

Fire from Heaven

By Nathan Warner

INTRODUCTION: Cadet Rachel Dawson is studying a pre-warp civilization as part of her Senior Project when she uncovers a plot to steal paradise.

“What have we got today?” Rachel asked herself, kneeling down in her Isolation Suit in the waist-high grassland turf to extract a soil sample in an ampoule. Had it not been for her polarizing screen on her helmet’s faceplate, she could not have seen the Tricorder in her hand, nor the sampling equipment. Her suit’s holographic field saw to that. She was cloaked, and for all practical purposes, she wasn’t even in the field.

The lengths we go to ensure non-interference! Rachel thought as she held up the soil sample and repaired the ground to hide any trace she’d been there. The grass scraped noisily against her. It was so dry! She stepped back and a few blades actually crumbled into a fine powder that sifted down through the air.

She scanned the sample carefully and frowned at the readings. The same Fusile products were concentrated here that she had found everywhere else for a dozen kilometers around the Cinchona village. It was as if the very dirt was becoming combustible material. The concentration had nearly doubled overnight.

Where was it coming from? She looked up at the sky. Long, ugly strands of old contrails spread out like dusty cobwebs above her. They were slowly expanding into overlapping nets of condensed vapor. She scanned the near atmosphere above her head.

"It's definitely precipitating from the atmosphere," she muttered, noting the concentration of the same mysterious agent in the air that she'd been reading for a week now. Suddenly, on the horizon, she noticed two faint lines spreading towards her from the east. "More ships!" she gasped, raising her Tricorder to scan them.

At least, they probably were ships. Her Tricorder had yet to pick anything up and even magnified visual scans showed only a shimmering mirage just ahead of the contrail being laid down in the sky. Was it a cloaking device? She'd seen the contrails being laid day and night for a week now – in long grids nearly touching space. And that week had been filled with a growing

alarm that something wasn't right on the ground as well.

Rachel rose from the ground and raced back through the field towards Base Camp, skipping in the lower gravity of Dubium – a small planetoid orbiting a Quasar. Such a thing had been deemed a violation of the laws of Celestial Mechanics by the Vulcan Science Academy up until several years ago, when Dubium had been discovered by a Vulcan survey team. Aside from its orbital mechanics, the Vulcans had cared little for the planet itself, which hosted a small tribe of preindustrial plant gatherers and a rich biosphere of pharmacological plant life. They left such studies to the less “pure” science of the Federation, as they deemed it.

The honor fell to the *U.S.S. Carver*, a fancy new Nova class starship that specialized in scientific reconnaissance missions to worlds that fell under Starfleet's “non-interference” policy, which Dubium certainly did.

That very year, Rachel, who was due to graduate from Starfleet Academy with a specialty in Exobotany (the study of alien plants) had been assigned to the *U.S.S. Carver*, which was hosting a team of four Xenopologists (study of alien peoples), led by Commander Cynthia Crawford. Rachel had wanted to build up her field

experience, and the posting seemed like the perfect opportunity for a Senior Project. While not officially on the team, she was allowed to tag along for her studies. At first Rachel was a bit intimidated as Crawford had an impressive reputation as an innovator in non-intrusive field work.

"Relax, let your hair down once in a while," Crawford had winked at the serious Cadet. "Just make sure you don't get careless - that is an unforgivable sin in this line of work."

Much to her excitement, Rachel had been on the first away team to set up a Base Camp, composed of a large holographic Duck-blind for studying the environment while also maintaining Starfleet's strict policy of non-interference with technologically primitive species. That species, in this case, was a tall reptilian race that had adapted to the low gravity of Dubium. Starfleet had dubbed them the "Cinchona" - after a famed South American medicinal plant. The reason for this was that some researchers postulated that the flora on the planet may have "prevented" the Cinchona from technologically advancing, since all disease, illness, injury, and even discomfort could be successfully treated by a plant-based diet. It certainly helped that the climate of Dubium was perfectly moderated, also. There were only about 89 Cinchona living in one

“village,” partly due to their incredibly slow reproductive rate.

