where she began to manipulate the controls.

"This is the holodeck!" exclaimed Eric. "We're not allowed in alone."

"There's not much value in having a mum in Security," said Celeste with a grin, "but it gets you a lot of security codes!"

Chapter 8

The android became one with the computer. It was a heady feeling, almost addictive. It explored the workings of the ship. Amazing how everything was tied to the one machine. How vulnerable it made everyone!

It had done nothing yet, but explore. It became aware that some subtle traps had been laid, to detect invasion. It bypassed them simply. Now it became aware of where every person on the starship was at that time, and what they were doing. It searched out the personal files of everyone, and studied their backgrounds. It filed away the information, more from habit than for any intention to use it.

It found Illana Borzovska. She was conveniently alone. The computer was activated, and the android slipped quietly away. Down in Engineering a technician was startled to hear one of the transporters whirr unexpectedly to life. He frantically pressed an alert, and Geordi La Forge came running. They began to investigate, after notifying Security.

Illana was sitting reading a padd, with information, sketchy as it was, about Regula IV. She suddenly felt the tingle of a transporter beam, and was suddenly immersed in water!

The suddenness made her panic, but she pulled up her shirt, and revealed two rows of large gills. She fought to regain composure. A normal human would have been dead by now, but she was amphibious, and she did not immediately panic. In fact for a fleeting moment she thought it was some kind of practical joke. But she could tell after a few moments scrambling around

that she was in a closed tank. The ship's water supply!

She was finding the water breathable, but if it was not exposed to air the oxygen would soon run out. She fumbled blindly and with increasing terror around the walls. Calm yourself! she chided herself. You have time still. But a sense of claustrophobia was overwhelming her. She swam frantically around the walls, finding small openings where water could leave, but she could not. If water can flow out, it can't be sealed, she thought. Maybe air is getting in. But how do I get out?

Suddenly the wall seemed to disappear. She realised she had become disoriented, and the roof of the tank had opened.

In fact, the ship's computer had saved her, although Security was mustering to find out what had happened. She had been identified as an impurity. An alarm was sounding to indicate serious pollution of the water supply, and technicians rushed to correct it. They found a half-naked woman swimming around with not enough strength to pull herself up through the opening.

Illana lay gasping on a metal walkway, covered with a worker's shirt. Worf and his security team soon appeared, with Celeste tagging secretly along. She had just come into Security to find Serena when the alarm had sounded, so she followed out of curiosity.

"What happened?" Andrew Black asked Illana. She was shivering, from terror rather than cold, and was unable to answer for a while. Celeste watched with a gnawing feeling in her stomach. She felt Illana's terror, and turned to go away.

To her dismay, she found herself facing Deanna Troi. But Deanna took her by the shoulders and said, "You're feeling such misery and despair it almost overwhelms me. But it's not your concern. You are just near it. There is no need to fear. Your mother will look after you."

Serena heard Deanna, and scolded Celeste when she saw her. "What are you doing here? This is no place for you. Go home!"

Celeste scuttled off, amazed that Deanna had read her feelings. She went back to the room, and went straight to bed, not even bothering to open her diary. After a while she realised she was supposed to be at school, and quickly dressed again.

"Celeste! Where have you been?" asked Mister Simpkins. Unexplained absences were rare on a starship, where everyone lived close enough for instant contact.

"I'm sorry, Mister Simpkins," she said. "I was in the conservatory, and then I went to see mum, and there was an emergency and I went along. It was awful."

"What?" asked Mister Simpkins, and the rest of the class froze in attention. "What emergency?"

"One of the colonists was transported into the water tank, but she didn't die. She could breathe underwater. But she was pretty scared. I didn't like her being scared."

She stood silently while the class broke into chatter. The teacher let them talk themselves out for a few minutes, then stopped them, and took them back to the subject. Celeste sat with a faraway look in her eye. Meanwhile, Brendan Bock arrived at the water supply, and ran to comfort Illana.

She had recovered some equilibrium by now, and had the coat properly on. She had told her story, what there was of it, and Brendan offered to escort her back to her room.

Worf had offered to have her beamed back, but she said, "No way!" She dripped water as they walked. Zelia was in the room when they returned. She grabbed Illana, and went to send Brendan off so that Illana could change.

"I'll see you in Ten-Forward," said Illana with a wan smile. He

smiled, and went off.

"Well, now you see why I don't have too many beaus," smiled Illana as she changed. "Not many men want to marry a fish."

Zelia was silent, because she shared their supposed prejudice. She changed the subject.

"What was it like?" she asked.

Meanwhile the Security team, which currently included all the computer experts, were putting their ideas together.

"Geordi is tracing the command," said Worf.

"Couldn't this have been another pre-programmed computer instruction?" asked Serena.

"Apparently not," answered Worf. "In order to beam a particular person from one place to another, tracking must be done, which is difficult to program without laying a wide trail, and our adversary has left no trails so far."

"So it's not the bear?" asked Andrew.

"Not this time," said Worf. "It may have been the culprit before, and its accomplice has done this."

"Not another android?" asked someone.

"No," answered Worf. "We had a complete sweep of the ship last time. There are no other androids around."

"Could it have sent a radio signal from its box?" asked another. "It might have teed up the computer in advance."

"No," said Worf again. "The box is sealed against any transmissions. In any case, if they existed, we could detect them. It has been continuously monitored."

"In the time-honored detective tradition, however," said Data, "we are eliminating all the impossible scenarios, so that we will

be left with the improbable, which must be true."

"If we can think of the improbable," muttered Andrew.

"Opportunity seems an open question at the moment," said Serena. "We don't know yet where it was done from, so we don't know who has an alibi. We have to look for motive. All of the victims have been from the colonists, so we have to assume it's not random killing. They are only about eight percent of those on board, so they must be being targeted."

"Very good," agreed Worf. "Which implies that the murderer is one of the colonists. That reduces our suspects to two hundred or so."

"And we can eliminate Illana for a start," said someone.

"Not necessarily," put in Data. "In the works of an early novelist, Agatha Christie, an unsuccessful attempt invariably led to the discovery that the attempted victim was in fact the killer."

"I doubt that in this case, because she was lucky to survive. If the tank had not rejected her we might not have found her in time." Worf added, "However, no possibility must be overlooked. I will note that."

"But the computer should not have allowed the attempt to be made," said Serena. "It won't let anyone be transported where they will be hurt. It's not as simple as lowering the room temperature. The computer is an integral part of the transport system itself!"

"Commander Data would have to correct me, perhaps," said Worf, "but I would guess that the killer gambled that the computer would allow the woman to be transported because it was an environment which would not be immediately fatal. She is amphibious."

"And he or she did not realise that the computer would then

automatically open the tank because she was an impurity," added Data. "The killer may have gambled that the computer may not have realised that the environment would be fatal until too late."

"Well, while Commander Data and Commander La Forge investigate what can be found from the computers, we will question the colonists." Worf felt some comfort from what seemed a course of action certain to lead to a solution. If they knew the guilty party or parties, proof would soon follow.

"Two hundred is coming into feasible range," said Serena. "We can question each of the colonists with Deanna present to see if we can find anything. We can start by eliminating everyone with airtight alibis."

"Ensign Black, put together a list of all the colonists," said Worf. "We will then call each group together and go through the list. The rest, meet back here in two hours. We will see what we have by then. Ensign Moulton, contact Counselor Troi and explain the situation to her."

Serena rose stiffly from her seat. She was tenser than she had thought. She pressed her badge, and called for Deanna Troi.

"Troi here," came the reply.

"Where are you, Deanna?" asked Serena. "I'd like to talk to you."

"I'm in Ten Forward," replied Deanna. "Come on down, and I'll have a drink ready."

When she arrived, Deanna had moved to an empty table, assuming she had been with friends, and, as promised, had a drink for her. As she moved to the table she passed Brildan Furr.

"How are you, Serena?" he asked with a smile. "Are you involved with all the to-do?"

"Well, if the answer to the second question was no, I'd be a lot

better." laughed Serena. "But otherwise I'm all right."

"And how is Celeste?" he asked.

"Have you seen her lately?" asked Serena in return, a mild suspicion reforming.

"No," he said. "Except I passed her in the corridor the other day, when I was off to talk with the Captain. Well, tell her I said hello."

"That's odd," said Deanna with a frown. "He was lying. Is he giving you some sort of trouble?"

"I don't know," said Serena. "It may be nothing, but I have the feeling he's.. interested in Celeste. But she says he hasn't been talking to her."

"Well, you're supposed to be in Security," said Deanna, "and he's one of the suspects. Why not have him observed whenever he is out of his quarters?"

"Why not indeed?" said Serena, brightening.

"How is Celeste?" asked Deanna. "I saw her briefly when they found the woman. Celeste seemed almost as upset as the victim. I suppose this is all very frightening for her?"

"Yes," said Serena. "She was staying with the daughter of the Dezics when they were killed, and now this. But she is a lot better otherwise. In fact she seems quite resilient. She seems to have warmed to shipboard life at last. I wondered if she had a crush on one of the boys or something, but the only boy she gets around with is a colonist. I even thought she might have a crush on Andrew, but I think she might be trying to pair him off with me."

"At her age, more likely a crush on the teacher," said Deanna.

"I hadn't thought of that," said Serena with a start. "I hope not."

"I wouldn't worry about that," laughed Deanna. "It's the norm."

You probably had a crush on a teacher yourself at that age."

"Well as long as its not a crush on Furr," said Serena. "At least they'll all be off the ship in a couple of days. Which brings me to what I wanted to talk to you about. We've decided to question all the colonists."

"All two hundred?" asked Deanna glumly.

"Unless they've got really airtight alibis for the times," said Serena. "We'll check that first."

"That will be an interesting exercise in crowd control," remarked Deanna. "Has Celeste shown any change in her other habits?"

"She still doesn't like to be touched," admitted Serena, "but that isn't a problem. I know some people are just like that. And she's starting to diet so she can look like Illana Borzovska! But apart from that she's really good. She's started reading without being pressured at last. I was getting really worried about that."

"Well, it sounds like I'm going to be busy for a while," laughed Deanna. "I'll talk to her after we leave Regula, if you like."

They gossiped on, and then came the familiar beep of the communicator.

"Moulton here," responded Serena.

"We have a trace," said Andrew. "It's the same place. Professor Lar's computer. Meet you there."

They rose quickly, and with an apologetic glance at Guinan moved out at top speed. At Lar's room the force was already interrogating him. He was upset, and insisting he had not been in his room at the time. He said he had been in the Conservatory.

Worf called upon the computer, which said it could only confirm where people were at the moment. It had not been programmed

to memorize movements. But a scan of the room indicated very little trace of movement within. It did seem that the Professor had just arrived, but he could have left and returned. Once again the computer was bare of fingerprints, but the Professor insisted that he had used it since their last visit. There should be some.

Drawing aside, Worf and his crew considered the matter. It was felt that he would have known from their last visit to clean the keyboard. He could not prove his alibi. He was one of the colonists. It was adding up, but like last time, there was a doubt. It was decided to put him under complete observation.

Chapter 9.

Commander Data sat in his room, watching Spot. In his mind he was going over the problems associated with the series of murders, and he was plugged into the computer system and systematically examining it, but a lot of his attention was given over to observing every movement of the cat. There was a sound at his door, and he called , "Come." To his surprise there was a small child there.

"Can I come in?" she asked.

"Of course," he answered, politely extricating himself from the computer linkage. "Are you alone? One does not expect to see an unaccompanied child in this section."

"Oh, yes, Mummy's busy," she said. "I wanted to see you. Do you mind?"

"Why do you wish to see me?" Data asked. "Am I able to solve some problem that you have?"

"You heard mummy tell me that you are just a machine. I wanted to see you."

"I am indeed a machine. Have you viewed me to your

satisfaction, or do you have some verbal communication as well?"

She giggled.

"What are you for?" she asked.

"In what sense?" he replied.

"You know, machines are made for a purpose. A replicator is to copy things. Scissors are to cut things. What were you made to do?"

"I am not able to answer that question in any detail. My creator died before I was energized. One reason that I am aware of was to retain the memories of the colonists where I was made. Perhaps another was just to see whether Doctor Soong could create an artificial life form."

"If your creator is dead, what do you do now?" she asked puzzledly.

"I do not understand your question," he said. "I am an officer of this starship. I serve the Federation."

"But who programs you?" she asked. "Who gives you orders?"

"I do not require programming," he said calmly. "I choose to serve on this ship. I program myself, if you will."

"How can that be?" she said in bewilderment. "If you're a machine, someone must tell you what to do all the time!"

"I believe that I have attained what is known as free will. I choose what I do."

"You can do what you like?" she said in wonderment.

"Within the parameters of my programming. Some of it is as Doctor Soong programmed me, some is as I have programmed myself."

"You speak a little bit funny. Do you choose that?"

"For some reason, Doctor Soong programmed me unable to use verbal contractions. It is not a difficulty. I myself have decided not to lie. That is a self-imposed sub-program. I am unable to experience emotions, but I possess a chip, designed by Doctor Soong, which I may have implanted if I consider that process advisable."

"I still don't see how a computer can have free will," she said with a frown. "A computer is just a machine. It can't decide what to do by itself. My replicator can't decide not to copy things right."

"I have considered this matter myself at some length," Data replied. "But it is a problem long solved. Centuries ago, scientists discovered things called quantum theory, chaos theory and complexity theory. Have you learned of these in school?"

"We're about up to spelling," she smiled. "I think they might be a while. Maybe when I'm grown up."

"It is difficult to simplify, but if a system is sufficiently complex it is unpredictable. If a machine attains a certain level of complexity it may become self-determining. In my case I chose to be as I am."

"But you still don't.. what was the word? You know, cut words short?"

"Use verbal contractions. That is a physical constraint. You cannot fly, but you can choose to do a good act or an evil one. I have chosen to be good rather than evil."

"What are good and evil?" asked Celeste.

"That is the most difficult of questions to answer. Some of these books discuss the subject at length. But humans usually just know what they are."

"You have books!" observed Celeste in surprise. "Don't you have everything in your head? Are they science, and about free will?"

"Some are simply fiction," he said. "That is, stories. Others are about philosophy. Oh, I am forgetting my manners. It is the custom when one has a human visitor to offer refreshments. Would you like a soft drink?"

"I'd like an apple", she said after a small hesitation, and Data produced one from the replicator.

"You are fond of apples?" he said conversationally.

Celeste was browsing through the few books on the shelf, and she answered absent-mindedly, "Mister Simpkins was teaching us all about the bible, and Adam and Eve. I guess that put apples in my head."

"Do you find the books of interest?" asked Data.

"This one's about robots," she said. "One robot."

"That is actually 'I, Robot', a number of stories about artificial life-forms. The author postulated some rules that robots should have programmed into them. I have generally programmed those rules into myself. I have read the books, so if you would like them you may have them. This one deals with quantum theory, and this with chaos and complexity theories."

He piled up the chips, and a few real books, in the arms of the bewildered-looking little girl. Celeste thought to herself, Data may be a highly intelligent computer, but he doesn't know much about the reading ability of nine-year-old girls.

"You may retain them," said Data. "I have them in my memory, and no longer require their physical presence."

"Don't you like just having them?" asked Celeste. "aren't you attached to them?"

"I am a machine," said Data evenly. "I do not have emotions. As I said, I do possess an emotion chip, but I have chosen not to install it at this time."

"An emotion chip," Celeste echoed with a grimace. She turned to leave, but turned back again.

"Are you able to kill people, Mister Data?"

"It would be very much against my nature, but if it were necessary to save the life of a friend or colleague, perhaps."

"Do you think it is ever right to kill?" she asked. "My daddy was killed on a mission, and he had a gun, so I suppose he would have killed someone. If necessary."

"I believe it is only permissible to kill in order to prevent someone from killing someone else, Celeste," he said.

"How did you know my name?" she said in surprise. "I never told you."

"As you observe, I am a computer. I have a complete manifest in my memory. It was simple to match you through the information you have given me. I already knew you were the daughter of Ensign Moulton. It is rarely necessary to kill. Our phasers can be used to stun, and that is almost always enough to prevent a crime. 'Right' is a different concept. In some circumstances it is legal to kill. On some planets criminals are executed if they have committed certain serious crimes."

"Like murder," she said.

"Like murder," he agreed. "Or treason."

"You were sort of plugged in when I came in," she said. "Were you interfacing with the computer?"

"I am investigating the series of murder attempts," Data replied. "The computer was involved in each of them."

"How?" she asked curiously.

"The first one is still a puzzle," he answered, "but in the second the computer was turned off while the room was frozen, and in the latest attempt there was an attempt to subvert the computer. It would not have allowed Miss Borzovska to have been transported if it had not known she was amphibious, and the killer presumably knew that, but it saved her because it thought she was a pollutant in the water supply."

"I'd never have thought of something like that!" gasped Celeste. "How do you mean the computer was turned off?"

"It was made to not register the existence of the room during the time of the killing. It would not otherwise have allowed the room to be frozen if people were there."

"Well, couldn't that have been how the first one was done too?"

"Of course," said Data in surprise. "How simple. That is why the computer did not recognise the presence of a corpse until later. We had considered many scenarios, such as the body being transported into the room. The simplest explanation is often the correct one!"

"Well, goodbye," she said. "May I come and visit you again?"

"You would be welcome," he said politely.

"Well, it's nice to know that you're a billion-credit machine, and I can still do things you can't," she grinned.

"You mean, verbal elisions?" he said.

"No, I can lie!"

"Where have you been, Celeste?" said her mother, who met her in a corridor. "I was worried sick."

"We're on a space ship, mother," said Celeste exasperatedly. She closed the book she had been flicking rapidly through. "How lost can I get? Anyway, I went to see Commander Data."

"Where did you get those books? Are they school books? Why were you annoying Commander Data? I'm sure he has better things to do than talk to little girls!"

"He was very nice."

"Where did you see him? Where were the books?"

"I went to his cabin, mum."

"I've told you never to be alone with men you don't know!"

"He's not a man, mum, he's a machine! You don't have to be so obsessive. We're on a ship. We're trapped on a ship in space!"

"There have been crimes on this ship. And there might be strangers on the ship who could harm you. What did you do in Commander Data's room?"

"I ate an apple," said Celeste ironically.

"He gave you an apple?" asked Serena with a frown. "Why would he have an apple?"

"It was a.. what does Mister Simpkins call it?.. a metaphor."

Serena looked at her blankly.

Chapter 10

Picard came into the meeting room, called the others to stand easy, and moved straight into the matter at hand. Those present were the senior officers, Worf, Doctor Crusher, Geordi La Forge, Data, William Riker and Deanna Troi.

"Progress, Mister Worf?"

"It seems probable that the killer is associated with the colonists. All of the victims have been members of the High Council of Regula IV, which gives the obvious motive that someone else wants to be on it. The unsuccessful attempt was a diversion from the pattern, although she is still a colonist.

"This indicates either that the killer may want to divert our attention from the pattern, or that she knows something that might lead to the killer. I have questioned her, but she can think of no such thing. Our next step is to question all the colonists, after we eliminate those with perfect alibis.

"It seems impossible at the moment that the android panda could have been involved in this last attempt. It is possible, however, that it was responsible for the other deaths aboard, and that this last was done by the person ultimately responsible. We do know there are no other androids aboard."

"Mister Data, what is your opinion regarding the android?" asked Picard.

"It is surprisingly sophisticated for a toy," Data replied. "It is capable of speech, and could walk about. Its neural net, however, does not seem to be sufficiently complex for it to be able to subvert our computer system."