For Rachel, the flora was the only really interesting thing about Dubium. The Cinchona weren't “Sentient” enough for her tastes. They made her wonder where the line of Sentience was, as in her eyes, they had more in common with Tribbles than the Trill!

The first year and a half went smoothly, and Rachel couldn't believe her luck at being stationed in an exotic part of the Galaxy, studying the most fascinating specimens of flora she'd ever come across. But that all changed a month ago when Ensign Graspe contaminated the food supply of the tribe when he accidentally broke a vial of concentrated bacterial agents while taking samples of their communal leaf piles. The incident nearly resulted in the death of an adolescent Cinchona male from food poisoning. The entire Xenopological team was recalled to Starbase 72 for a hearing on the matter and all further studies of the Cinchona were halted until the team's procedure could be reviewed.

As Rachel had not officially been on the Xenopological team, and her focus of study was the plant life, she was asked to stay behind and manage the Duck-blind until the matter could be resolved. The only proscription was

that she could not interact with the vicinity of the Cinchona village.

"Aye, aye, Sir," she had replied, a little too enthusiastically, earning a curious look from Captain Bilson on the viewscreen from Starbase 72.

"Try not to enjoy yourself too much, Cadet," he said with a wry smile. A little flustered she'd been that obvious, Rachel simply nodded. She was just relieved she wouldn't have to deal with the local creatures.

Within two days of the incident, the *U.S.S. Carver* pulled into orbit to pick up Commander Crawford's team. "Don't get too comfortable," Commander Crawford had fondly tapped her on the arm, "and don't you dare touch my rations – they're off limits – especially my piece of Betazoid chocolate birthday cake I've been keeping in Cryo!"

"No worries," Rachel replied impatiently, holding up a couple tubes of protein rations. "I'm all set." Crawford took a last look at Rachel and gave her a motherly hug. "We shouldn't be gone long, but if you need anything..."

"Yes, I know," Rachel interrupted. "I'll just punch up the Comms." It was a little too obvious from her demeanor that she was looking forward to having the place to

herself. She always felt more at home with plants than people, anyways. Crawford smiled knowingly.

And then, in a shimmer, the other four members of her Starfleet “family” were gone.

That had been a little less than a month ago now, and Rachel had been having the time of her life “holding down the fort” on Dubium. She loved that she could let her hair completely down without anyone giving her guff for it, and work a schedule that suited her! She loved sleeping outside in her Isolation Suit under the stars, studying a single strand of Angel-hair grass for hours, and having the entire lab space for her botany studies. She had filled the Duck-blind with potted plants of all varieties, and the floral scents were overpowering – Commander Crawford would never have allowed it while she was there – even the slightest floral scent sent her sneezing.

But then, about a week in, Rachel woke one morning, nestled in the soft grasslands of a forest clearing and looked up at an unusual sky. The light of the morning Quasar caught strange linear clouds stretched like twisted ribbons through the sky. Rachel startled fully awake and peered at them perplexed. “What the...” she whispered to herself. She’d never seen anything like it since she’d been stationed there. The preindustrial sky

had always been a pure, almost effervescent blue at its apex, gently melting into a lulling green on the horizon!

“Perhaps its volcanic?” she wondered, rising from her floral bed. Suddenly, her proximity alert went off – an annoying ascending tone in her right ear. She turned to her right until the tone became audible in her left ear. Something was moving straight towards her. She waited. A few moments later, a dozen or so Cinchona natives spilled out into the clearing in front of her, gazing and pointing vigorously at the sky. Rachel backed out of their way, careful not to make too much sound. Like willow branches, the people’s forearms were as tall as her. Their scaly skin was a pale purple with green speckles, except for their darker faces which were long and narrow – reminding Rachel of the “resurrected” Deinonychus dinosaur she had seen in the travelling Ferengi Zoological Park on Bolarus IX when she was a child. Only, in regards to the Cinchona, they had herbivore teeth, lacked claws or talons, and were sentient beings – or near about, according to the experts. The Cinchona stared up with earnest faces and spoke in almost musical voices, which were much more excitable today than Rachel had ever seen.