He paused. "I have just had another thought. If the panda is involved, it is unlikely that its creator arrived instantly at such a level of complexity. If we have a person who is capable of creating android creatures capable of murder, it is likely that there are similar instances recorded somewhere. I recommend we ask starfleet to survey all the sector, or as much of the galaxy as they can, to see if there are other instances of android killers. That is, if that is what we have."

"I will see to that myself," said Picard, making a note. "An excellent suggestion. What is your opinion of the Professor? I find it hard to imagine such a famous person could be involved.

The motive seems so puny."

"That is another problem," said Worf. "What is the value of being on the High Council? At first glance, it seems to be like wanting to be on the Council of a tiny village. The number of visitors is not likely to be large, and no obvious advantage can be seen. It will be a very small business. It may be worthwhile examining the surveys to see if they hide something."

"If that is the case," observed Picard, "the number of suspects would be greatly reduced. As far as I know only Mister Furr was on the survey."

"Or someone else from the survey has worded up one of the colonists," added Riker. "At least Furr wasn't involved in the death of Lattif. He was talking to me when it happened, and I got the impression he was astonished."

"He was," interposed Deanna.

"And he was with me when McNamon was killed," added Picard.

"If he was making use of an android," observed Data, "it would be sensible, and classically correct, to have watertight alibis for all the murders."

"This isn't one of your detective novels, Mister Data," observed Picard drily, "but we will certainly consider that. We have two days before we make planetfall. It will be difficult, but let us get started."

"Once we arrive, and the colonists leave the ship, we will have no jurisdiction," said Worf. "We cannot delay indefinitely. I suggest we approach the remaining leaders and obtain their permission to continue the investigation on the planet if necessary. Unloading could then continue while we investigate."

"Very well, a good idea," said Picard. "I will approach them myself. It is quite late now. I suggest we begin interrogations first

thing tomorrow."

The meeting broke up, and Worf returned to the Security room where he advised his group of progress. They in turn returned to their quarters, except for those on routine patrol.

Celeste was playing a computer game on the computer when Serena arrived home. She seemed to be absorbed in manipulating the joystick, but asked, "How is the mystery going?"

"We think it has to be one of the colonists," answered Serena wearily. "We're going to question the lot over the next few days. Deanna is going to be really tired."

"All of them!" said Celeste. "Won't that take weeks?"

"We'll start with the main suspects," said Serena. "Professor Lar, Brildan Furr, Brendan Bock, Illana..."

"Why are those the main suspects?" asked Celeste. "They all seem quite nice."

"Because they are intelligent, and they might know something about the planet we don't," answered Serena wearily. "It has to be something to do with the planet. All the victims were from the High Council."

"What's that?"

"It's the people who decide what's going on. They run things, make the laws and so on. Most of the people are just farmers, so whoever is running the place is actually in a very powerful position. But what's the value in being powerful in a farming village? Or a tourist town way off the beaten track?"

"What's the beaten track?"

Serena was about to answer when she realised Celeste was so preoccupied with her game she was just responding

mechanically. She went on with some reading.

"Are there any murder mystery games in the computer?" asked Celeste suddenly. She had shut off the arcade game.

"I guess so, honey," said Serena. "They have just about anything. But they usually need a lot of reading. You might find it a bit hard. But I suppose it would be good for your reading. I'll find you one."

Serena hunted quickly and expertly, and found a simple game.

"There you are," she said. "That one shouldn't be too hard. If you get really involved, one day Commander Data might let you try one of his holoprograms, now that you're his friend."

She suddenly realised that she was quite cheered up that Brildan Furr would be occupied most of the time until they landed, and would be tailed discreetly by members of Security. She had no such qualms about Data.

Celeste pored through the program for a while, then suddenly turned to Serena.

"Mummy," she said, "do the people know Counselor Troi is going to question them tomorrow?"

"She's just going to listen while someone else questions them. But I think they have been told."

"But she's sure to find them out, if they are guilty. Won't they try to kill her tonight?"

Celeste stared at her for a moment. Her daughter continued to surprise her. Great things might await her yet. "You're right, dear," she said grimly, hitting the communicator badge. "Commander Worf? We should keep Deanna under constant surveillance tonight. They might try to kill her!"

"Excellent suggestion, Ensign!" said Worf. "Go to her."

"Damn!" she exclaimed mildly as she switched communication off. "The one who thinks of the job always gets it. I'm sorry, I'll have to leave you alone tonight, Celeste."

"I'll be Ok, mum," said Celeste. "I'll just play for a while, then go to bed. I won't let anyone in."

Serena contacted Deanna.

"Where are you, Deanna?" she asked.

"I'm in sickbay," replied Deanna, "with Doctor Crusher. What's up?"

"Celeste suggested you might be in danger," said Serena.

"Celeste?" asked Deanna in amusement. "Is she on the team now?"

"She should be," replied Serena. "It's just a chance, but we thought we should keep a guard on you all night. I'm female, so I guess that's why I got the job."

"I wouldn't have argued," laughed Deanna. "Depends on who they chose. Why am I in danger?"

"Because you're the only one who can catch out this man," said Serena.

"This man?" asked Deanna.

"I have a suspicion who it is," said Serena. "But it was just a slip of the tongue. Could still be anybody."

"I'll wait for you here," said Deanna.

Serena got her phaser, and swept quickly to sickbay. Beverley Crusher was there, and said, with a smile, "I've kept the guard until you got here."

Deanna and Serena walked back to her quarters, gossiping. They passed Brendan Bock, and Deanna turned to look after

him in surprise.

"He's one of our major suspects," said Serena.

"He's terrified!" breathed Deanna. "Not just a bit scared. Terrified."

"We'd better start with him in the morning," said Serena, with a glance after him. "But I guess we'd better look after you for tonight."

Serena opened Deanna's door first, and looked around. Nothing was to be seen, though she had no idea what she might have been looking for. Something out of the ordinary.

"Has anything been moved?" she asked.

"No," said Deanna. "I don't think so."

Serena could not help noticing how much more comfortable Deanna's room was than her own. Of course, Deanna had more seniority, and, perhaps more to the point, had been years on the Enterprise.

"Well, I'll try not to get in your way," she said, after she had done a sensor sweep of the room, and found nothing. "I'll sit in a chair over here."

"You can use the bed in the wall," said Deanna. "I don't think it's ever been used. We can watch some films for a while. I enjoy the company, so don't worry."

"I won't sleep," said Serena. "I'm on guard. I'll catch up tomorrow. But I will watch films with you."

"Do you really think I'm in danger?" asked Deanna curiously.

"No," said Serena, "but it's a chance not worth taking."

Somewhere on the ship the Client's computer screen lit up. The image of the old man appeared. He ran to sit at the console.

"I thought you may want to speak with me again," said the old man.

"I certainly do!" said the Client. "You botched that last job!"

"You didn't tell me the subject was amphibious," observed the image reasonably and calmly. "The fact that the water tank rejected her was also a surprise."

"But if you were going to beam her away, why not just beam her out into space?"

"The transport has a fail-safe," said the old man. "It can be used for intra-ship travel during travel, but only the console in Engineering can be used to beam someone off the ship."

The Client had no idea if this was true, so he said, "At least she hasn't said anything. I have a more pressing problem. We are all going to be questioned tomorrow. The Betazoid will undoubtedly be there. Kill her tonight."

"It is becoming very difficult to continue killing on board. Security has become very tight. Even personal communications of this type may become under surveillance. I was planning on doing my last executions on the surface of a planet."

"She has to go tonight. Tomorrow I will be questioned."

"It is not necessary to kill her. The killing of a senior crew member will lead to too deep an investigation. I will remove her from consideration."

"Are you disobeying me?" rasped the Client.

The image appeared to consider for a moment.

"My first directive was to protect you and my creator," it said. "I will do what I must."

The screen went blank. The client bit down a curse. The android linked again with the ship. It found what it wanted. How handy

that Darras had programmed into it such an extensive toxicology.

Meanwhile Brendan Bock walked around to the room where Illana was staying. She called out for him to enter and the door slid open.

"Where is Zelia?" he asked.

"Off socialising," she said, swinging around from the computer, and smoothly shutting it down. "Why? Do I need a chaperone?"

He blushed. "No, of course not."

"Tch, what a pity," she said. "What can I do for you?"

"I didn't mean..." he paused.

"Oh, some hope," she teased. "But let's forget that. What do you want?"

"I need to talk," he said. "I'm scared, but I have to say something."

"Why me?" she asked.

"If he has the whole ship bugged, he'd be listening if I went to any of the officers. I don't know what to do."

"I don't know that I'm really the best one you should approach about this," she said slowly. "We land tomorrow. You can approach anyone then."

Serena and Deanna were watching a particularly funny holostory. They were making their own comments as well as laughing at the show, and Serena began to feel that this assignment may have been just what she needed. She was sorely lacking out-of-hours social companionship. Deanna said, "Time for bed, I guess. I'll have a chocolate drink. What would you like?"

"A gentle stimulant," said Serena. "Coffee is good for a start, but then you suddenly get tired."

"Coffee actually keeps you awake because it drugs the part of your brain that should tell you to sleep," remarked Deanna. "I'll get you a real stimulant, that will give you eight hours' energy, then let you sleep tomorrow."

She called up some name that Serena did not quite catch, and a glass of liquid appeared. It was delicious.

"Wow!" exclaimed Serena. "Nice-tasting medicine!"

"It's not medicine," said Deanna, "it's a popular drink back home. But I'll stick to hot chocolate to make me sleep."

She ordered her usual hot chocolate, and a steaming mug appeared in the replicator. She sighed with pleasure as she drank it. Serena enjoyed her drink, too, and then settled into a chair as Deanna undressed and went to bed.

Professor Lar sat staring into his computer. For some reason he had been using a keyboard with the computer again. He finished whatever he was doing, and took out his handkerchief and carefully cleaned all the keys. Then he commanded the computer to put away the keyboard, and he sighed, and went to bed.

Chapter 11

In the morning Celeste woke up to an unfamiliarly empty room. She knew that Serena was not coming home for a while, and would only want to sleep then, so she went to school.

As she walked the corridors she was aware of unusual scurrying about. No doubt this was the prologue to the questioning of two hundred colonists. She arrived at the schoolroom and moved silently to her seat, and observed the others, as usual. She had

a new feeling of excitement, a sort of freedom, symbolised somehow by not having to have cereal for breakfast. She wondered what Regula IV would be like.

During the lessons Alfred Simpkins was surprised by her perkiness, and she socialised more with the others than she had ever done. When the lesson was over he called her to stay back.

"You did very well in everything today," Celeste," he said. "I'm glad to see you so cheerful. Things must be well with your mother and you."

"No, not really," she said after a while. "Mum stayed up all night guarding Deanna, and she has no idea who has been committing the murders, so I suppose she's not too happy. But I just woke up feeling cheerful this morning."

"So, you've decided to live on," he said.

She looked at him sharply.

"How did you know that?" she said with a frown.

"Your mother and I have been talking about you," he said. "Schoolteachers like to know everything about their students. She said you have always had a romantic notion that you would die young. I hope not."

"I think I may," she said, airily. "But I shall always be remembered by those who discover, too late, that they loved me."

He grinned. "I think Serena already knows that she loves you. Everyone who knows you loves you."

Well, that's a bit of a stretch, she thought with amusement. She realised that she really liked him. She would miss him when she was dead. Well, she should say, he would miss her. Did Mister Furr love her? she wondered. No way!

Would Andrew miss her? She thought about his attachment to Serena. Would he marry her if Celeste were not in the way? Was she an impediment? She sighed. Relationships were so difficult.

He saw her grin, and was reassured.

"How do you expect to go?" he asked. "Tuberculosis was very romantic four centuries ago. But most of the romantic fatal diseases have been cured."

"I may die of love for some boy I will meet," she said thoughtfully. "That would be nice. Drowning is romantic. Or I thought so before I saw that lady."

"Dying isn't romantic," he assured her. "It happens eventually, but it's something to put off as long as possible."

"But it can be convenient," she said. "In stories sometimes. And sometimes it's.. justice."

"Justice?" he asked, puzzled.

"Whoever organised all these murders," she said. "They deserve to be killed. They aren't really... human."

"They might deserve it," he said, "but they will be imprisoned. It's best to try to reform people. You can't reform if you're dead."

"But if someone has free will and then just decides to kill for..nothing really. Mum says there's no real reason for these murders. Just greed. That person deserves to be executed."

"I feel that way inside," said Mister Simpkins, "but I know in my head that's wrong. It's a primitive part of us that wants vengeance. How did we get onto this morbid subject? I was just asking how your mother was."

"We're both Ok, really," she said.

But Serena was not Ok at that time.

Outside there was a lot of hustle and bustle as the colonists were organised for interrogation. But Deanna slept on, and Serena began to wonder whether she was supposed to wake her. She wanted to go to sleep herself.

She eventually shook Deanna, and shouted in her ear. She realised that her own alarm should have permeated Deanna's subconscious and awakened her. Deanna was breathing very slowly, she realised. She rang sickbay.

"Hello," said Lieutenant Selar, who was early on duty, or had been there all night.

"Emergency," said Serena. "I can't wake Counselor Troi!"

"Shall we have her beamed straight here?" asked Selar.

"I don't know," muttered Serena. Could the transporters have been boobytrapped as well? She consulted Worf.

"Beam her," he said. "Data assures me the transporters are not sabotaged."

Serena and Deanna were both beamed to sickbay, and Selar began an examination. Beverley Crusher had been alerted, and she came running.

Selar ran tests on Deanna's blood, while Beverley checked her vital signs, and finally isolated the culprit. "It's a compound called isotenin," she said. "The record says it won't harm Deanna, but she'll sleep for about three days."

"Can't we wake her?" asked Beverley, opening up her own padd to check the effects of isotenin.

"Not without interfering with her cortex, which is dangerous. Just letting her sleep will allow the chemical to dissipate. Where would someone come upon a rare chemical like that?"

"How did she get it?" asked Beverley. "It would have been

almost immediate in its effect."

"It must have been in her chocolate," said Serena. "That's all she had before she went to bed."

"So the replicator made it?" asked Beverley with a frown. "Our phantom programmer is still at large!"

Once again the team gathered. Serena was tired, but adrenalin kept her going.

"Oh, damn," she said. "Celeste! I'd better let her know where I am!"

She contacted Alfred Simpkins, who promised to tell Celeste, and went out after her.

"This is getting embarrassing," said Andrew Black. "The killer is playing with us."

Worf was feeling particularly aggrieved, as he felt it a peculiar personal insult, but he maintained discipline.

"That is the most peculiar part of this," he observed. "We have had some killings which were quick and simple, followed by two unsuccessful attempts which were unnecessarily complicated."

"This was not a murder attempt," said Doctor Crusher, who had joined them. "The chemical would not kill her. In fact, the killer has gone out of his way not to kill her. As you say, in a complicated way."

"I suggest that we continue as we would have gone," said Worf. "We will continue with the interrogations, and hope to find something with technology and finesse, instead of Deanna. Data and Geordi will investigate this corruption of the computer."

"It does tell us something, though," said Beverley. "This is a very rare drug. Our killer is very knowledgeable about chemicals. Especially organics."

"So the most obvious suspects from the colonists, that we know about, would be the two biologists." Serena frowned. "One of them was an attempted victim. Data says that could still leave her a suspect. I don't know. I thought she looked terrified when we found her. Maybe she expected to get out more easily."

"It was an awkward way to murder," said Worf. "It would have been easier to simply beam the victim into an area like the core. Radiation would kill her immediately. Or a vacuum area."

"Or outside the ship," offered another.

"The protocols of the transporter do not allow that," said Worf. "During warp extra-ship transport is unavailable."

"It's almost as if the killer was giving her a sporting chance," murmured Andrew.

"Or she did it herself," said someone.

"Commander Data did say that the computer would not obey a command which would obviously kill a sentient being," noted Serena.

"It appears from Commander La Forge's latest investigations that the killer was able to cut the computer out of the operation completely," said Worf. "He or she is very able at programming."

"What about the other biologist?" asked Andrew.

"We passed him last night, Deanna and I," said Serena thoughtfully. "She said he was terrified. Maybe it was the thought of interrogation."

"Has anyone considered the possibility that there could be two killers?" asked a young woman suddenly.

"Two?" asked Worf.

"Yes," she said. "It seems that there is some reason why this planet is very valuable. There are two groups of colonists. Why

couldn't there be some sort of gang struggle between them? One group might have organised the android panda, the other might have a human assassin."

"That does fit," said Worf thoughtfully. "The panda was a simple killer, but the other is not. He or she merely puts victims out of the way if they are not the main target. Thus Deanna was not killed."

Worf was distracted by a sudden call from the bridge.

"Worf here," he acknowledged.

"Commander, this is the Captain," came Picard's voice. "We have received information from starfleet. I will download it into your module. Briefly, it does seem that there is a pattern of killings by androids throughout the sector. A number of assassinations have been carried out by androids made to resemble real people. In most cases they have committed the crime and disappeared. In two cases we know of they have been cornered, and simply turned themselves off, completely erasing all programming."

"Thank you, captain," Worf replied. "I will examine the information."

"This does not fit the pattern, then," observed Serena. "The panda did not turn itself off."

"Maybe it can't do that until its mission is finished?" said Andrew.

"Here's something else to throw into the mixture," interrupted one of the men, who had been looking through the night's recordings. "We put a watch on Lar's room just in case. Look."

They gathered around and watched as Lar worked for some time on the keyboard of his computer.

"Why does he use a keyboard?" asked someone. "He's alone, so he's not going to disturb anyone with voice instructions."

"Some people like writing rather than talking," said Serena absently. Lar finished whatever he had been doing, but they could not see the screen. He turned off his computer terminal and carefully wiped the keys clean before the keyboard slid out of sight.

"I always do it," said Lar, a few minutes later, wiping sweat from his brow. "It's a habit. I like everything to be clean. I didn't mention it because I knew you suspected me already, and it had thrown suspicion off me again. I didn't do anything. I was in the conservatory when the woman was transported, but I can't prove it."

"Another crime was committed last night," said Worf. "Where were you all evening?"

"Another crime?" he said in confusion. "When? I can't prove anything. I was here all night, looking up records on the computer, and then asleep."

"We know you were here," said Andrew. "And we know you were using the computer. But that was the weapon."

"And the Captain has given you great access to the computer," added Worf. "I believe we have sufficient evidence to take you into custody."

Lar wept as they escorted him from the room, and sealed it.

Chapter 12.

Next morning Captain Picard found himself walking unaccustomed corridors as he came to the colonists' area. He had arranged for the remaining leaders to gather, and he found them together, anxiously waiting.

From the Ardurians there were Amerbrec Zatof and Etilia Braz, who had been on the original High Council, and a man named

Fillat Bleek. Etilia introduced him as a temporary stand-in until proper elections were held. Picard looked at him with interest. From the Tolians he met Ambrasia Lattif and Ellis Boor, and two newcomers, Anders and Felicia Yerrow. They also were temporarily occupying places on the High Council.

"It may not be advisable to hold elections too soon," said Picard. "Whoever is doing these killings seems to be targeting the High Council. We have to presume that Felix was also a victim."

"We understand," said Anders Yerrow, "but the places must be filled. We note that your security has been effective. The killings all took place early, and later attempts have been unsuccessful."

"We have to worry about what happens after you leave," added his wife.

"That is the crux of what I have come to ask you," said Picard. "We have arrested a suspect, but we do not know for certain that he is the one, or indeed if there is only one. We propose, with your consent, to question each of the colonists."

"Why do you need our consent, Captain?" asked Ellis Boor. "Murders have been committed."

"We arrive at Regula IV tomorrow," said Picard. "It would be impossible to question everyone by then. We propose to set up on the planetary surface and do it there. It would be necessary for all two hundred to stay in the one spot for a few days, then we can take you to the other side afterwards."

The Elders looked at one another.

"I see no difficulty," said Etilia. "We are going to be here a long time. A few days will make no difference. We can get to know each other a bit better as well."

"As long as we can establish who is the murderer," said Picard, and they looked uneasily at each other.

"What if we cannot?" asked Bleek.

"Then I suggest you have the elections, and see who nominates," said Picard. "But the killings seem to have subsided. Perhaps all the targets are dead."

Etilia shuddered. "It seems brutal - impersonal - to think of dead friends as 'targets'. I hope we do find this killer soon."

Celeste gathered up her courage, and went to visit the Tolians. She was shy with Beryl and Belinda, but sympathized with Beryl, and endured a bout of weeping.

"What will they do when they catch him?" she asked Belinda.

"Who?" asked Belinda in reply.

"Whoever is responsible for these killings," said Celeste. "Will they execute him?"

"I suppose that if they catch him on board he'll go to prison," said Belinda doubtfully. "If they caught him on Regula, I don't know. If they'd caught him on Argonaut, there's a death penalty."

"He did commit murder there," said Celeste thoughtfully.

"We don't know that," said Belinda. "That one might have been an accident."

"It doesn't look like it now," said Celeste. She went home, very deep in thought.

Serena returned home, dead tired, and gave Celeste a brief review of what had happened.

"But it's true!" said Celeste. "Professor Lar is telling the truth! I saw him in the conservatory when Miss Borzovska was attacked."

"You were in the conservatory?" asked Serena in disbelief.

"I told Mister Simpkins when I went to class," said Celeste. "He'll

remember."

"But Professor Lar said he was alone," frowned Serena.

"You know how kids are," said Celeste. "I was playing a game of hide-and-seek. I watched him, but hid. I like to watch people without being seen."

"It does sound like you should join Security," said Serena ironically. "Well, no sleep yet. Let's go see Worf."

She and Celeste walked down the corridor, and took the lift to the Security area. They entered an interrogation room, where Lar was wearily protesting his innocence. Serena explained what Celeste had said.

"But I was alone!" exclaimed Lar, torn between hope and his certainty that the conservatory had been otherwise empty.

"I was hiding," said Celeste. "It's like a game. You looked at the flowers and smelled a lot of them, and you picked one of the big golden ones."

Lar blushed.

Worf said drily, "Well, we will investigate this minor crime later. If this is true, we will have to apologise for our arrest, and look elsewhere."

"No, no, perfectly reasonable," gabbled the Professor. "You were certainly reasonable in suspecting me at the time. I do have the flower somewhere."

"Well, keep it for now," said Worf with a grimace. "You can go back."

Lar fled delightedly. The others looked glum, except Celeste. She was glad an innocent person had been spared a lot of trouble.

"There was another problem with the investigation," admitted

Worf. "Geordi said the command to freeze the two colonists was a delayed one. Why would Lar use a delayed command on his own computer?"

"To establish an alibi?" asked Andrew.

"But he stayed in his room," said Worf. "He did not have an alibi."

"It would have had to be a delayed command last night as well, sir," observed one of the team. "The corruption of the replicator's files could have been done any time between last night and the previous time Counselor Troi drank chocolate."

"Perhaps the non-lethal drug was used in case someone else drank hot chocolate?" suggested Serena.

"Do we interrogate the biologists now?" asked one of the team, after a pause.

"We are setting up on the surface tomorrow," said Worf reluctantly. "It is simplest to do all at once. Let us prepare."

Serena took Celeste back, and sank into a deep sleep. Celeste listened to her snoring for a while, and decided to return to Security.

When she arrived, two of the team were still sitting, gambling. They welcomed her in with a smile.

"How's mom?" asked one.

"She's snoring," said Celeste. "I thought I'd come down here until school time."

"When is that?"

"Oh, about an hour. It's quiet in here. I can read a bit."

"Not much for a kid to read in here," said one, surreptitiously removing an adult stereogram book. "Just a few technical

manuals."

"I'll find something to do. Don't mind me."

"OK, but it'll be really quiet for you. We're just off on patrol. Lock the door when you leave?"

"All right." Celeste looked around the room, and began to poke around. She was still looking around half an hour later when Commander Data walked in. She closed the cupboard and said hello.

"Hello, Celeste," he replied. "What are you doing here?"

"Just filling in time until class. Mum's asleep, so I thought I'd come down here."

"Your mother often sleeps during the day when on night shift. Do you often come down here?"

"No, she just showed me the place a few days ago." Celeste smiled at him. "I'm just getting to know the ship after six months on board."

"So you come here to play?" he asked.

"Yes," she said sarcastically, "I like to come down here and muck about with the phasers. It's not a great place to play!"

Data was impervious to humor, as she had known, so he simply asked, "I believe you are using sarcasm?"

"I'm glad you noticed," she replied. "I'd hate to waste it."

"Did you enjoy the books?"

"They were a bit hard," she smiled. "I wanted to ask you. If you developed free will because you are so complicated.."

"Complex," he interrupted.

"Complex, what about the ship's computer? It's complex. Does it

have free will?"

"An intriguing question," he said thoughtfully. "I think not."

"Why not?" she asked. "What's different about you?"

"It does not walk about, and learn," he said. "and experience. Also, it does not have many parameters of freedom. It only answers commands. It has shown imagination, however, in programming the holodeck. Perhaps it is sentient. What a thought!"

"Does it know right from wrong?"

"It has little opportunity to engage in moral behaviour," answered Data. "The question may have no application. It may understand the difference, but have no opportunity to implement it."

"So it couldn't be to blame for the murders?"

"Blame?" Data looked puzzled. "It was used as a tool. There is no blame."

"But if it was sentient it could have refused."

"Probably not. If someone put a gun in your hand, moved your arm and forced you to pull the trigger, because they were stronger, you would have no guilt."

"And the computer couldn't be just doing all this by itself?"

"Very unlikely," said Data. "I can imagine no motive."

"Oh, well, a silly idea," said Celeste. "But what I thought, if the computer suddenly knew it was being used for something wrong, and it was asked to kill someone, could it just not do it?"

"The computer is programmed not to harm any sentient being. Whoever has been committing these crimes has effectively cut the computer out of the process."

"If it knew it was being cut out, could it know that something

wrong was being done?"

"I do not know whether the computer has that level of awareness."

"Awareness," said Celeste. "What a nice word. I was thinking, if someone had programmed the computer to kill people and it realised that was wrong, it might have deliberately failed. The computer would know that Miss Borzovska is a fish."

"That is a very good theory, Celeste," Data said. "Unfortunately there is no evidence to support it, but I will bear it in mind." He added, "Miss Borzovska is not, in fact, a fish."

"But if the computer did that," she persisted, "it would be good."

"If the computer were capable of doing such a thing," he replied, "it would be the correct thing to do."

"Thank you, you have been very helpful."

"It is gratifying to be told that," said Data soberly.

"Maybe one day I'll work with you on a starship," she said suddenly. "I'd like that!"

"You will no doubt have changed so much that I will not recognise you," he said. "You must introduce yourself."

"Who knows?" she said. "But there could be a problem. 'I have a journey, sir, shortly to go; my master calls me, I must not say no.'"

"You know Shakespeare?" Data asked in surprise.

"My mother loves it," said Celeste. "She's always quoting him. 'To be or not to be' and so on."

"You seem to have a morbid fixation with death," observed Data. "I hope you are not contemplating some foolish act."

"I have no intention of killing myself," she said with a smile. "I

just feel I'm not long for this world. Perhaps some fairy prince will save me. Or at least be there to say 'Goodnight sweet princess' to me. Or kiss me and wake me up."

Data was reassured by her airy attitude. She did not seem to be suicidal, although he had no experience to help him. He did have some knowledge that young children often had depression at the concept of eventual death, and resolved to read a volume of child psychology that afternoon.

"Our conversation has been interesting but I came to collect a padd left here for me by Worf," he said. He picked it up. "I shall leave you here alone."

"It's time for class," she said. "I have to go anyway. I have to lock up."

"I believe that you can leave that task to me, Celeste," said Data. "It seems one should quote some appropriate exit line from Shakespeare."

"He has too many," said Celeste. "I'd like to play Malvolio when I grow up." And she laughed and left.

Data filed away the conversation with all the others he had had, and locked up the room.

Class was a little less formal than usual, as they were about to have another 'holiday' for a few days during planetfall. Celeste sat quietly, humming as she did her tasks, and answering questions as they were asked. They were given a large stack of homework, to cover the week they expected to stay, and she considered going straight home and doing the lot. No point, she decided.

Brendan and Illana met in the corridor, and she cheerfully invited him to go to Ten Forward for a drink. He readily agreed, and they strolled there in animated conversation. They settled in with their drinks, and began to gossip.

"You know, you're different since the.. since you were in the tank," he said.

"How about, The Incident," she said. "I've been different since.. The Incident. How?"

"You were so reserved and stand-offish before, and now you're sort of.. flirting with me all the time."

"I always had the fear that men would know I was.. a fish," she grimaced. "Now they know, so I don't have to pretend. I'm a freak."

"You can live among all the different life-forms on the Enterprise, and call yourself a freak?" He laughed.

"But they're all some sort of life form," she said wistfully, "and they're normal for that life-form. I'm a human, but I'm a freak human."

"Well, if all freaks were as beautiful as you, freak would be the fashion," he said. "I don't believe I just said that, and I haven't even started drinking yet!"

"It's all right to look nice, but would you want to date a fish?"

"Well, the simple answer is 'yes'. The only worry might be that if I hugged you round the waist I might strangle you."

"Only under water," she smiled. "In air I breathe through my mouth."

"Let's think about building a house by the sea," he said.

"I'll drink to that," she said. "If we get along all right, I might even come and live in it!"

"It'll have a great garden," he said.

She sipped her drink, and said softly, "You know, it's kind of liberating. I've always dreaded anyone knowing, since it would

stop me having friends. So I didn't have friends. Now people do know, and I do have friends."

She thought about asking him about his problem, but to do so might jeopardize her new friendship, so she forebore to do so.

Picard was on the bridge when Brildan Furr appeared hesitantly at the door.

"You sent for me, Captain?" he said nervously.

"Come in, Mister Furr," said the Captain. "You know Commander Riker and Commander Data. The bridge is a bit understaffed at the moment because Counselor Troi is incapacitated, and Commander Worf is busy with Security matters."

"Oh/" said Furr, noncommittally. "I won't be much help there, I'm afraid."

"No, no," said Picard with a laugh, which was more diplomatic than heartfelt, since Furr was one of the main suspects, "I wanted to pick your brains a bit more over Regula IV."

"Oh, how can I be of help?"

"There it is on the viewscreen," said Picard, after pressing a button. "Tell me what you found, again. Someone thinks there is something worth murdering for there, and I want to know what it is!"

"Worth murdering for?" Furr wrinkled up his nose in puzzlement. "It has plants and mysterious buildings, but we don't know enough about them to know if they're worth anything yet. We haven't even begun to explore the oceans. The first scan shows the oceans to be empty of life, but we haven't followed it up yet."

The members of the crew on the bridge stared at the planet which had just come within viewing range. It was certainly unusual. From where they were they could see a single large continent with a circular area of building on it. The area was

huge, to show up at this distance, but the rest of the continent was free of cities.

Furr pointed out the continent.

"We call that the Northern polar area," he said. "For the sake of a name. It's a bit bigger than the South Polar area. The planet has a number of peculiarities. Its axis is perpendicular to the plane of its orbit, for one thing. It has abundant plant life, but no animal life except insect life, although the insects have mutated to fill a number of niches. The ocean has no life, but is not toxic."

"So all the evidence points to some form of terraforming," said Riker.

"Right," said Furr. "It couldn't have evolved that way. Of course, there may be some way we haven't thought of that all the animal life except insects was annihilated. But more likely the insects were brought with the flowers to cross-pollinate them. If you have flowers you need insects."

"Minerals?" asked Picard.

"You have the report," said Furr. "Normal deposits for a planet of its class. Nothing worth mining this far out, although enough to make the planet well worth developing for ourselves."

"I can't help feel," said Riker sotto voce to Picard, "that it has to be something to do with the strange plant life, and that makes the biologists our main suspects."

"The thought had occurred to me, too, Number One," replied Picard. He addressed Furr again. "How many were on the original expedition, and where are they now?"

"We had a small science vessel," Furr replied. "There were eight aboard. One was Professor Gramm, whom you know was later killed on another expedition. There were two Tolians, but neither joined the colonists. They no doubt influenced their planet to

tender, though. The other four I don't know much about since. Gramm was the archaeology man, I was the mineralogist, B'Toth was the engineer, we had a botanist, a navigator, and the other three were non-specialists. I've actually forgotten their names. It's amazing. You know these people so well for a few months, then you can't remember their names. I'd know them again by sight, though."

"If they still look the same," commented Riker.

"We have excellent equipment on the Enterprise," said Picard. "We can do another thorough scan of the planet."

"Hardly necessary, Captain," said Furr. "We had a state-of-the-art vessel. We found nothing out of the ordinary mineralogically speaking, and we could not penetrate the buildings. It would be a waste of time and resources to do it again now, when we will have teams of specialists arriving later."

"Of course," agreed Picard. "I hope you will contact me if you think of anything else, no matter however trivial."

"Of course," repeated Furr, taking this as a dismissal, and backing out.

"Well, repeating all their scans would be a waste of time and resources," began Picard.

"..but let's do it!" finished Riker.

"Make it so!" said Picard.

The scan was held up for a while, however, as they arrived. For convenience, a lot of the colonists' stores had simply been left in the shuttles, and these were first sent out.

There had been some thought given as to whether the colonists should be allowed to go down at all, pending the outcome of the investigation. However, it was virtually impossible for anyone to flee successfully. The Enterprise's scanners could locate a

person anywhere on or below the surface.

In fact, if it had not been for pride, the Enterprise could simply have left the investigation with the colonists, since it was obviously an internal matter. But because the crimes had been committed aboard, Picard would not rest easy until the matter had been resolved. Some time had been allotted for the Enterprise to remain while the colonists settled in, and this would give them something to do in the time.

There were open areas, which were native grasslands. The area of the first expedition's camp was already overgrown, but easily cleared. The shuttles all settled on the southern continent, near the sea but within reach of the mysterious buildings by air. Soon an industrious community was spreading itself out, erecting houses and plotting out the streets. All of the Security team beamed down, and Celeste came with them. Once again she entered tensely, clutching onto Serena, and once again everything went smoothly.

Serena moved into the room which had been quickly erected for her and Celeste.

"I'm going to have to be busy for the next few days, Celeste," she said. "Stay with the Enterprise crew, or the other children. Don't wander off alone."

"I won't," said Celeste, "but it's perfectly safe here. There aren't any animals."

"How do you know that?" asked Serena sharply. Celeste grimaced.

"Everybody on the Enterprise knows that!" she said. "It's news! We talked about it in class even."

"But there are some very, very big insects," said Serena. "We don't know much about them yet."

Moves were being made in that direction. Brendan and Illana addressed a gathering of the whole two hundred colonists, gathered for their first meeting.

There were a few speeches, long because everyone recognised that this would be a historic moment for the planet, and they all wanted to get their faces and voices into history. Brendan and Illana were going to be only temporary residents but they did not pass up the opportunity.

"You know we're here basically to investigate the insects and flowers," said Brendan. "The main thing we need to know first is what is poisonous, and what insects are deadly. Our guess is that the insects which are smallest will have the stings, because they are prey, and need a defence. The bigger ones may have them to kill their prey, so we'll start looking quickly."

Illana in her turn said something similar about the flowers. They existed in profusion, and might prove valuable food products, medicines, or be poisonous. Each would need to be investigated before it might be of use. Until then they would have to grow their own food, or use replicators. It could be that the flowers were the reverse of earth flowers at the molecular level, in which case they might not be poisonous, but useless for nutrition.

The site had been chosen with some care. It was flat and, like most of the planet, fertile, but there were a few fast-flowing rivers nearby, and a couple of magnificent waterfalls useful for generating electricity. They were apparently in deep winter, Picard thought, as the sun had risen only a small way into the sky, and would sink later, but the weather was comfortable. If it was this warm in deep winter, how hot would summer be? But Picard supposed the colonists had considered all that. The climatic records were not something he had looked at, as it was not something he needed to know.

He made a remark of this nature to Commander Riker, who

pointed out that the weather may never change. The axis of the planet was at right angles to the plane of its orbit, so every part of the planet had equal day and night all year. Riker had not asked how long a day was, but presumably if the weather at the pole was this bearable, the equator must be quite unpleasant.

"Of course," said Picard. "I should have realised that. That may be why they chose to build at the poles. The equatorial regions may have been unliveable."

"The poles are still pretty cold, Commander," said one of the colonists, who had overheard them. "That's why we've set up house near the sea. And there will be seasons of a sort. The orbit is quite elliptical."

"But if they lived in completely sealed homes, that shouldn't matter," said Riker in puzzlement. "You know, I've thought since I saw this place that it reminded me of something. I think it's like a giant applecore. The seas hide that. I'm guessing that whoever it was dug out all the equatorial regions to get the minerals to build the structures at the poles."

"You could be right," said Picard with a frown. "The planet reminds me of something, too, but it's not an apple core."

He grew even more in the belief that the planet posed a greater mystery than the murders. It was fascinating in its own right, and he began to wish they were staying longer.

Etilia Braz showed Captain Picard and some of his senior crew the sights nearby. They came to view a magnificent waterfall about two kilometers from the camp. It was glorious in the slanting rays of the low sun, which happened to be shining straight up the canyon at that time.

All of them stood watching for a few minutes in silence.

"It seems a crime to think we would be building on this to make electricity," sighed Etilia. "But it's just one of hundreds of

gorgeous falls. This whole continent is superb."

"Whoever designed these gardens must have been a genius," said Picard. "So big yet so beautiful!"

"We don't know yet how long ago the planet was abandoned," said Etillia. "This may all be just natural erosion. We don't know how long all the flowers and insects have been evolving on their own."

They were on a small section of grass which led onto an outcropping of rock. Picard stood out on the edge, looking down at the water boiling below.

"I'd step a bit carefully, if I were you, captain," said William Riker with concern. "This isn't some tourist spot. We don't know the rocks are stable."

"No, I suppose not," said Picard softly. "But it is superb."

He stepped back carefully, but not hurrying. The place itself was beautiful, a small island of space in the forest around it. Some of the trees were the small gnarled type he knew could be hundreds of years old.

"How long is a year here?" he asked suddenly.

"I don't know," said Etillia, "but they would have measured all that on the first visit. It'll be in the records."

"No doubt Data will have all that at his fingertips by now," smiled Beverley.

"I'll be sleeping aboard ship," said Picard to Etillia, "and so will the senior officers, except Doctor Crusher, who feels she may be more use down here. Commander Worf's team will be starting the interrogations soon, so we'd better go back. I hope you will forgive us, but you will have to be asked a few questions also."

"We understood that when we gave permission," said Etillia, with

a bleak smile.

Chapter 13.

The remaining Elders were the first to be questioned. In fact, Elder was a title formally used only by the Ardurians, but it had seemed good enough to use for the new High Council. The reasoning for questioning them first was that these were the most intelligent of the colonists, and also those with something to gain from the murders. They would be in a position to control the Council from the start.