One of the younger ones, which the team had fondly referred to as “Drey,” suddenly jabbed his long finger into the air and let out a piercing note. Rachel followed

his direction and then she saw it. A contrail being formed. It was fresh and new – a pure white plume trailing a long thin strand of vapor. It was being laid down by something. Suddenly, she saw another, and another – faint lines of vapor, like spider silk being spun in the atmosphere. This was no volcanic plume in the sky! There were vehicles flying around in the upper atmosphere! But what did it mean? Was it an invasion?

Rachel backed away slowly from the growing crowd of Cinchona, carefully trying to avoid any sounds. When she deemed she was far enough for it, she turned and ran as fast as she could, bounding in long two meter strides through the lower gravity. In a matter of minutes, she'd reached the Duck-blind and passed through the holographic buffer onto the "patio," where a number of recreational chairs were laying under the eaves of the facility. She reached for the keypad by the door and punched in her code as quickly as she could, which was a little too quick, because she earned an unhappy sound from the computer.

"Fine!" she muttered and input it again more carefully. The doors hissed and she scraped passed them before they fully opened. Her holographic emitters popped off instantly and Rachel quickly detached her helmet, which clung to her auburn locks with static as she

desperately tried to slip out of her suit. Tripping out of the last leg, she slid into the Main Control Console and punched it alive. She passed down through a few layers of prompts until she found what she was looking for – the Comm Array. Her finger hovered over it, and she paused.

What if it was just a band of local asteroid miners taking a quick joy-ride through the atmosphere? Or maybe just some high-altitude probes from a passing science vessel? She'd hate to be wrong, but she felt in her gut that the only thing wrong was what was in the sky. She tapped the button.

"This is Cadet Rachel Dawson," she called, breathlessly, "of the United Federation of Planets research facility on Dubium. To the vessels in orbit, what are your intentions on Dubium?"

Silence responded ominously. She could see from the readout that whoever was up there was receiving her. Suddenly, the channel was drowned in a sea of digital static.

"They hung up on me!" Rachel said in disbelief. "Fine, I'll call in the big guns, then." She tapped the Automated Distress Call. Almost instantly, the Computer responded.

“Unable to comply,” it said. Rachel tapped it again, this time harder.

“Unable to comply,” it repeated.

“What!” Rachel cried. “Why not? What is wrong?”

“The transmission is being reflected,” the Computer said matter-of-factly.

“What do you mean, ‘reflected?’” Rachel asked, “What is reflecting it?” Her jet-black eyebrows bent down as low as they could go.

“A broadband subspace inverter is in effect,” the computer replied.

“A broadband...subspace...inverter?” Rachel muttered to herself, trying to remember something, anything, from her Starfleet Muti-spectrum Communication class, knowledge which she hadn’t paid much attention to and certainly hadn’t had to employ yet. She stared down at her feet, as past exams and classes rushed through her mind, searching for anything that made sense. Suddenly, she looked up.

“Do you mean we’re being jammed?” she asked, finally.

“Affirmative,” the Computer answered.
Rachel threw her head back in irritation.

“Why didn’t you just say that?” she yelled, flashing her grey eyes at the emotionless screen.

“Invalid query,” the Computer replied.

Rachel leapt up and stomped to the large window looking out over the main Cinchona village. She peered up at the sky, now a milky white mat of condensate.

“So,” she said, trying to settle the facts in her mind. “I’m voiceless! And no one is going to come looking for me for at least a week.” That was about the time the hearing at Starbase 72 was scheduled to conclude, and the *U.S.S. Carver* was supposed to be back in orbit a few days later. A lot could happen in that time! What was she to do in the meanwhile?

“Try and figure it out, of course” she replied to herself. Over the next few days, Rachel took constant scans of the sky with her Tricorder during the daylight hours, making holographic recordings of the activity and her experiences. In the evenings, she reviewed her data, looking for anything to help explain what was happening up there.

“If only I had a shuttle!” she sighed.