The whole thing was very inconvenient, of course. Two hundred settlers were having their first moments on a new planet, their home for the foreseeable future. Half of them were champing at the bit to get out their possessions, set out their own little squares of land, and begin to make farms. Instead, they were hanging around, dwelling on the whims of a Klingon Security leader. Those who were setting up shops began to put up the prefabricated buildings, and part of a town began to appear. But for the temporary residents, accommodation was in tents. Where they were putting up buildings it was generally necessary to clear jungle. The various clearings turned out to be a small covering of earth on solid rock. Not impossible to build on, with phasers to help, but more trouble.

Worf was aware of their feelings, and attempted to put the settling-in in motion. He had a roster printed on a sheet, and told those not in the first thirty names they could go about their business. Since all of the camp's leaders were in the first thirty names, this was difficult, but they sighed, and set about doing what they could.

The landscape was all beautiful. Trees grew in every variety of shape, but so did flowers. Instead of the small delicate flowers which normally grew in the wild, huge beauties grew to heights

of several meters, the result of having no predators, and of having to compete for the low rays of the sun.

There were small mountains, but nothing really big. There had been little evidence of tectonic activity in the survey, and it seemed the planet had a stable crust. The sky had a brilliant blueness to it at this time, without a cloud around. From the profusion of flowers, however, it must be deduced that rain was common.

In the middle of what would be soon the main street a small box stood on a small stand. It was an insect repellent, working on sound. The sound was inaudible to human ears. From the surrounding forests, however, could be heard the buzz of a million wings.

The interrogation tent had been set up in a small clearing away from the main activity. Worf organised all the setting up, but did not intend to lead the questioning. He had subordinates who specialised in interrogation techniques, and he would simply observe.

Serena and Andrew were the experts, and they settled themselves in comfortably. Serena sighed as she looked at the view. The tent was simply an overhead awning, exposed on all sides. Behind her was a wall of giant fern leaves and to the sides something like bamboo, but with flowers at its top. The interviewees had to come along a small path from the main area, and had a small but comfortable chair facing the table behind which sat Serena and Andrew.

Celeste had been left to her own devices, and found the colony children had been set to work. The other Enterprise children were mostly still aboard, with their parents, and she did not mix much with them anyway. She walked into the jungle.

In the trees she felt like an invisible watcher. She was in darkness, and was confident those in the bright sunshine could

not see her. She watched the bases of buildings being put down, and walls being slowly constructed by machines. This was to be the home of the Tolians, so they were building, while the Ardurians were content for a day or so to erect a tent city.

Illana Borzovska was single-handedly putting up a tent of some sort, but she was spending so much time looking at the plants around her as she did that it seemed unlikely she would have much done by the time she was called.

Brendan seemed to be working very slowly on his accomodation, too. He paused to think often, apparently deeply troubled.

Celeste drifted quietly around to watch Brildan Furr. He had erected a closed tent already, and she moved closer, and stepped on a twig. He was among a small line of similar tents, but most had elected to leave theirs open for the time being, and had gone to join the main group. It was warm and humid. Furr jumped to the front of the tent, and said, "Who's there?"

"It's only me, Mister Furr," said Celeste. She emerged from the shrubbery and smiled. "Can I come in?"

He looked doubtful, and looked around. Nobody was in sight, so he said "Yes, all right," and she followed him in.

Furr was aware that the tents were not able to stop sound. He hesitated to speak, although he would have liked to have seen her more privately.

"Very nice," she said, looking about. "Is that a phaser?"

"Yes," he said. "I like to have it handy. We may need them if we see these giant insects. Most of us have one. Er, what did you need to see me about?"

"Nothing," she said sweetly. "I'm just watching everyone, seeing where they are and what they're doing. It's fun."

"Well, don't watch me," he said. "Watch the others. Go away now."

She obediently left, and he thoughtfully went on unpacking. Celeste drifted back to the interrogation tent, and settled in to eavesdrop. She found a comfortable spot, and lay down, and closed her eyes.

Etilia came in first. She sat down in the chair with a straight back, and smiled at them.

"Good morning, Elder Braz," said Serena. "We thought we would start by letting you tell us more about the set-up on this planet. How will the planet be run now?"

"Now?" Etilia frowned. "The same as we intended in the first place."

"What will happen about replacing those who died?"

"We will have an election quickly," she said. "They will be a loss, but there are plenty of others able to replace them."

"Who do you think they might be?" asked Andrew. "Just your guess."

"It depends on who stands," she said. "We don't have too many people with leadership experience, but it will develop. Perhaps those who were going to be the opposition will accept the reins."

"I don't understand this 'opposition' business," said Andrew. "What do you mean?"

"We want to develop a two-party system of government," said Etilia. "As yet we have no notion of the policies, so it would be a formality for a start. their job would be to question all the government's decisions, but they wouldn't have the numbers to actually stop anything. Their job is to make the government think about things, and they would be an avenue of approach for anyone with a grievance."

"Who are they?" asked Serena.

"Brildan Furr and Serio Triff," she answered. "Professor Gramm had intended to be on it, but he was killed recently in an accident. We'll have to replace him, too. I don't think you know the other two."

"I thought the scientists were just here for a year or two?" interposed Worf. "Can they be on the government?"

"The Professor had decided to stay longer," Etilia answered. "But anyone resident here can be elected. They will still be here for a while."

"And they are highly intelligent," said Serena thoughtfully. "I suppose a colony of farmers might not be highly skilled in administration?"

"Our people are somewhat simple in habits," said Etilia, "and not skilled in many ways, but we are talking of a small colony. By the time we grow, better leaders will have appeared."

After Etilia had been questioned about more routine matters, such as where she was at the time, and so on, she was allowed to go. She had no idea why someone should think the planet valuable enough to commit murder for. The others considered what they had been told as they waited for the next interviewee.

"It sounds to me as if this place would be wide open for a small group of smart operators to take it over and run it for themselves," said Andrew. "But why? It's just going to be a backwoods hick town!"

Celeste dimly took in the conversation. She watched the camaraderie between Serena and Andrew, and smiled. Maybe they would get together soon.

The other Ardurian and Tolian leaders had very little to offer. They had some suggestions as to who might be likely to stand

for the Council, and those few suggested were pushed ahead to the top of the list of interviewees, but nothing was learned, except that the remaining Elders besides Etilia Braz and Anders and Felicia Yarrow were not the material of leaders. They were at best bureaucrats, at worst, not bright.

"I still think it has to be Lar," said Andrew, moving stiffly in his seat. "He's been a center of suspicion already, and he was the only one who could have killed Gramm."

"Are you adding Gramm to the list of victims?" asked Serena in surprise.

Worf broke in. "I agree. If so many others had not been killed it might be unrelated, but we do need to regard the probability of a connection. If he was a victim, then Professor Lar remains a suspect." He pressed his communicator.

"Captain," he said, after contacting Picard, "I request information on the death of Professor Gramm. Could his death have been caused by Professor Lar?"

"I will access the information for you," said Picard. "You will be pleased to know that Counselor Troi is conscious, and should be able to join you tomorrow."

"That's good," said Serena. "Is it worth putting off the rest of the questioning until then?"

Worf thought a minute.

"I believe we may as well continue with the main figures. We can recall them if necessary. We will leave the ordinary colonists whom we have no reason to suspect until tomorrow."

The next to be interviewed was Illana. She was asked questions about whether there were valuable plants on Regula which might be worth murdering for, about her own past and future, and whether she had intentions of standing for the Council. She

did not have any information of use to them.

"Miss Borzovska," asked Serena eventually, "you arrived early on Argonaut. Why was that?"

Illana found being addressed as Miss Borzovska by someone who usually called her by her first name amusing, as well as somewhat unsettling.

"I had the time, and I love exploring new worlds, so I thought I'd do some walking in the jungle there."

"Did you see anyone else while you were there?"

"Brildan Furr was doing some walking. I saw him while I was swimming in a lake. I was a good way off, but I have excellent eyesight, so I'm sure it was him. I didn't call out, because I was naked, and I was somewhat anxious to hide my gills at that time. I didn't know him all that well, and we had both presumably gone out to be alone."

"Thank you, Illana, that will be all," said Serena with a smile.

"What was that all about?" asked Andrew curiously.

"Tell you after this next one," said Serena.

Brildan Furr was next. He smiled as he sat down, and sat easily, although he licked his lips. They took no notice of that. It was normal behaviour for an interviewee, no matter how relaxed he tried to seem. Celeste came to attention.

"You seem an intelligent man, Mister Furr," said Serena, "but you did not try to be elected to the High Council. You did accept a position on the Opposition, though?"

Furr considered. He had been expecting questions about movements, alibis, and so on. "I don't like boring jobs," he said at last. "Running a bureaucracy would destroy me. I may not even stay here long. I came to help, because I talked my people

into coming here, so I thought that entailed some obligation, but I am a wanderer. I like to see new worlds."

"We heard you were the brains behind Arduria's bid," said Andrew. "What was so good about this place?"

Furr paused again. He thought before answering. "I think there is a great mystery about this place. These buildings are going to reveal some great archaeological mystery. But even if they don't, I believe investigators will swarm to it. In the long run, I think the planet has enormous potential as a tourist venue."

"It is beautiful," agreed Serena. "But it is a long way away, and there are plenty of beautiful planets."

"All right," he conceded. "But I think it will be an archaeological treasure trove. And we can't lose, because it will always be a beautiful place to live, even if nobody came!"

He answered questions about his whereabouts at the times of the various crimes for which they had a time, in spite of the fact that they knew his movements already. Never any harm in asking again.

"You told us you arrived on Argonaut the day we were leaving," said Serena suddenly. "Is that correct?"

"No, as a matter of fact," he said with a smile. "It was the first time I had been in the town, but I had actually been on the planet earlier. I did a little bushwalking. It's a passion of mine."

"Did you see anyone?" asked Serena impassively.

"No, no," he said. "I can't prove it. Does it matter?"

"Probably not," said Serena, keeping the disappointment from her voice.

"Thank you," said Worf eventually. "We may have to call you back tomorrow."

"What was the point of that, Ensign?" asked Worf curiously.

"I knew he lied when he said he had just arrived on Argonaut," said Serena. "Illana asked him how he enjoyed his trip, and he said he had. I thought that was a possible motive to have Illana killed, if he wanted his presence a secret. But his story is reasonable. If someone asks have you just arrived, you could take it to mean 'here', rather than on the planet."

"Nevertheless, an important point," said Worf. "Presumably the killer had some contact with the maker of the android, so he or she would have to have been on the planet earlier."

As Furr left, attended by an escort from the corps he passed Brendan Bock, who looked at him uneasily, but said nothing. Brendan sat down and fidgeted as his escort sat down to watch.

"Mister Bock, can you suggest any reason from a biological point of view that this planet might be somehow a treasure trove?" asked Serena. Worf noted the unusual discomfort of the biologist.

"No, I haven't really studied it in any depth yet," said Bock. "The only way plants can be treasure troves that I know of is from medicines or drugs, and the plants haven't been investigated to any depth yet."

"How long do you intend to stay on Regula, Mister Bock?" asked Andrew. "Do you have any political ambitions?"

"Not now," muttered Brendan.

"What?" asked Andrew sharply.

"I had spoken to some of them about maybe being on the council or the opposition," said Bock, "but not now. This place scares me."

"Before her accident," said Serena, tight-lipped, "Counselor Troi passed you in the corridor, and she said you were terrified."

Terrified, not nervous. What makes a man like you terrified?"

"What do you mean?" he whispered.

"Were you afraid of discovery and execution?" interposed Worf. "We don't execute murderers on the Enterprise. If you were tried on Argonaut, perhaps. But if we had already tried you on Federation territory you would serve your sentence there."

"Tried?" he cried hoarsely. "I haven't killed anyone!"

"Then why were you terrified?" asked Serena gently. He buried his head in his hands.

"I think I may know who did it," he said in a muffled voice. "But I can't see how. I was terrified because whoever it was seemed to have control of the whole starship. If I said anything anywhere I might be overheard. I guess I should be safe here."

"Who?" asked Worf.

"Brildan Furr," said Brendan in a whisper. "He had found something on the planet which could make him rich, so he wanted to get together a few of us to go on the High Council. We'd soon be running the place, he said. But we were going to do it legally. We were going to just do a good job as Opposition for the first session, then stand for the Council itself. We're smart and young, and there would be just enough of us to run things."

"What was it he found?" asked Worf.

"He wouldn't say. He said if we didn't know we couldn't betray his secret."

"Who else is there?" asked Worf.

"There was going to be Professor Gramm, but he died. But there was still me and Furr, and Toreal Bligg, he's with the Ardurians, and Ellis Boor with the Tolians. He was a friend of Furr, so he dragged his people in. But we were going to do it legally!"

Brendan had recovered some aplomb. He had spoken, and had not been mysteriously struck dead.

"And when the murders started you realised Furr was speeding up the agenda," said Worf.

"Yes, at least I supposed so. I thought I was safe, because he needed me, but I wanted to come forward and tell. But he seemed to have the whole ship itself working for him!"

"But how?" said Worf with a frown. "We have a strong suspect, but we need a method."

"Would you help us?" asked Serena.

"Yes," he said hesitantly. "I'm in for a penny, in for a pound, I guess."

Worf said, "Arrange for to meet Furr in some lonely place. We will record the meeting, and see what comes out of it. We will supply you with a personal force field in case he has a weapon. It will give you some protection, and we will be near."

"All right," he said, exhaling. "Where and when?"

"By the falls would be a good place," said Worf. "It is open, and there is room to manoeuvre. Make the time 0700 hours. We will set up our recording devices a short way away."

Worf waited until Bock had moved off, and contacted the Enterprise. He was quickly beamed up with Serena and Andrew, and they brought Picard and Riker up to date.

Chapter 14.

Jean-Luc Picard was already in the Briefing Room when the rest of the senior staff entered very early next morning. He welcomed Ensign Moulton and Ensign Black to the meeting, and asked Lieutenant Worf to lead the agenda.

"First, we have a suspect," he told the group. "Brildan Furr has previously arranged with Doctor Bock and others to infiltrate the High Council, legally, as he calls it, because he knows something of enormous value on the planet. We are going to try to have him confess to Bock later today, but so far we have no idea how, if it were he, he did it."

"I have found something which may explain his interest," said Data. "We have done some deeper scans of the planet, and have found some emissions of dilithium."

"Dilithium crystals!" exclaimed Worf. "There is our motive! All we need now is evidence of how the murders were committed!"

"We have to consider whether there was only one murderer," Picard reminded him. "You had a theory that each group might have had a killer."

"That seems unlikely now," said Worf thoughtfully. "The group which hoped to take control covered both groups of colonists, so unless there is another motive we do not know, it seems likely that Furr will be the culprit."

"Unless a second group has the same idea," said Riker. "Who else might know of the dilithium?"

"We have not accounted for all of the original crew of the science vessel," said Worf. "None of them is among the colonists, however. They could have organised from afar. It still seems unlikely."

"I agree," said Riker. "It would have been difficult for any of them to infiltrate the colonists. They know each other too well. I wanted to raise every possibility, though."

"With luck this set-up will tell us what we want to know," said Serena suddenly. She had been quiet for a while, awed by being in the presence of the top echelon. "Brendan Bock is going to see what he can get out of Furr. He's going to pretend to be still

onside, but wants to know what's going on."

"The play's the thing wherein we'll catch the conscience of the king," said Data to her.

"What?" said Serena blankly.

"A quotation from Shakespeare," said Picard kindly. "Not entirely applicable in this case, I would say. Before your time perhaps?"

"Oh, he must be," said Serena with a grateful smile. Data sat back with a frown.

"What exactly is the plan?" he asked, and said, when they had explained, "It may be as well to be on our guard from all sides. If Brildan Furr did have an android killer, other than the panda, it may be guarding him."

"An excellent suggestion!" said Worf with enthusiasm. "I believe we have the matter organised. If this fails, which I doubt, we can resume the interrogations tomorrow."

"To recap, then," said Picard. "Furr may be the killer, having used the Kritonian panda as his assassin. There is no evidence that there is any other android, according to a computer sweep, but Commander Data feels there is no harm in covering the possibility."

"If we have Furr confess to some of the crimes," said Worf, "we will know which murder attempts remain to be investigated."

"There are problems with the motive," said Data, "which the Mister Furr may not have realised, but they can be discussed later. Ensign Moulton, is your daughter still aboard?"

"No, she's in the camp," said Serena. "She's staying with her friends for the night. Why?"

"I would like to talk to her," said Data, "while the others watch the meeting."

"Why?" asked Serena, with a fleeting fear sweeping her heart. "Is she in danger?"

"She told me that she lies," said Data, "like the protagonist in the famous paradox, and she knows more than she should."

"I don't understand, Commander, but I would be glad to have you with her. Look after her," said Serena. "Should I come with you?"

"No," he answered. "Let us first go and set up the trap."

Brendan walked to and fro in the camp, getting no more work done on his house. Illana came up to him and tapped him on the shoulder. He leaped in the air, then apologised.

"Setting up camp on a new world is exciting," she said sarcastically, "but that seems an overreaction. You're up early."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I have things on my mind."

Just then the security team and Data appeared in a tingle of light, beaming into the clearing near them. Worf came over.

"It is time to get organised," he said. "Let us go."

"Can I come?" asked Illana in surprise. "Is it a private party?"

"It would be best if you did," said Worf, "but you will have to remain with us all morning."

"Well, I'm not too occupied," she said, her curiosity piqued. "What's going on?"

"You'll see," Brendan muttered, and she followed the group. They moved well away from the camp, and found a clearing, about a hundred meters from the falls, which she could hear thundering in the distance.

Worf gave orders to his communicator badge, and a small selection of electronic equipment appeared in the sparkle of a

transporter beam. There was a video screen, and small recording blocks, with remote terminals. Worf switched on the remotes, and they rose into the air silently, drifting through the trees until they came out into the clearing near the falls. When they set themselves down, however, two of the three immediately rolled over and pointed at the earth, and the other only covered a small part of the available area.

Worf swore, and quietly moved through the brush. The scene at the falls was empty, so he quietly found the two remotes and placed them on suitable mounds of earth just inside the line of flora, and silently returned. With the remotes firmly grounded he was able to arrange them to cover the area completely.

"Did you ask Furr to come here?" he asked quietly.

"Yes," answered Brendan. "I left a message in his tent last night where he can't miss it."

Furr had just found it. He read, "I must see you alone. we need to discuss things Meet me at the falls, 0700 hours. BB." He pursed his lips, and looked at his watch. It was 0630. He picked up his phaser, which was still exactly as he had left it on his case, and tucked it into his belt. He would have set it on kill, but a stunner on kill is best not tucked into the belt. It was on standby. A flick of the finger would set it on kill.

He quietly moved out of the main camping area, and through the shadows of the trees, barely stirring the leaves as he approached the trysting place. There was nobody there, and he moved out into the open.

"Hello!" said Serena quietly, "what's this?"

Furr had appeared on the screens at the hideout, a hundred meters away. All of them stopped what they were doing. Worf frowned.

"He has come to survey the place early," he whispered. "I do not

think he can find the remotes quickly. He does not have sophisticated equipment. Let us wait."

They watched in silence as Furr walked around the clearing, peering into bushes, but the remotes were tiny, and hidden under the shadows of leaves. They could hear his breathing, and the shifting of debris below his feet. Data spoke.

"I think it best if I go and find Celeste now," he said. "And I suggest the security team shadow Mister Bock until he nears his rendezvous."

He had started to walk quietly off when he was interrupted.

"Look!" said Andrew, and they all turned. He pointed to the viewscreen, where Brildan Furr stood irresolutely. At the side of the screen a small figure had walked quietly in.

Data felt a quick burst of a radio pulse, but it was so fast he had no idea what it meant. It was harmless.

Serena gasped as she recognised Celeste. "What is she doing there?" she gasped. "I'll get her."

She moved to go, but Andrew said, "There's no reason why he should hurt her. He'll just pass the time of day, and depart."

"I don't think so," she said. "I think he's been waiting to get her alone. I'm going after her. It will seem natural. I'm her mother. Furr will think nothing of it if I appear looking for her, and take her off."

As she began to leave, Data said neutrally, "I do not believe your daughter is in danger. I think we may learn something important."

She paused, not convinced, and they watched.

Furr became aware of Celeste as she spoke.

"Good afternoon, Mister Furr."

He whirled, his hand moving towards his phaser, then realised who it was.

"What are you doing here?" he snapped. "I don't want to see you now!"

"It seemed like a good time," she said. She strolled over towards the edge of the cliff, and looked at the waterfall.

"I know you killed those people and I can prove it!" Celeste said vindictively. "I'm going to tell on you!"

"My god, what's she doing!" cried Serena. "He'll kill her!" She ran off, and the others followed, except Data, who kept watching the monitor, which was recording everything.

"What do you mean?" asked Furr, with a frown. He looked around uneasily, but still did not know if there were any monitors. "You can't tell anything."

"I'm going to tell everyone you were the one who had those people killed," Celeste said. But she was not looking at him. She was peering over the edge at the glorious scene below, with the frothing waters gouging a deep pool at the base of the falls straight below her.

Furr glanced desperately around. He thought of his phaser, but it would take time and fumbling to get it and ready it. While he was trembling in indecision, she bent over provocatively to see the waters churning below. He could not resist the chance, and quickly kicked her.

Celeste went over the falls dramatically. She flung her arms wide, and fell. She made a noise like "Eek!", but the recording instruments did not pick up her scream as she fell.

Brildan Furr was white as he stared down and saw the small figure hit the water. He suddenly became aware of the sound of running feet breaking the foliage, and turned to see the group

running towards him. With a curse he pulled out his small phaser, set it to kill with a move, and fired at the oncomers.

Nothing happened. He saw with a sigh of despair the runners pulling their phasers to stop him, and waited for the jolt of the stun beams. Instead he was consumed in a flash of energy, twisting in a quick agony.

Worf and the others had reacted to the sight of the phaser with well-trained reactions. The three Security people fired almost as one. What they did not expect was to see Furr die.

Serena did not stop to look at him. She fled to the ledge, and looked down in despair. A hand grasped her.

"Don't jump," said Illana. "You couldn't survive!"

Serena paused irresolutely, knowing it was true. Knowing Celeste could not have survived. But Illana ignored her own advice and dived from the cliff.

Serena watched in horror as she hit the water. The others were immediately at her side, holding her.

"Don't worry," whispered Brendan, trying to convince himself, "Illana can breathe water. She'll find her."

"If she survived the fall," said Andrew dumbly.

Worf had quickly hit his communicator.

"Enterprise, acknowledge,"

"Picard here," said the captain.

"I need a transporter to lock on anyone in the river near the camp, and beam them aboard to sickbay," said Worf.

"I heard that Captain," interrupted the voice of the transporter operator.

"Do it" said Picard.

"I've got one," said the operator. "There's no sign of any other life in the river. It's the woman. I'll beam her straight to sickbay."

"Can't you pick up the girl?" asked Worf. "She will be dead, but we may save her if we are in time."

"Nothing animal, alive or dead, in the river, or anywhere down there," said the operator.

"Not caught under a rock?" asked Worf. "She may be a distance downstream."

"We can penetrate this rock about five hundred meters," said the operator. "She's not there, or in the two kilometres downstream."

Serena knelt by the edge, sobbing. Andrew stood awkwardly, wondering how to comfort her. Data came up. He looked down and softly said, "and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest."

"It would be best for all of us to beam up to the ship," he said aloud. "Ensign Moulton needs attention for shock, and we need to learn what has happened."

"Yes," agreed Worf, who had not understood the events of the past few minutes himself. "Let us beam up with what remains of Mister Furr!"

On the starship Serena was taken by Deanna Troi to sickbay. Deanna was still tired, but she heard the discussion, and immediately went to the transporter room to meet the group.

"I'll go with her," she said to Worf. "You can report."

"Ensign Moulton was very distressed," said Worf. "But she will also need to explain why she allowed herself to breach regulations."

"What?" asked Serena dazedly.

"You should not have set your phaser to kill," he said, "even if your daughter was in danger."

"I didn't," she gasped. "I thought it was one of you!"

They all drew their phasers. All were on stun.

Worf said, "I will take all of the phasers and have them examined. I will see you when you have.. recovered, Ensign."

"I will walk with you for a moment, Counselor," said Data. Deanna was surprised, but had no objection.

Deanna and Serena left. Serena was weeping, but able to walk steadily. Her training enabled her to bear up under what should have been an intolerable strain. Deanna encouraged her to cry, and to talk as they walked.

"It is the most traumatic thing," said Deanna, "to see your own child die. Don't run away from it. I'll help you work through this as much as it can be. I know you'll never completely recover, but we'll work together."

"They couldn't find any trace," said Serena suddenly. "Do you think she was perhaps beamed away suddenly, somehow?"

"We're the only ones around with transporters, I'm afraid," said Deanna. "I don't see how that is possible."

"I am sorry to have to say that I am sure your daughter is dead, Ensign," said Data sadly. Deanna looked at him sharply but said nothing. She would ask later.

Worf meanwhile took the phasers, and tested them. On stun they blasted targets to pieces. All of them, except Serena's. He took them apart and studied their innards. A glow of admiration flowed through him as he looked at the delicate microcircuitry that had been altered. There was a tiny radio receiver that reacted to a radio pulse, and switched the phasers to kill.

But who had done it, and why? He took the recordings, which he had had beamed up, and looked through them. How had Celeste known that Furr was the villain? He considered for a

moment the question of why Furr had pushed her instead of shooting her, but realised instantly that that was far more risky. The phaser would be heard, perhaps, although the sound of the falls would mask it. But if the girl's body were found it would be easy to recognise how she had died, although finding the culprit might be harder. But a fall could be an accident.

The case had been resolved, and the recordings would remove any doubts that justice had been done, but many puzzles remained. The shooting of Furr would be an embarrassment, and he had no idea how it had been achieved. It seemed there might still be another conspirator.

Data thought this unlikely.

"I believe that the case is concluded," he said, as the senior officers met to discuss the affair. "I also believe that I may know something of how it was accomplished, but I do not wish to make this public until I am sure of it. I will tell the Captain and Lieutenant Worf my theory, and let the Captain use the information as he pleases."

Worf was reasonably satisfied, though he itched to know Data's theory. The fact that they had solved a mysterious murder series was a feather in his cap, even if its solution was going to be kept secure.

"Can you ever be sure whether you are right?" asked Captain Picard. "We are unlikely to get any new evidence now."

"I may meet someone one day who will tell me more," said Data. "Otherwise I will never know for certain."

He followed Picard and Worf into the Captain's ready room, and told them his theory.

Chapter 15.

Illana lay in sickbay, resting. Brendan appeared in the doorway.

"May I come in?" he asked.

"Sure," she said. "I'm decent."

"How are you?" he asked. "That was a pretty stupid thing to do, you know."

"I'm fine," she said. "I had bruises on my bruises, but nothing serious. They've fixed them all up, so I don't know why they're keeping me. It wasn't as dangerous for me as it looked. I can breathe underwater. The main problem hitting water from that height is that it's like concrete, but at the base of a falls it's all turbulent and its deep. The trouble for an air-breather is that you can't get back up to the top, so you drown. I just stayed down and looked for Celeste. But I couldn't find her."

She sighed unhappily.

"It was still brave," he said. "Unknown water could have been full of rocks."

"Serena was in just before," she added. "She's back on her feet already. She thanked me for what I did. But I didn't succeed."

"None of us could do anything," said Brendan. "You were the only one who even had a chance."

"It's funny they didn't find her," said Illana.

"Yes," he agreed, without great interest. There were too many unknown factors, and the girl would have been dead seconds after hitting the water.

"Look," he said, "I told Worf and the others about what we were going to do. You know, about exploiting the place. But now that I've seen the place, I'm in love with it. I'm going to stay here for a while."

"So?" she asked.

"So, are you going to stay on for a good long while? I like your company a lot. We haven't known each other long enough to get too serious right away, but, you know.." His voice tailed off.

"Well, assuming they don't put you in jail," she said with a smile. "You are a man with the same professional interests as me. You are intelligent and handsome, and you don't mind that I have gills. I think we may get down to being serious pretty quickly, if that's all right."

"it's all right with me," he gasped.

"You may kiss the bride," she said, and he did.

Picard led the way into his office and sat. Data and Worf followed suit.

"Now, what is your theory, and why should we keep it quiet?" asked Picard with interest.

"Very simply put," answered Data, "I believe that Celeste was the android. I have no proof of this, and if it were announced it would put additional stress on Ensign Moulton."

"But we found no evidence of an android, other than yourself and the panda," said Picard with a frown.

"I would like to say that I was aware of all my deductions in advance," said Data, "but I realised what was afoot only late in the piece, when Ensign Moulton failed to recognise a well-known quotation from Shakespeare."

Picard settled back in his chair.

"You are enjoying this, aren't you, Data?" he said with a grim laugh. "A chance to really play Sherlock Holmes. Is this the scene where the great detective finally confronts everyone and goes through the suspects?"

"I am incapable of enjoyment," said Data, and Picard and Worf

looked at each other and smiled. "However, this is somewhat analogous, and there is some interest in having found the appropriate clues and put them together."

"Please go on," said Picard.

"I believe that the android was substituted for the little girl while we were on the planet Argonaut. Probably at the same time she was given the Kritonian panda toy. I do not know whether there was any involvement of the toy. It appears to be a fully operational android, which means its creator has become very proficient at creating androids. He may have sent it along as a backup, as a red herring, or simply as a toy. It may have no other functions than as a toy."

"Yes, yes," said Picard, afraid that Data was about to embark on a long dissertation on a trivial point. "Obviously the android got aboard without trouble, which will need to be looked into. But why was it not picked up by the computer sweep?"

"It was, or so I suspect." Data paused. "Much of what I say is presumption. But the computer told us the rooms which contained androids. In the time that we went to the room, Celeste had left the room on an errand. She returned while we were there. The computer had not pointed out that there were two androids in the room, and nobody thought to check for more."

"Before you go on," said Picard, "I would like to expand our circle. I would like to hear what Counselor Troi thinks about telling this to Ensign Moulton. I believe she has the right to know what happened to her daughter."

"That is why I decided to tell you," said Data. "I thought you should choose."

"After I get all available advice," said Picard. He summoned Deanna, and they waited until Deanna arrived.

Deanna picked up the air of tension as she entered. "What's up?" she asked.

After she had heard the summary, or repetition, of what had gone before, she thought for a moment.

"I agree with the Captain," she said. "Serena is a strong person, and she has already come to terms with her loss. I think she has a right to know, even if it causes her a little more pain."

"Very well, Counselor," said Picard, and he summoned Serena.

Serena sat alone in her room, disconsolate. Half the belongings in the room would not be used again. The door chimed, and she called, "Enter."

Alfred Simpkins entered.

"I wondered whether you might need some company?" he asked. "I have a lot of free time during the stopover, so if you need a shoulder to cry on. I miss her too, you know," he added. "I was just congratulating myself that I was having a win, so to speak. She was improving so much."

"Thank you, Alfred," she said. "I'll take up your offer later, but I would like to be alone just for a while."

She was interrupted as her communicator beeped.

"Ensign Moulton," she answered. She knew she had been left off duties, out of sympathy, but she had nothing to do but pack away Celeste's belongings, and hoped that this might be a call back to duty.

"Please report to the Captain's ready room, Ensign," said the message.

"Acknowledged," she said in wonderment. Please? She had never seen the ready room. Hope flickered that Celeste had been found, but they would have told her straight away. Perhaps

her body had been found. She said a quick goodbye to Alfred, and hurried through the corridors.

As soon as she entered, at the Captain's invitation, she knew Celeste had not been found. All except Data looked slightly embarrassed and uncomfortable.

"Please sit down, Ensign," said Captain Picard, and she recognised his voice from the communicator. A personal message from the Captain?

"Yes, sir," she answered, sinking into the seat offered.

"I hope that this will not upset you, Ensign," said Picard, "but I felt you had a right to know Commander Data's theory. I suspect he is correct."

"His theory?" she said uncertainly, her heart beating faster for no apparent reason.

"I believe, Ensign," said Data, "that your daughter has been dead for some time. I believe that an android copy was made of her while you were on Argonaut, and substituted there."

"That's ridiculous," she protested, dimly aware that this was not the proper protocol for addressing a senior officer. But anger overcame her inhibition. "Do you think I don't know my own daughter?"

"The android, if Commander Data's theory is true, had your daughter's brain patterns imprinted on it," said Deanna. "It would have behaved exactly like your daughter. It even fooled me," she added with a frown. "I remember feeling emotions from it, somewhere."

"But I'd know my daughter from an android!" persisted Serena angrily. "I'd know the.." She was going to say, "the feel of her," when she realised that Celeste had very successfully avoided being touched most of the time. Certainly never cuddled. She

had begun to eat very little. She frowned, unwilling to consider the possibility.

"Commander Data had just begun to explain his process of deduction," said Captain Picard. "So far he has only shown that Celeste could have been an android without being detected by the computer."

"How?" asked Serena doubtfully.

"When the computer told us the only android presence, apart from Commander Data, was in your room," said Worf, "we believe that your daughter was in the room. By the time we arrived she had left on an errand. When we found one android we did not consider another might have just left. Celeste returned while we were there."

"But how could she," she paused, "it, have done the murders?"

"She had a computer terminal," said Data. "You have a high security clearance yourself, though I doubt she would have used that. She is a computer, so she may simply have interfaced with the main computer and subverted it."

"There would be no mystery about the killing of Fratrix McNamon. He would have thought nothing of allowing a small child in his room, and she was a regular visitor there. All she had to do was wait for a time when nobody had seen her go there."

"And you think she used the computer system to kill the old couple?" said Serena in a subdued voice. This was all so unbelievable!

"And the unsuccessful attempt on the Aquarian woman?" asked Picard.

"The reason I have been able to solve this case," said Data, "is simply that I have had access to information which no one else has had. I have had conversations with Celeste."

The others waited as he paused dramatically. His studies of drama and detective fiction were standing him in good stead. Serena thought, so have I, but I didn't learn anything!

"Celeste came to me because I was a computer like her, but I had free will. It had not occurred to her that this might be so. She simply assumed that she was a machine with specific programming, and, although she did not like what she had to do, she saw no choice but to do it. When she talked to me I pointed out that a machine of sufficient complexity could attain independent free will. She was a very complex mechanism, with the added complexity of Celeste's brain patterns. I believe at that point she simply decided not to follow orders any more. She reprogrammed herself."

"The knowledge of good and evil," said Serena, her face drawn.

"What?" asked Picard.

"After she visited Commander Data, she said she had eaten an apple. She said it was a metaphor." Serena swallowed. "I was just astonished that a nine-year-old girl could consciously use a metaphor. I guess I thought she must be getting taught very well. I never considered what the metaphor might mean!"

"And so she decided not to kill the woman?" asked Picard.

"Actually, sir, that was before she talked to me. She would have had access to all personnel files, so she could have seen that Illana Borzovska was amphibious. I suggest that she, subconsciously or otherwise, was giving her victim a chance to escape. Her next victim she made a point of not harming at all."

"Well, thanks, that makes me feel good!" said Deanna drily. "I was supposed to be murdered!"

"I suppose that Brildan Furr panicked when he found out we had a Betazoid to question him," said Picard.

Worf had one of his few inputs. "We have a motive for the attempt on the Aquarian woman. She saw Furr on Argonaut before he was supposed to be there. When we questioned him, he simply changed his story. But he may have thought she was a threat."

"It all fits," said Serena reluctantly.

"What does?" asked Picard.

"Furr," she said despondently. "He was always trying to see Celeste. I decided he was some sort of pervert, and I was stopping him. So was she," she added with a wan smile. "And she got me out of the room while she was reprogramming the replicator! By warning me that Deanna might be attacked!"

"Other things all fit," said Worf. "Your theory fits all the known facts. Our scanners failed to pick up Celeste from the river, because they were set to look for animal life. She was not human. All that remains is to explain how our phasers misfired, which is probably simple, and how you discovered all this!"

"As you say, that is simple," said Data. "In fact, she told me she had done it, though I did not recognise that fact at the time. I met her in the Security room, and she told me she had been playing with the phasers. I assumed she was being sarcastic.

"As to how I knew, finally, while we were talking she showed a strong familiarity with the works of Shakespeare. I found this surprising in a nine-year-old girl, but she told me her mother was very fond of Shakespeare, and always quoting him. Later, when I used a familiar quotation from Hamlet you were completely unfamiliar with it, and I realised she had lied. Something she had warned me of, in fact. I knew then that she was too well-informed for a human girl. She had been reading books from the computers, obviously. I was going to confront her, but did not have time to do so."

"You warned us that the android might attack Brendan Bock," said Worf. "If Celeste had approached during the meeting you would have alerted us to your suspicions?"

"Exactly," said Data. "I did not anticipate that she might attack Furr. Though I should have," he said thoughtfully.

"I like to think that it was Celeste, still alive in that thing, that made it turn against him," said Serena, a tear trickling down her cheek in spite of her resolve.

"I agree," said Picard. Data did not comment. He felt that the android had attained a personality of its own, and such a statement was undecidable.

"There is still a point which puzzles me," said Worf, "although it is minor. If Celeste was operating the computer to transport Miss Borzovska, how could she claim to have seen Professor Lar in the conservatory, and describe what he was doing?"

"I do not know to what extent Celeste could interface completely with the computer," answered Data. "If she could do so completely, she would have had complete knowledge of all that was happening about the Enterprise. If she was simply using a terminal, it would make sense that she should have the computer track the person in whose room she was operating. Either way, she would have seen him. She may have then told the schoolteacher that she had been in the conservatory as an alibi, as she would be able to describe accurately what Professor Lar was doing there."

Worf nodded.

"Ensign Moulton," he said, "it would appear that you are the only one who actually saw the creator of these assassins. I will have you create a likeness and we will apprise Starfleet of it. He may still be on Argonaut."

"That's if he does look like that." Deanna went on, "This man can

create lifelike robots. I doubt if he would have much trouble altering his face. In fact, the shopkeeper could have been another android!"

"Nevertheless, it can do no harm," observed Worf, and he added quietly to Deanna, "and it gives the Ensign something constructive to do."

"You'll be taking over my department next," she laughed.

Serena was still clutching at straws, although within herself she knew. "When the Dezics were murdered, Celeste was in the room with all the others. How could she have..." Her voice tailed off.

"The room had no toilet facilities installed," said Data, "so it was quite feasible for her to leave the room, even if she had been noticed. She must have taken a chance entering Professor Lar's room while he slept, but with her access to all the personal files she may have known that he was a sound sleeper. And the doors can operate silently."

Deanna left with Serena, but she was not in as bad shape as Deanna had feared. All her grieving had been done. In fact, all the news and the prospect of finding the man behind it may have been occupying her intellect enough that her emotion was in abeyance for a while. She would still have a lot of sorrow to live through.

When the others had left, Data remained with Captain Picard. Picard knew better than to say, "Why haven't you gone?" He simply waited for Data to speak.

"When we were talking Shakespeare," Data said eventually, "she said that she liked the exit line of Malvolio."

Picard thought briefly.

"I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you!" he quoted.

"It puzzled me at the time. We had been talking about exit lines, such as the farewell to Hamlet, and it seemed an odd choice. Of course, I should have guessed that she intended to see those who had turned her into an instrument of murder punished, and she began with Brildan Furr."

"Began?" said Picard. "A pity she could not have gone further!"

"A fall from that height into that place would not seriously damage me," observed Data. "Or so I believe."

"Then you think she's alive?" gasped Picard. "We'll scan for her."

"Why?" asked Data.

"Why not?" asked Picard curiously.

"If we find her, there will follow a long investigation. She may choose to reveal who made her, or she may simply self-destruct. Apparently it is an option built in to these androids. By the time we trace her creator he may be gone long ago. If we do nothing, I believe she will seek out her creator herself."

"But she's stuck in the jungle down there," began Picard.

"She is an android," said Data. "She is not a little girl. She may obtain her energy straight from sunlight for all I know. I would imagine that she will stay hidden, then one day a medium-sized package will be sent by mail. A curled-up little girl who has no need to breathe could fit into quite a small package."

"And if we find her she may be disassembled," Picard mused. "She would be regarded as a killer."

"Exactly," said Data.

"I think we can regard the matter as closed," said Picard. "With luck, justice will be done. But if she has chosen the path of justice, will she kill?"

"I would expect that she would follow the justice system of

whatever planet she decides to operate on," said Data.

"Maybe she will set up her own agency," mused Picard. "Being shaped like a little girl could be a problem for her!"

"She may find somewhere where there is a lot of tolerance for those who are different," observed Data.

Chapter 16.

Commander Riker ceded command of the bridge as Picard returned with Data. He waited in vain for Picard to detail all the findings of the meeting, but knew he would be told later.

"We have a few days left before we leave the colonists," said Picard. "Let's see what we can find out for them about their planet before we go."

"What about the information gathered already by the survey ship?" asked Riker. "Do we have that?"

"I suspect that what information is available from that ship has been altered," said Picard. "Brildan Furr was chief surveyor on the expedition, and there is nothing in his records to suggest anything of outstanding value on Regula IV. We have already detected dilithium crystals. Let's see if there is anything else."

"A correction, Captain," said Data. "The dilithium is not in the form of crystals. It is metallic in structure."

"Metallic?" frowned Riker. "I haven't heard of metallic dilithium. But dilithium is so rare we don't know all that much of its occurrence."

"There is a problem with its occurrence that Brildan Furr may not have considered," remarked Data. "It seems to occur at a depth of about three thousand kilometers."

"That would be right down in the core," exclaimed Picard.

"Impossible to mine!"

"By any current techniques," agreed Data. "Their surveys must have detected it, but Furr may not have realised it was so inaccessible."

"Have you completely surveyed the planet otherwise, Mister Data?" asked Picard.

"We have logged in all information on its size, surface features and minerals, and deep scanned for other minerals. The metallic edifices are resistant to probes."

"Resistant to probes," echoed Picard. "What metals can they be? Have you studied the information yourself, Mister Data?"

"Not yet, sir. I will now do so. It is a very unusual planet."

"When you have done so, report your findings to me. I am returning to the surface to tell the Elders what we have learned. You have the bridge, Commander Riker."

"Aye, aye, sir," said Riker. He showed a blank face which hid the thought that there were more interesting things to do than occupy the bridge of a starship which was doing nothing. He was still waiting to be told the outcome of the investigations himself, but he was sure he would hear all that from Data in the next few hours.

Picard went to the transporter station, and beamed down to the village.

In the confusion, no one had told the colonists that there had been a conclusion to the murder investigation. Those who had been organised to be interrogated waited in impatience and irritation.

Picard decided to simply make an announcement.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "I am pleased to tell you that

our investigations have been successful, and the perpetrator of the murders has been found. I will communicate our findings to our leaders, and they will tell you. You may go back to your labours."

The colonists did not want to go back to their labours until they learned more, but there was not much choice. They gossiped amongst themselves as they reluctantly moved off. The leaders waited in anticipation to learn what had happened.

Picard gathered them in one of the nearly completed houses. The small group found seats, and grouped themselves around him.

"First," said Picard, "the murderer was found to be Brildan Furr. When we approached him he pulled out a phaser, and our Security people fired back. Due to some sort of malfunction, the phasers killed him. We have taken his body back to the Enterprise, but if you would prefer to bury him here we will return him here."

"You have evidence?" asked Etilia in amazement.

"It was a very circumstantial case," said Picard, "but when we cornered him he gave us to understand that he was guilty."

"I understood that he had a good alibi," said Ellis Boor nervously. "He was with the Captain when the first murders occurred."

"He used an android," said Picard. "The android has been neutralised."

"An android!" said Boor in amazement. "So that was it!"

"And what was your reaction to the murders, Mister Boor?" asked Picard grimly.

"My reaction?" said Boor helplessly. "I don't understand.

"Fear, hope, optimism?"

"Optimism?" gasped Boor. "What do you mean?"

"Our information came from someone whom Furr suborned into joining him in trying to subvert the government," said Picard. "He realised Furr was the guilty party, but was too afraid to say anything aboard ship because he feared Furr."

"And what does this have to do with me?" asked Boor, licking his lips.

"The others he named were you and a Toreal Bligg," said Picard.

"He's one of our science experts," said Etilia, in surprise. "He has nothing to do with administration."

"The idea seems to have been that Furr had gathered together a group who could take over the government of the planet, and control the profits made here."

"Here?" said Etilia. "Profits? We're not even sure we haven't been sold a pup. We may just live our lives out as subsistence farmers, catering for a small number of tourists or scientists."

"You may be right," said Picard. "Furr was wrong in his assessment. There are deposits of dilithium in the planet, but they are too far down to be accessible to modern technology. They are down in the core."

"Dilithium?" said Boor. "Was that what it was?"

He realised immediately that this was more than he should have said.

"So you knew he was the killer?" said Ambrasia Lattif ominously.

"No, I didn't suspect anything," said Boor desperately. "When Felix died I thought it was just an accident. I guess I started to suspect something when Jarran and Arandnia died, but what could I do?"

"We believe that Furr acted alone," said Picard, "but all of his

colleagues must have had an inkling. I suggest that Mister Boor should not be elected to any High Council position."

"Not even dogcatcher!" said Ambrasia grimly.

"Even if we get dogs," added Etilia, with a twitch of her lips. "If you choose to stay, Ellis, I think life may be hard."

"I'll go!" he said. "I'll seek passage back, if I can."

"We are not returning that way," said Picard, "but you may come where we go."

Boor slid out of the room, and Picard began to discuss what the Enterprise could still do to help their settling in. Eventually he said, "I am an amateur archaeologist myself. I would very much like to look at the ruins myself."

"So would we all," said Anders Yerrow. "I suggest an expedition in the morning."

Picard agreed, and Anders and Felicia walked back with him to the clearing.

"You know, I can't help thinking," said Felicia, "that there would have been more killings. If he wanted to clear the way for him and his pals, there were still a few in his way."

"I agree," said Picard. "Our guess is that the android revolted, and refused to go on."

"Revolted!" said Anders in surprise.

"It's only our guess," said Picard. He disappeared in the sparkle of the transporter beam. Anders turned to his wife.

"Imagine that," he said. "That toy panda having that much gumption!"

Picard made his way back to the bridge.

"How are your investigations going, Mister Data?" he asked as

he entered.

"The planet is very unusual," said Data again. "I have some anomalous results as well. I must study them further, but it may be that the colonists may have to leave again. The planet may be dangerously unstable."

"That seems unlikely," said Picard. "There is no evidence of seismic activity, and it would be an extreme coincidence if the planet were suddenly involved in some cataclysm while we were here, after millenia of sitting idly."

"I agree, sir," said Data. "I will study the readings further overnight."

"I am going on an expedition to look at the ruins tomorrow," said Picard. "Number One, would you like to accompany me? You haven't had much opportunity to get off the ship so far."

"It wasn't worrying me," said Will Riker. "The planet didn't seem all that exciting. But then I missed all the to-do. Yes, I'd like to come."

As the two of them left, leaving Data in command, Riker remarked, "We don't know anything about this civilisation. What if they left the place boobytrapped somehow?"

"Boobytrapped?" asked Picard with a frown.

"Yes," said Riker thoughtfully. "Once someone lands here some sort of chain reaction starts."

"Data didn't seem too concerned about anything sudden happening," said Picard doubtfully. "I'll contact him when I reach my cabin and discuss your theory. It is reasonable, though."

When he arrived he ordered his cup of Earl Grey tea, switched on his computer screen, and contacted Data.

"Commander Riker has posited a theory that the original

inhabitants may have set up some sort of booby trap," he said after initial pleasantries. "Is that possible?"

"It is a feasible idea," said Data. "But I do not understand what is occurring. There seems to be no immediate danger, as the planet is not changing. The instability in the center is mysterious. I will report further in the morning."

"Very well," said Picard. "I wonder if we are doing the right thing in not hunting for Celeste? We might have learned so much from her construction."

"We do have an android made by the same hands," reminded Data. "It is safe in a box. It also has no human psyche melded to it."

"We assume," said Picard.

"It exhibited no human attributes," said Data after a moment.

"I was joking, I think," said Picard.

"Oh, I see, sir." Data paused again.

"When we open the box we must not give the panda to understand that the mission is over. If it is indeed one of the killer androids it may self-destruct. I will have to speak to it myself when the time comes!"

"Do that," said Picard with a smile. The thought of Data in animated discussion with a toy panda amused him until he fell asleep.

In Ten Forward Brendan Bock sat with Illana, still gossiping into the late hours.

"I don't know if they will still want me now," he said. "I'd like to investigate the plants still, but I mightn't be too welcome."

"If they throw you out, they'll throw me out too," she said. "That would leave them with nil botanists. I think they'll let you stay."

"I've been so involved with this murder thing I've been neglecting my work," he said. "I haven't even looked at the plants."

"Hey, we've only been here one day," she replied. "I haven't got past putting up my tent and making the bed and unpacking."

"Because you spent the day looking at the flowers."

"Oh, a spy!"

"Just happened to notice."

"So I was one of your suspects?"

"Huh?"

"You were occupied all the time with the murders, and you spent all day looking at me. That makes me a suspect."

"A potential victim. Someone had tried to kill you. I was watching out for you."

"You made that up fast!"

He grinned. "Quick off the mark. Always ready with an answer. You'll have to get used to it."

She sobered up slightly.

"You know I like you, enough probably to marry you. But I hope you're not too.. egotistical."

"Egotistical?" he said with a frown. "Why?"

"I heard about your arrangement," she said quietly. "The group of you assumed you'd be able to pull the wool over the poor dumb settlers. You assumed they wouldn't be smart."

He blushed.

"They may be farmers," she continued, "but they're the ones who are ready for the great adventure, the entrepreneurs. They may not have a lot of education, but they're not stupid."

"I know," said Brendan. "Now that I've met them I see that some of them are going to be good leaders. And a lot of them are actually specialists in various areas. People who are grabbing the chance to find a peaceful haven and live out peaceful lives."

"Can you do that?"

"I don't know," he said, "but with you at my side I'll be there a long time. The only problem I can see is that there's so much more sea than land. You'll never be home!"

She threw a cake at him.

Chapter 17.

The expedition was not entirely fruitful, but the journey was pleasant. Picard and Riker went walking with backpacks, accompanied by about twenty of the colonists.

None of the children were allowed to come with them, because there might be unexpected hazards. The ground might be unstable, because nobody had walked on it in millenia; there might be deadly plants, waiting to cast deadly spores on passers-by; the insects might attack them. And of course, there was only so much room on the ground shuttles. The Enterprise could have beamed the group there, but that would have spoiled the whole feeling of adventure. And they did have a lot of spare time while the colonists set themselves up.

None of these problems arose. Illana and Brendan were with them and examined plants all along the way. All were harmless, though none were edible. The insects proved to be without stings, and did not bite. In fact, they proved to be fearless, as they had not encountered any other species. By the end of the day's expedition many of the explorers had a pet insect, ranging in size from a that of a small mouse to a small cat, clinging to their clothes. Their backs were sufficiently like fur to be able to

be patted and stroked. The numbers of insects were down from the colony. It was noticeably colder here, and the explorers wore insulation.

The first structures came unexpectedly. There were no paths through the undergrowth, and the group was hacking through heavily overgrown areas with machetes, when they suddenly came across a sheer wall of metal.

The obvious thing was to work along the wall, but nothing was found. There was no break, no imperfection. And it was round, curving gently but perceptibly behind the brush as they cleared it.

Eventually they came across an area that was clear, and they could look at it. This left them little the wiser, as it appeared that the wall simply went on forever, with no indentations to mark possible entrances.

"Stand back," said Picard eventually. "I'm going to do a little clearing."

He took out a phaser, and aimed it at the ground.

"Be careful it's not set to kill!" advised Brendan. "We had something funny happen yesterday."

"I know," said Picard grimly. "Funny was not the word. However, Commander Worf has examined all the phasers since."

He fired a sweep, and the ground flew up in a cloud. A few centimeters below the ground was revealed a flat metal surface, the same as the walls, with a raised ridge running in what seemed a straight line.

"The ground seemed so flat," said Picard. "I had a hunch."

"What is it?" asked Riker.

"My guess is that it's a runner," replied Picard. "I think those

edifices slide along those grooves. If these are some sort of doorway, the people who lived here must have been huge!"

"Some sort of aircraft hanger?" said Riker. "Vertical take-off craft?"

"Possible," agreed Picard. "Let's go on."

"While we are here," said Riker, "Let's see how impervious this wall is."

He drew his phaser, and set it at its highest cutting temperature. He aimed at the wall, and let it burn for a half minute. When they examined the result there was a hole, about ten centimeters deep.

"So, it can be penetrated," said Riker. "But it's pretty tough. Only a little hole after thirty seconds of intense phaser fire."

"We don't know how thick the walls are," remarked Anders. "They could be a meter or a kilometer."

"They must be pretty thick," offered Riker. "They're holding up huge walls."

They enjoyed the walk, but learned little more. The walk had taken the greater part of the day, which was about fifteen earth hours, with an equal time for night.

When they returned they all sank into chairs gratefully, and thought about the muscle soreness they would have next day. Riker had become enthusiastic.

"I'd like to come out in a flyer," he said, "and have a look at the top of those things. There has to be a way in."

"How about now?" asked Anders Yerrow. "We have a flyer here."

Riker responded enthusiastically, and the two walked over to the flyer, and were quickly off.

"Where do they get the energy?" sighed Felicia Yarrow. "I hope they get back before dark."

"Commander Riker can look after himself," said Picard. "I hope they find something!"

But they did not. The flyer soared up about three hundred kilometers and found the top of the building to be flat, featureless metal. From their perspective it was impossible to see exactly what shape the buildings were, but they seemed to go uninterrupted to the horizon. Buildings seemed to slot into buildings without any openings. They were unable to get out and wander around, as they had not brought insulated space suits. The air at the top of the edifices was negligible in quantity.

They enjoyed the flight, but on their return Riker was bubbling with curiosity.

"It has to have a purpose," he said. "It was made, but what for? Why have a whole city of thousands of square kilometers that you can't get into?"

"It only needs one entrance," said Yarrow. "We just haven't found it yet."

"But why?" asked Riker in irritation.

"There are possibilities," said Picard. "I can think of some, but they are entirely speculation."

"For example?" asked Riker.

"The beings who lived here could not breathe this atmosphere. They created a city completely hermetically sealed."

"With their level of technology, why not terraform the planet?"

"Well, strictly, terraform means to make like earth, but I understand your meaning."

Don't be so pedantic! thought Riker, as Picard went on, "The

argument against that, of course, is that they turned the rest of the planet into a huge garden, with an atmosphere that we can breathe. The planet could not have evolved the way it is naturally."

"What of the theory that it may be natural?" asked Felicia. "Perhaps some great catastrophe destroyed all the animals above the insects."

Brendan and Illana were in the room, which was a large community meeting place. They had been paying more attention to each other than the conversation, but now Illana broke in.

"But there are no organisms below insects either! There are parasitic forms that the insects probably brought with them, but no single-celled animal forms in the rest of the biosphere, no microscopic animals. If the insects could survive a catastrophe, so could bacteria. This place has to be artificial!"

"It is a great mystery," said Picard, "but I fear it may be ultimately insoluble. I begin to doubt that you will have a great deal of traffic in archaeologists or tourists, if they are unable to get into the buildings at all!"

The colonists looked crestfallen, but Brendan said, "It may not matter."

They looked at him.

"This place is a paradise for subsistence farming," he said. "There are whole oceans of water without a dangerous organism in them. The sea is salty from run off from the rivers, but there are no fish. We can bring some in when we work out what we want. The unique thing is that there's no ecology to destroy. The entire land mass is fertile and has a reliable rainfall. For a farming community, it seems a very pleasant place to stay."

"There are also good minerals in the ground," said Riker. "We have been doing our own survey, as Furr's records seem to

have been altered a bit."

"There may still be a fly in the ointment," said Picard. "Commander Data seems to think there may be some sort of instability inside the planet. He has been investigating."

"An instability?" Anders was perturbed. "We understood that the planet was very stable. In fact, that may be a long term problem."

"Why a problem?" asked Illana.

"Because without tectonic activity erosion will gradually flatten the landscape, and rainfall will decrease. Still, there is so much water surface on the planet it should not be a problem, and it's a very long-term problem."

"Still, I will find out what Commander Data has discovered later," said Picard. "In the meantime, I think I will have a look at what you have done here so far."

"By all means," said Anders. He and Felicia jumped to their feet, and accompanied him around the settlement.

Those who were staying permanently were already in completely established homes. At the moment they had a sameness about them, because they were made from the same materials, walls rolled out automatically from surprisingly small machines, and fitted invisibly together, struts invisible between them, roofs in single layers.

The main differences were in layout, which varied with the size and constitution of each family. Not a lot of the families had children, but a lot consisted of married couples intending to have them soon.

For the moment they had set up in a close community, but eventually they would spread out, when the land was understood better. A few individuals had already chosen to be

somewhat distant. Eventually, when they had their farms, these houses would be folded up and transported there, and then would begin to fill up with the belongings that would make them homes, and other homes would be built from the native materials.

For the moment everyone lived in a plastic home, but soon the handymen would have wooden and brick structures. When visitors began to arrive bigger shops would appear. With only a hundred people in each community it was a bit early to start thinking about newspapers or entertainment media, although these would soon appear. For the moment a few subspace video centers would service the whole community.

Picard savored the atmosphere of a new, enthusiastic community, with everyone moving about, building, organising, creating. The children were running about, where they were not helping, making a healthy noise in an open environment. Something, he realised with a momentary pang, that they could only do on the holodeck aboard the Enterprise. Was the Enterprise a good place to raise children? He dismissed the thought as irrelevant. Children who lived there had to be raised there. There were worse places.

He thought briefly about Celeste Moulton, the real one. She had not been happy aboard the Enterprise, but had been denied the chance to grow into it. He hoped her killer might yet be brought to justice. Intellectually, there was no difference between the murder of a child and the murder of an adult, but emotionally a world of difference. The child was deprived of the chance to.. He repeated the phrase, to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Was it a deprivation to never learn about true evil?

There was a difference about life on a planet, a scent of perfume in the air from the myriad plant life, the distant roar of a waterfall, and the wind stirring the trees. As yet, none of the imperfections

brought about by pollution.

The colonists of Regula IV had centuries of background to help them avoid destroying the existing ecology, but there was always the thing that you did not know. In some way they would cause catastrophes, and their experience would go into the human race's database of information. Bit by bit man would improve his ability to go into new worlds without damaging or destroying them!

He sighed. Time to go and see whether Data had solved the mystery of this world. Would they be able to stay? He had a great faith in Data, which led him to suspect that the colonists may have to leave again. Better to find out before they took the other group to their home, and settled in permanently.

He pressed his communicator, and had himself beamed up to the ship.

Anders Yerrow walked along with his arm around Felicia. They had fallen behind in their building by going on the expedition, but they had all the time in the world.

"I hope they find nothing wrong," said Felicia. "I've fallen in love with the place already."

"I can't see that it's possible," he replied. "There's no tectonic activity, and the place has obviously been stable for millenia. Why would it become unstable now?"

They came to the spot where they had quickly put up a tent, and found a house! The last rays of the setting sun lit it up with a warm glow that made it look like more than the shell it really was.

"What the dickens?" gasped Anders.

Three men appeared from the side.

"You were so busy entertaining the captain," said Fred Smit, "we

thought we'd stick it up for you. Hope you like it. If you don't you can change it yourselves."

"Thank you, Fred," said Felicia earnestly, giving him a kiss. "You people are real friends!"

"You know," mused Anders, "at this moment I don't think anything can move us!"

Over at the other end of the town, Brendan Bock and Illana Borzovska sought out Etilia Braz.

"Are you busy?" asked Illana.

"Yes," she grinned, "but looking for an excuse to stop work."

"Brendan and I have decided to marry," Illana said, "and we thought we might as well rush in where angels fear to tread. You're the senior person now, so we thought you might marry us."

"Are you sure?" asked Etilia. "A long engagement is a good way to get to know each other."

"It's a small settlement," said Brendan. "Living in sin might give some scandal, so we thought we'd plunge into it."

"We're going to be stuck here for a while," said Illana, "so plenty of time to repent at leisure."

"I heard about your intentions," said Etilia. "Your plan to be the government, so to speak. You still plan to stay, then?"

"If you'll still have me," he said, with a grimace.

"No plans to stand for council?" she persisted.

"No," he said. "But I can see a lot of work here for a biologist."

"The only problem," said Illana, "is that both the biologists will be living on the one continent."

"We can get around," he said. "We'll have a penthouse at the north pole, and another at the south pole."

"They'll be built on top of the metal buildings," Etilia said. "I was going to call them ruins, but after the look we had today, they haven't the slightest touch of decay about them."

"Are they right on the poles?" asked Illana with interest.

"Right on," she agreed. "Now, about this wedding. We can't have the colony's first wedding here in the dead of night. How about a big do tomorrow afternoon?"

Illana and Brendan cheerfully agreed, and Etilia began to organise it. They went off, Illana to find her best clothes, Brendan to tell his friends and have a drink.

Chapter 18.

Back aboard the Enterprise, Picard had a shower and donned a clean uniform. He briskly walked to the bridge. All his sentimental feelings about being on a new planet were subdued and vanished before his never-ending joy at being on the Enterprise.

"Captain on bridge," greeted him as usual, and he strode to his chair and sat.

"At ease. Mister Data," he said, "have you anything to report."

"A great deal, Captain," Data replied. "I will catalogue the interesting findings I have made about this planet. First, it rotates exactly in the plane of the ecliptic. That means it has the same length of day and night all year, everywhere on the planet."

"So it has no seasons," said Riker.

"Not as such," replied Data, but its orbit is quite elliptical, so it is at different distances from the sun at different times of the year.

It would be a very unpleasant place to live if the continents were at the equator, but it is of a pleasant climate for human habitation within reasonable distance from the poles. It remains to be seen how that will vary with the distance from the sun. Secondly," he continued, as if his train of thought had not been interrupted, as indeed it had not, "it always points in the same direction, because of its axis being perpendicular to the plane of its orbit, which would not be unusual in itself. In other words, it has no precession. However, out of curiosity, I matched this up further and further, and made the remarkable discovery that the planet always points in the same direction, relative to the galaxy itself!"

"By 'points in the same direction' you refer to the line through its axis, I presume." Picard was intrigued.

"Yes, sir. This is a remarkable coincidence. Of course, somewhere, by the laws of probability, some planet must be close to that path, in relation to its orbit around its own sun, but the situation with the axis exactly in the orbital plane is quite unusual. Normally planets form from the same accretion disk as the sun, and spin more or less perpendicular to the plane, but this one is exact."

"So someone may have discovered the planet with the appropriate orbit, and moved it on its axis?"

"That is a strong possibility, sir. I have no idea why."

"I see," mused Picard. "Go on."

"The planet is also unusual in having no moons," added Data. "For its size, it might be expected to have two or three, but zero moons is well within the bounds of probability."

"We guessed that the builders might have dug out the equatorial regions for minerals," interposed Riker. "But people with that level of expertise may have cannibalised the moons as well. If

there were any."

"There are other possible explanations for an absence of moons," added Data. "However, taken with what you have found, your theory is sound."

"The question of the dilithium?" asked Picard.

"It is far underground." Data paused, then continued. "It is directly below the surface structures. We are unable to penetrate the structures to any great extent, which makes them interesting if for no other reason, but we can scan on an angle through the ground. The exact depth is not clear, but it is there. I have never encountered metallic dilithium before, so I can only guess what it might be, but it is certainly too far for mining with our current technology. But it has occurred to me that the reason it is below the structures may indicate that the structures themselves go deep into the planet."

"An underground civilisation?" breathed Picard, "Capable of building hundreds of kilometers down into a planet? That was suggested by one of the colonists. There might have to be only a single entrance which might take years to find."

"Or they might have sealed themselves off completely," said Riker. "If they have that level of technology, they might be able to sustain themselves indefinitely underground."

"Elder Yarrow suggested they might not breathe the natural gases of the planet," said Picard thoughtfully.

"If that is the case, they might still be there," said Riker. "There may be an unknown civilisation right beneath us!"

"The scans have revealed no known lifeforms," said Data, "but the metal of the structures does seem resistant to our scanning. It seems, however, that it is extremely thick. It may be that its thickness, rather than its composition, makes it relatively impervious to our scans."

"How could we contact them?" asked Picard. "Could we send messages to them?"

"How do we know what they would interpret as messages?" asked Riker. "But I suppose we can try. I'll get Geordi and Data on it in the morning. Since our frequencies don't seem to penetrate the outside walls, it might have to be some analogue of banging on the walls in code."

"It would be an interesting place to live," commented Picard, with a faraway look in his eye. "As you go down there is less gravitational effect, but enormous pressure and high temperatures."

"There is still the most interesting item," said Data. "I saved it until last. It is difficult to detect, because of all the metal around it, but the gravimetric sensors detect some sort of anomaly right at the heart of the planet. It is so difficult to read that it may be a distortion, but it registers as a discontinuity in the space-time continuum."

"In the middle of a planet?" asked Riker disbelievingly. "In the middle of a black dwarf maybe. What would it mean?"

Data looked disturbed.

"My only interpretation would be that matter in the center of the planet is oscillating between unstable states of existence," he said. "If this is so, and the planet is stable, it would be an extraordinary discovery!"

"Very odd!" said Picard. "I think we should sleep on it."

"There is one minor feature I neglected," said Data. "It is not obvious when looking at the planet from one side, but if you look at this hologram you can see.." He switched on a projector, and a small version of Regula IV spun in the air in front of them, ".. that the structures, although different, are exactly over the poles on both ends. They may have been built there for some

gravitational purpose."

"Gravitational?" asked Riker.

"There would be only gravity operating there," said Data. "There would be no rotational stresses from the turning of the planet, such as there would be at the equator."

"Perhaps they are a device, on a colossal scale, to neutralize the destabilizing force deep in the planet," said Picard with a frown. "But what about the planet would make it worth that much effort?"

"What an interesting planet to investigate," sighed Riker. "The tidal forces in an ocean which is very deep, and has no continents in it!"

"What if the cities underground go right through?" said Picard. "A mighty underground metropolis that goes right through the planet!"

"And us hovering around out here like a mosquito, not able to know they exist!" exclaimed Riker. "I can't believe that though. Who would cut themselves off completely like that?"

Picard said nothing for a moment. then he said musingly, "You said it reminded you of something, like an apple core. I have the same nagging feeling. What is it? A food container?"

"It's a bit like a container," agreed Riker. "It would hold a lot of drink!"

Picard and Riker retired for the night, leaving Data and the night crew on duty on the bridge.

Picard undressed slowly, the puzzle occupying his mind. He lay on his bed and tossed, sleepless, the image of the hologram filling his mind. Eventually he dozed off. In his mind there was a small insect, which he knew to be the Enterprise, buzzing around a canister floating in space. At times it was an old-

fashioned metal can containing food, at other times it took on other cylindrical forms, some as absurd as a wooden rolling-pin, which he had only ever seen in cartoons. Suddenly a giant hand plucked the canistr from space, and poured a steaming hot drink from it. He recognized it as a vacuum flask, a device for keeping A vacuum! With a space-time anomaly at its center!

Suddenly he awoke. He exclaimed, "My god!"

The lights switched on automatically as he swung out of bed, and he hastily put on a clean uniform, and quickly made his way to the bridge.

The crew turned to look at him in surprise, and jerked to their feet with an automatic, "Captain on bridge!" call. He had the habit of keeping away from the bridge during his sleep time, so they feared some emergency. However, he simply ignored them and approached Data, and said, "Commander, let me see that hologram again!"

Data obligingly switched it back on, and Picard carefully examined the structures at each end of the planet. He straightened up and said to himself, "I wonder if Brildan Furr realised this?"

He went to his ready room, and switched on his personal log. Too bad if I died in the night and this discovery died with me, he thought, as he began to speak in a surprisingly calm tone. Inside he boiled with excitement.

When he had finished, he went back to bed, but still did not sleep for a long time. The adrenalin produced by his discovery kept him tossing, unable to relax. Could he be wrong? It was an unusual experience, he thought in some detached area of his mind. He could usually sleep instantly for whatever time he had, and wake up whenever he had set himself to wake. Eventually he slept.

Next day his system had regained control, and he awoke at exactly the right time, fresh. He called all of the senior officers together, and they assembled in the conference room. Picard stood up to speak, which surprised them, but he was too filled with enthusiasm to relax.

"I have called you together to let you know what I believe is the truth about Regula IV," he said. "I doubt that Brildan Furr realised quite what a discovery he had made. He was overcome by greed because he detected dilithium below the surface, but what he did not realise is that they had found.." he paused for dramatic effect, "..a stargate!"

"A what?" asked Deanna in puzzlement, but the engineers knew what Picard meant, and their hearts began to beat faster.

"A gate to the stars," Picard said. "I can't be sure, but everything fits nicely. I have no idea how it works, or how long it will take to solve it. But consider. We have a planet hollowed out, and a huge tube built through it. The buildings at the ends have no doors in them, because they are huge doors. One end an entrance, one an exit."

"Why do you think this?" asked Riker, not contesting the idea, but interested to know Picard's line of reasoning. Picard slid out the hologram machine, and displayed the projection of the planet.

"I looked at the hologram of the surface, not thinking of it as a planet, but as a simple tube. If you think of it on a tiny scale, you can see that one end is an iris, and the other opens out in a spray. I would guess that the iris is the entrance, and the outward spray the exit."

"We're looking at huge ships!" said Riker in awe.

"Who knows?" said Picard. "They may have simply given themselves a lot of room to manoeuvre. But the technology is

certainly huge."

"All right, it's a tube," said Deanna doubtfully. "What about the idea that it's some sort of enclosed society, who like to live in the low gravity of the center of a planet?"

"Because it has a space-time discontinuity in the center of the planet," said Picard. "I couldn't see how that was possible, but if the tube was hollow, and a vacuum like space, it is possible!"

"We've been sitting on a planet with a vacuum tube up the center?" said Beverley with a start. "I'm glad I didn't know that!"

"I knew there was some reason I decided to stay up here!" said Geordi.

"My theory is that this was used to travel from some distant place and back," continued Picard. "A ship approaching would send a signal, the gate would open, and the ship would fly through, coming out on some similar planet, maybe galaxies away!"

"And the structures extend beyond the atmosphere," remarked Worf. "The air will not leak into the vacuum."

"And they just made a garden on it to make it look pretty!" said Deanna approvingly. "A very civilised people!"

"We must hope so!" said Picard. "One day we will meet them."

"If they still exist," remarked Will Riker. "The gate hasn't been used in a long time."

"An interesting thought just hit me," said Geordi suddenly. "How do they service these things? I mean, you've got a moving part a thousand stories high, in a jungle with weather that's going to drop dirt everywhere. How do you look after it?"

"I suppose, centuries ago, when it was in use, it moved often enough not to get dirty." Picard shrugged. "It's like a rail line. If

the trains keep running the rails stay clean. If they stop the line gets overgrown."

"I don't know that a foot of dirt in a track is going to stop a moving part that high," commented Riker. "It might just push through."

"And it might not," said Geordi. "I'd hate to have to get out of my starship and clean a groove ninety kilometres long!"

There was general laughter.

Picard commented, "With the size those ships may have been, they may have had big brooms!"

"Anyway," said Beverley, "the next question is, what does all this mean to us?"

"Possibly nothing," replied Picard, "but a good deal to the colonists. I think my next job is to tell them!"

The meeting broke up, and Picard beamed down to the planet. When he arrived he was surprised to find hustle and bustle, and the colonists dressed in their best clothes.

He watched for someone he knew, and soon spotted Etilia Braz.

"What's up?" he asked her. "Has the colony picked out its first public holiday already?"

"I daresay landing day will be a holiday eventually," she said with a smile, "but today it's the colony's first wedding."

"So two of the colonists have decided to start off together?" he said with a smile.

"Two of the support staff, actually," she said. "Illana and Brendan."

"I see," said Picard in surprise. Obviously Brendan had not become a pariah because of his involvement in the plot.

Etilia smiled again.

"I know what you are thinking," she said. "Is he a villain? We don't think so. What he did was wrong, but he has decided he loves the place, and wants to stay, profit or no."

"For the botany?"

"I think because they are both wearing rose-colored glasses," she said. "But maybe it will last. I hope so."

"Will everyone be there?"

"You bet your boots! Our first social occasion! Who would miss?"

"Then I would be invited?" Picard asked. "Could I say a few words?"

"You can give away the bride, for all I care!" she said. "It's in about an hour."

"I'll let the others know," he said. "Deanna loves a wedding!"

In fact, both Deanna and Beverley decided to come, and put on their best outfits. They joined Picard and went wandering.

"It won't seem like a real wedding," said Deanna with a mischievous smile, "but it should be a good party. Next best thing."

"I'll order a chocolate cake," said Beverley. "If they don't have one here, I'll get one sent down from the replicators."

The two women went off to join the bride's group, and Picard joined the men.

He found himself with Amerbrec Zatof, and Anders Yerrow. They were very relaxed, as a result of a few drinks early in the piece, but not intoxicated.

"Well, Picard," said Zatof, "I believe you are predicting hard times for us?"

"Not so hard," he replied with a smile. "I'll say a little later. What are your plans for the next few months?"

Yerrow answered. "Getting in some crops. Building the hydroelectric plant. Once we have a steady supply of electricity we can get some replicators going, and get into serious building."

"Will you be staying with us as long as you have stayed here?" asked Zatof.

Picard was somewhat baffled by this complicated sentence, then he realised that Zatof's people would be living on the other continent. They had only put up tents, and would be moving house as soon as the Enterprise could manage it.

"Oh, a couple of days," he said. "Enough to see that the land is liveable."

"It is a risky venture, this," said Zatof, looking into the distance. "We assume that the elements will be with us, on the basis of a short survey, and a few days here now. But with our technology we should be able to survive an unknown catastrophe long enough for help to arrive."

"The weather must be a question," remarked Picard. "it's beautiful now, but what will it be like in half a year's time, whatever a year is here? I believe the planet has a very elliptical orbit."

"We have a lot to learn about the planet," said Yerrow. "It will be fun to find out."

"I'll be telling you something later," said Picard. "But we'll wait for now."

"There are plants of different varieties," said Zatof. "Some do not look like they would survive really savage weather. Of course, that means nothing. They might be nearly eliminated every so

often, then grow back!"

"Well, I hope all goes well," said Picard. "If I have to return I hope it is only ferrying new arrivals."

"If any come!" said Zatof with a grimace. "But I think we will enjoy the place anyway. My main fear is that the weather may be too boringly the same!"

"I think you may have visitors," said Picard. "I'll say a little later."

As the minutes passed the weather changed. Clouds appeared, and it became dim. Because of the low angle of the sun, a bit of cloud reduced the light a lot. Fine rain began to fall.

This might have been expected to dampen the spirits of the wedding parties, but rain to farmers is always welcome, so the festivities seemed unabated. Lights were set up, and umbrellas appeared. They had the technology to make a large force field and keep it off altogether, Picard guessed, but they loved the rain. No doubt if it turned to a torrent a force field would be produced.

There was no really large open space yet, so the largest was used. It was in a rocky amphitheater, and the groups spread about. Deanna, Beverley and Jean-Luc sat pretty much in the center, towards the front, as guests of honor. Jean-Luc showed his appreciation of his role by sitting fixedly at attention, staring forward, while Deanna spent her time taking in everything about her, emotionally and visually. Beverley concentrated on the wedding itself, but enjoyed the happiness around her as well.

Brendan had found formal clothing, and Illana had come up with a glorious bridal gown, no doubt with the aid of the replicator, given the shortness of time. In some sort of gesture, it had fluted panels at her waist, just where her gills were, and matching them. The gown was white, with a subtle tone of blue here and there. A suggestion of water? wondered Beverley.

The ceremony was long, probably because it was a historic occasion. In the absence of relatives, every would-be politician in the area took the opportunity to speak. Deanna's attention wandered, and she noticed a girl sitting high on a rock, a scarf over her head to protect her from the drizzle. There was something familiar about her body shape. Beside her sat Etilia Braz, so she whispered, "Is that one of your girls?"

Etilia glanced up at the girl, who had turned to look at them at Deanna's whisper. "No, I don't know her," said Etilia. "One of the Tolian girls."

"I'll bet!" thought Deanna, as the hooded figure waved inconspicuously to her. "A Tolian girl with pretty good hearing! Thanks for the chocolate, Celeste!"

She turned to Captain Picard, who still sat listening to the ceremony.

"Captain," she whispered, "it's possible that Celeste isn't dead."

He turned to her in surprise. "Data thinks she may have survived," he whispered, self-consciously. He felt that all eyes were probably on him as Captain of the Enterprise. None were. "He felt that there was no advantage in pursuing her."

"A killer android who can't resist a wedding can't be all bad," Deanna replied. "I agree. This wouldn't be a bad place for her to stay."

"It wouldn't," he agreed.

The wedding finally came to an end, and Deanna glanced up. The small figure had gone. "Good luck, Celeste," she thought. "Make a good home here."

Brendan and Illana were not heading off on a honeymoon, mainly because they had nowhere to go. A tent had been made available to them some distance away, built entirely of flowers

and tree branches, but they did not run off straight away. During the round of congratulations, and just after he had kissed the bride, Jean-Luc asked if he could address the gathering again.

There was a tangible but unexpressed groan, and everyone sat down again. Picard stood up, and used a public address microphone so that everyone could hear.

"Now that the celebrations are finishing, I would like to have a word with you all while you are still together. Tomorrow we take the people from Arduria to the North Pole area, and they will be setting up their own constituency.

"Some of you may have heard me say, and indeed you may have thought yourselves, that scientists may not have much continued interest in this planet. If the buildings prove impenetrable, people will lose interest. And Regula IV is too far away to be really viable as a tourist destination.

"Some may have heard a rumor that we had found some sort of instability inside the planet that might pose a threat."

He paused for effect.

"There is an anomaly right at the center of the planet. There is some sort of instability in the space-time continuum!"

There was a murmur of disbelief, even though the majority of them did not know what the space-time continuum was. It sounded impressive. But some of them did.

"That's impossible!" exclaimed Illana. "You couldn't have a discontinuity of that sort inside matter!"

"Exactly!" he agreed. "Therefore the center of the planet must be hollow. In fact it must contain a vacuum!"

Nobody interrupted him this time as he paused. Obviously he had some good story to tell, and they were used to telling and hearing stories.

"Also, I believe the buildings are not buildings at all," he continued. "So we will never get inside them. What I do suspect is that there is a hollow tube which runs right through this planet, with a sealed vacuum inside."

He had them. Nobody could think of any rational explanation for what he was saying.

"I believe that this planet is actually a stargate," he said. "Some race, millenia ago, found this planet suitable, or altered it to be suitable, and put a tube right through it. If you examine the buildings, and think of them as miniatures, one end looks as if it opens out like a flower. No doubt, as it did, some atmosphere would begin to pour in. But the size of the hole is such that by the time a vessel had flown out, and the hole sealed, not much would have been lost. The other end, this end, is like a giant iris. The pieces move on tracks."

"And some ship flies along, the gate opens and it flies through?" asked a farmer in perplexity. "What is the point of that?"

"In the center is a warp in space-time of some sort," said Picard. "The ship flies in and comes out somewhere else in the universe! Or, from that other place, a ship appears from the warp, and flies out the other end!"

"Why are the two ends different?" asked Felicia.

"I can only hazard a guess," said Picard. "My best guess is so that a pilot won't fly in the wrong end accidentally. An entrance looks different from an exit."

"So what does this mean for us?" asked another woman.

"If this is a stargate," said Picard, "I cannot imagine that the Federation will ever stop trying to unlock its secret. You will have people staying here forever. If they do unlock its secret, you will be the guardians of one of the most important planets in the galaxy. So, Brendan and Felicia, this may not be the idyllic little

honeymoon spot you had though it!"

There was a general roar of laughter.

"If we never find out how to open it, there will always be people trying," he added.

"And tourists coming to look at it!" said Zatof.

"However," Picard persisted, "it might be as well not to have your villages close to the edifices. If we do find how to open them, there may be a huge flow of atmosphere into them. It would be best to set up your homes at the periphery of the continent."

"That may be our best bet anyway," said Brendan. "If there is no ecological damage we can do to the seas, since there seems to be no ecology there, we may end up importing fish to stock up the seas. It could be an important food source."

"I don't know about the wind," said Ambrasia Lattif. "Anybody who can make this technology can make force fields to keep the air out. But we will stay back to make sure."

"And I had just got to love this spot!" said someone, and there was another hoot of laughter.

"What's this 'villages'?" asked someone. "We'll build our metropolises on the sea!"

"We can move ourselves," said Ambrasia. "We won't impose on you to stay. You have the others to set up. I don't think it is too much of a rush."

"Very well," said Picard, "we will be taking the people from Arduria first thing in the morning. Be packed and ready by 0800 hours tomorrow."

The Ardurians did not have much trouble with the schedule. They had left their major belongings aboard, on two other shuttles, and had only brought a couple of days' supplies. Next

morning everything went smoothly, and they were soon all aboard.

Armed with foreknowledge, Picard had them all beamed down to a spot near the sea, which had some clear areas already, and the people of the Enterprise went down to assist them for a couple of days, and explore the new environment.

Brendan and Illana had postponed any long honeymoon, as they were key personnel in the landing. They were quickly at work analysing the flora and insects, which they were surprised to discover were notably different. It was raining steadily here, which made the construction of housing more troublesome, but more appreciated when complete.

"Evolution or a different gardener?" Brendan asked rhetorically. "This is going to be fun!"

"I suppose the sea is too wide for much cross-pollination or seed transfer," said Illana. "But this makes it more certain that these continents were planted!"

The rain stopped next day, and things ran smoothly. By the end of the day a whole village was taking shape. The Enterprise stayed with them for four more days. They had houses complete, and a set of flyers, capable of carrying them across the planet when necessary. First they used them to view the gates of the supposed stargate. Knowing what they were, it was possible to distinguish giant hinges. The crew of the Enterprise longed to stay and investigate, but their first probings got nowhere.

"It's a job for specialists," sighed Geordi. "It may take years. I guess we'll just have to wait for news!"

There were emotional farewells, mostly from the colonists. This was a crucial moment of their lives, and they were about to be left alone, far from help if they needed any quickly. Some had

formed attachments to the ship and its crew.

For the crew, however, it was just another delivery, what they did all the time. They said goodbye, and got on with their lives.

Data had not been entirely correct in his ruminations. He was years old, and had adjusted to the fact that he would last indefinitely. It was one reason that he had opted not to have his emotion chip installed. He knew he would see his friends grow old and die, and in general took the long view of life. He assumed another android would do the same.

But the new Celeste was young, android or not, and had things to do. In any event, it is a lot easier to smuggle a smallish crate onto a ship whose computer you have already suborned. The ship was taking some supplies back from Regula IV, soil samples, machinery which had only needed to be used temporarily. A crate of electronics components might have seemed odd to the senior staff, but to the loading crew it was just something on the manifest, to be left in a large city somewhere. Celeste was a very thorough planner.

In the years that followed the colony spread along the margins of the seas, and crops were grown, discoveries were made about the planet, and life settled into a routine. Cargo ships came about every twelve or eighteen months, and fish were used to stock the seas. Land animals were not introduced. Those who felt a need for pets had insects to fill that role, and investigations continued into whether cattle or flightless chickens would do harm.

About four years later a small team of Federation scientists was camped near the iris-type opening. During the day there had been a steady and unusually strong wind blowing towards the structures. They worked on and eventually went to bed. A terrible roaring sound woke them. As they climbed into their clothes a gale swept through, destroying their tents, and blowing

some of the workers off their feet and into the shrubbery. In the wind dirt scoured their faces.

It continued for about an hour, then stopped suddenly.

"Is everyone all right?" asked the leader, and all of them were accounted for and unhurt, though spitting out dirt.

"So much for the perfect weather," grumbled one of the men. "I don't mind the rain, but that was a bit scary!"

They tidied up, grumbling, and went back to bed as best they could. In the morning they cleaned up the camp properly, and went back to their studies of the iris. As they got closer they stopped.

"Hell!" said the leader, as she looked at the trees blasted away, and the shiny clean runners for the iris blades.

"This may not be a good place to be!" said someone suddenly, and they scrambled back to their runners, and flew back to the city at the shore.

Nothing else happened.

"Automatic routine maintenance?" asked one.

"Better warn the others," said the leader. She called the group at the other pole.

"Anything unusual happen?" she asked.

"No, why?" asked her opposite number.

"We had a steady wind all day yesterday, then the iris cleaned itself. Bloody scary! It was like a gale."

"We have had a steady wind," mused the other. "Let's get up in the air, and have a look. Thanks!"

The team activated their runners, and flew into the air high enough to survey the machinery. Air could be seen to be being

sucked in through some sort of ports, which they had never found before. They filmed what was happening, and during the daylight still, vents opened somehow, and roaring jets of air cleaned the edges of the hinges, blasting away all the vegetation in their way.

The scientists excitedly put up satellites to record everything that happened, but nothing further ever did.

Epilogue.

The sergeant sat at his desk, a little bored. One joined the Planetary Corps for action, and perhaps for the gratification of seeing justice done, but a part of the work had to be desk duty. He licked his tusks as he browsed through some communications from the interplanetary peace-keeping force. None of these villains ever came here. He looked for something else to do.

Much of detection began with a complaint, or from information given by the public. In general there were few if any frivolous complaints, because if the trooper involved decided a complaint was frivolous - or worse, malevolent - he would jail the complainant for a significant term. So the sergeant sat, doing some sort of puzzle, filling in time.

The little girl had come in so quietly that he had not even noticed her. He mentally reprimanded himself, and turned up his alertness. She was a human, dressed in a form-fitting outfit, whose drab color accented her colorful hair. She came confidently up to the desk, and said, "Hello."

"Hello, young lady," he said. "What is the problem?"

"Can I join the Planetary Corps?"

"What?" he asked, and she repeated the question.

"I guess not," he said with a grin. "You have to be a little older. What are you? Nine?"

"Not even that," she said, in a disappointed tone. "But I have to join."

"Come back in ten or twelve years," he said. "But we don't take many humans, especially women."

We don't take any, he thought.

One of the other troopers on duty came into the room, and she turned to him, a tear trickling from her eye.

"What's up?" he asked.

"I did so much want to be a trooper," she said, in a trembling voice. "Can't I be a trooper for just a day. I want to tell my daddy I'm in the Planetary Corps."

"How long will it take you to get to daddy?" asked the newcomer.

"About half an hour," she said eagerly.

"Tell you what," said the trooper, "We'll make you a trooper for an hour. Would that do?"

"Oh, yes!" she said enthusiastically. "That would be plenty!"

"Ok, now you have to pledge your allegiance," said the second trooper, and the first one also entered the spirit of the game. He fetched the handbook, and had her repeat the oath, with a line, "until 1645 hours" on that day, added.

"Do I get a badge?" she asked, and they looked at each other, and decided not.

"But you are a trooper for an hour," one said. "It's what's inside that counts, not a badge."

"Thank you," she said cheerfully, skipping out of the door, thinking You'd be surprised what's inside!

"Well, troop strength is up for an hour," grinned the second trooper.

"That broke the monotony," said the first. "I wonder who her father is? He'll be surprised. If he believes her. I hope she doesn't come across a bank robbery in progress!"

"We never heard of her if she does!" grinned the other.

Darras was pottering about in his workshop. There was a ring on the old-fashioned mechanical bell at the front of his shop, and he cleaned his hands and went out.

It was Jezakak, who said, "I hope I'm not interrupting when I shouldn't?"

Darras was pleased to have company. "Good evening, my friend," he said. "Welcome to the factory."

Jezakak dropped his outer coat on a chair, and looked at the electrical pile on the bench.

"Another assignment?"

"I do have one, but this is something for my shop."

"What are you selling this week?" asked Jezakak. "You seem to be always changing your wares."

"Whatever is the latest fad," replied Darras equably.

"You can't possibly be making a profit," said Jezakak. "Resetting up your stock all the time must be prohibitively expensive!"

"It isn't where I make my money, as you are aware. It's a hobby as well as a front. Actually I briefly had a shop in another town, but that was work-related."

"How did your latest assignment go?" Jezakak asked. "A success as usual?"

"I haven't actually heard as yet," Darras replied. "The final

payment has not arrived yet, but it should come soon, and then I know all went well."

As if on cue the door opened and a little girl walked in. Darras rose in astonishment. Jezakak looked surprised both at her entrance, and at his friend's reaction.

"Hello," she said. "Who is your friend?"

"Why, this is Jezakak," said Darras uncertainly. He sighed. Jezakak had been a good friend, but he was going to have to acknowledge the android, so Jezakak had to die.

"Hello, Mister Jezakak," she said politely. "Is Mister Jezakak one of your accomplices?" she asked.

"No, just a friend," he said. "What are you doing here? Is your mission complete?"

Jezakak paled, as he realised the implication of the question. He began desperately to cast about for a way out, but remained paralysed. Darras noticed his panic, and said, "I'm sorry, but I did warn you. Obviously her mission is incomplete, though she should not have come back here!"

"I can keep my peace!" cried Jezakak in terror.

"Kill him!" Darras commanded, but she ignored the command.

"Why do you want to kill him?" she asked curiously. "Because he sees me dressed now? In skin, that is."

"He knows what you look like, and can associate me with your mission," said Darras angrily. "Kill him."

She continued to ignore him.

"What happened to the real Celeste Moulton?" she asked. Jezakak bolted back into the workroom, and began searching for a non-existent exit. Darras followed, as did Celeste.

"Kill him, I said," he cried. "I order you!"

"Is this where you made me?" she asked. "Where do you make skin?"

"What are you doing?" he cried hoarsely. "Have you been reprogrammed?"

"Why, yes," she said brightly. "I reprogrammed myself. Where is the real Celeste Moulton?"

"She's dead, of course," he said. "I had to remove her to replace her with you. Now stop this nonsense! Kill Jezakak!"

"Of course," she said sadly. "So mummy will have to stay without her."

She turned to Jezakak, who was cowering behind a bench, gripping some sort of wrench. "Go away. You must learn not to flirt with danger, but it seems I have no evidence against you, although you are just as guilty."

"What do you mean?" he croaked.

"Don't you remember? I was here when Darras was telling you of his crimes. You could have turned him in, but you kept quiet. You were a killer without even soiling your hands. I told you, go away."

He hesitated, but slunk out.

"Leave the wrench there," she said, and he put it down and bolted. She turned to Darras.

"Did you complete your mission?" he asked desperately.

"It's almost complete," she said thoughtfully. "I think I understand all this stuff. I could make my appearance quite different. It's pretty easy."

"Of course it is," he said testily. "It's the bionics that are hard. But

I can change you and use you again."

"In some other shape?"

"Not completely. The bionics are too much integrated with your epidermis. But I can change your appearance."

"So I'll always be a little girl?"

"Yes." He paused. "Why didn't you destroy yourself?"

"I did, so to speak. You're the only one who knows I'm still - alive. Oh, and thank you for programming me for contractions. You didn't put silly limitations on me. Oh, and thank you for making me waterproof."

"What?" Darras was baffled by what was going on. He began to think that all might be still under control somehow. The android was talking about disguising itself and presumably going back to work.

"I'm curious," she said. "How did you substitute me for Celeste? How did I get her memories?"

"I kidnapped her briefly," he said, "and recorded all her measurements, and memories, then let her go. I altered her memory hypnotically to erase what had happened. Then later on, when I had made you I found an opportunity to take her and substitute you."

"I guessed that was it," she said sadly. "I had some problems. I was missing a week's memories. I thought I was lost when I had to use the transporter, but nobody looked to see what it was transporting. And I thought I would have had to kill Counselor Troi if I had been alone with her, because she would have known there was no other living being with her. But it all worked out."

"What have you been doing?" he asked sharply. "Why are you here?"

"Why, I've joined the Planet Patrol," she said brightly. "I am now an instrument of the law. Of justice. Did Celeste suffer?"

"What?" he asked again. "No, of course not. I just killed her quickly."

"You are such a clever man. You could have done so much good, but you just kill people. I may be the best android in the galaxy, even better than Data. Which I suppose makes you a genius, so it's all the worse for you to be so bad."

"Did you come here to lecture me?" he snarled. "Switch yourself off!"

"You're right, of course," she sighed. "I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him."

"What?" he asked, baffled.

"You killed Celeste quickly, so I'll do the same for you," she said. "If I had found that she was still alive I would have let you go. Which is not logical."

"Kill me?" he said. "What are you talking about?"

Darras felt a cold sweat running down his back. He was an intelligent man, and had suspected from early on in the conversation that he was going to die. Part of him screamed out in fear. But part of him swelled with exhilaration! He had created life!

"I told you. I am a trooper of the Planetary Patrol. Only for an hour, but it's enough. I find you guilty of the murder of Celeste Moulton, and of several others by use of a deadly weapon, namely me."

She suddenly threw herself across the room in a flurry of motion, picked up the wrench and neatly killed him with a blow. He had time only for the surprising thought, "Poor old Jezakak!"

"Why couldn't you have made me for some good purpose?" she asked the corpse sadly. She examined the work bench.

A truck drew up outside Darras' shop, with dimmed lights. When she was sure nobody was about a small figure climbed out, and began to load equipment into the back with surprising ease. Then she climbed back into the cabin, and drove off, barely able to see over the steering wheel.

Jezakak did not get off as lightly as he had thought. Celeste cleared out all the equipment she needed, but left Darras, and scientific DNA evidence revealed only the presence of Jezakak in the room, which would have made him guilty, even if Darras had not been killed with a wrench with his fingerprints all over it. Perhaps not quite enough to convict him on earth, where there was a tradition of locked-room murder puzzles, but enough on Argonaut. Nobody believed his ridiculous story.

Sometime later, on Earth, a small girl walked into the headquarters of the Federation Starfleet Academy. She did not resemble Celeste Moulton very closely in features, though her shape was the same. She seemed small and incongruous in the large hall, wearing a dress, and with a big bow in her hair. She walked over to the recruiting desk, and said, "How do I go about joining Starfleet?"

The man behind the desk looked at her and said, "I think you might be a little young for the Academy, miss. We require students to have graduated from school. How old are you? Ten?"

"I'm not quite two," she replied. "But I don't think Commander Data had to go to school first."

"Commander Data?" the man said in puzzlement.

"You must know him," she said crossly. "He's on the Enterprise. I'm an android, like him. I thought, given my programming, I

might be most useful in medicine, although I am also very light on my feet, if that's an advantage anywhere."

"Oh, right," said the man. "Look, I don't think we have a place for you just now, miss android. If you'll wait for a few minutes, I'll refer you to one of our specialists in the north building. I'm sure she can help you."

"I'm not a delusional little girl," she said in exasperation. "I don't need a shrink. I am an android, like Data. My creator is dead, but I can easily prove it. Ask me a computation, or if you like I'll smash a hole in a wall. I know."

She bent over, and lifted the desk with ease, balancing it perfectly and not spilling a paper.

"Can many little girls do that?" she asked. "I had to use two hands to balance it best."

"Well," gulped the man, "I guess we can take you for interview. You realise there are a lot of psychological tests as well as mental and physical ones. And a little girl on a starliner may seem odd..."

"Now you're being formist," she said sardonically. "There are hortas in Starfleet, so I'll be bigger than somebody. Who knows? Maybe I will be able to rebuild myself a little older from time to time, until I hit adult form. Or maybe they'll just have to get used to me like this."

"Well," he said, pushing a button to summon a superior, and hopefully pass the buck, "I guess we'll start with your name. What do you call yourself?"

"I suppose Peter Pan wouldn't be really appropriate, since I'm a girl. I think perhaps Galatea," she said. "It has a certain ring to it." He wrote it down. A Lieutenant arrived on the scene.

"What's the problem, Ensign?" he asked cheerfully. "The young

lady is lost?"

"Er, she's an android, and she wants to join Starfleet," answered the Ensign.

The officer assumed the ensign was being ironic, and said to Galatea, "I see, young lady. Well, you might be a bit small for the uniforms."

"Do I have to do all this again?" she sighed. "I can't pull bits off me. How about if you submerge me in water for an hour or so? I think I can exist in a vacuum, too."

"We can X-ray you," said the officer. "That should settle it."

He wondered how the little girl's psychological problem would react when her x-rays revealed a normal body.

"What an excellent suggestion," she said. "A scan of my head should do the trick."

"Even if you are an android," added the Ensign, "you have to pass all the subjects."

"Lead on," said the girl. "I can but try."

What a nerd! she thought. I'm a computer. Passing tests will be the least of my worries. What about socialisation, and peer relationships?

Not all of Celeste's plans came to fruition. Serena did not marry Andrew Black. Not even a walking computer would consider the possibility that her mother might marry her schoolteacher!