In the village below, the Cinchona’s hysteria had settled down a bit, but that calm wouldn’t last long. Five days into the phenomenon, Rachel woke to agitated sounds outside the Duck-blind. She strode to the window and looked down on the village. She’d never seen so much commotion! Some younger Cinchona were bringing leaves and grasses to the communal pile under the observance of the Elders of the Tribe. But, they had begun gesticulating and pointing in aggressive tones to the pile, which prompted the Elders to carefully examine the plants. Rachel wasn’t an expert, but she thought their demeanor suggested concern.

She was curious to know what about the plants was causing their distress. They looked like specimens of the common Misweed that she’d first catalogued when she arrived on Dubium. Quickly donning her suit, she set out carefully from the back of the Duck-blind. A quick glance up showed that the milky haze had not left the sky, but now some strange tufts of cloud were dropping out below the contrails – almost like limbs or segments of contrails that were slowly precipitating out of the Stratosphere. She’d never seen anything like it. It was unnatural and a little disturbing.

Swiftly, Rachel worked her way to the outer edge of the village. Her proximity alert was already going off. "You pipe down, my friend!" she sighed, reducing her suit's sensitivity from 20 meters to 4. Then, cautiously, she crept forward to the stand of tropical trees forming the back of the Elders' "bench" of judgement – basically a fallen log butting up against the trees that spread out like a fan behind them. This was as close as she could risk getting to the growing communal pile in the center of the village.

She drew out her tricorder and began scanning the pile from behind the Elders. Suddenly a great cry went up. Rachel shut her Tricorder and crouched in the shadows. Had her suit failed? Had they heard something?

She peered out and breathed a sigh of relief. The natives were all moving together out of the village towards the great wooded region to the south. What were they up to? She had no idea, but it had given her a window. Rachel rose and scanned the vicinity. No one was left.

"Don't mind if I do," she said, stepping out from behind the bench into the open. The grass huts scattered around were woven with little skill, appearing little different from the communal piles of vegetation meant to be food.

“A simplistic sensibility,” Rachel smiled. She honestly had more interest in the botany of the grass the huts were crudely made of than the Cinchona culture. Pulling out her Tricorder she moved to scan the pile of leaves and branches. They looked fine to her, but something triggered an alarm. She studied the results carefully.

“Fusile compounds?” she gasped. “What the...?” She’d never seen these chemical constituents in the flora before. She picked up a branch and held it to her faceplate. She strained her eyes to see what the Cinchona had noticed that might have alerted them to these compounds. But aside from looking a little dry, they didn’t appear any different to her.

Perhaps it is smell? she wondered. She had just decided to take the sample back with her to the Duck-blind for some more tests, when her proximity alert went off – both ears, straight ahead. Rachel looked up quickly and gasped. A Cinchona female was standing 4 meters away, dumbfounded, staring right at her! Rachel glanced quickly down at her holographic meter, but it was working properly. Then it hit her! The plant she was holding in her hand. It must have appeared like it was hovering in mid-air to the native. Rachel’s first thought was to drop it, but then she decided to slowly lower it, mimicking how it might fall in an updraft, hoping to fool

the female into thinking the wind had picked it up. But before she could do anything, the female turned back and let out a yelping cry. Immediately, more Cinchona appeared.

“Uh, Oh!” Rachel moaned. “Not good, not good!” She dropped the leaf and bolted, running full out through the commons. A cloud of hoots and hollers went up behind her as she scrambled behind a grass hut. She waited breathlessly, and after a few minutes, she thought the sounds had died down, but suddenly to her right a small group of Cinchona males, led by Drey, came around the edge of the hut, sniffing and studying the ground, following the depressed reeds where Rachel had stepped!

“You have to be kidding me!” Rachel cried. Frantically, she thought about what she was going to do as the Cinchona neared her. She considered the hut at her back, and crouching low she leapt with all her strength, reaching its peak.

Thank goodness for lower gravity! She thought, landing softly on the top and clutched at the reed roof, steadying herself from toppling back. Down below, the Cinchona males pounced on the spot where she'd been. But then, Drey lifted his snout and looked straight at Rachel. His eyes strained, trying to see what his

heightened senses were telling him was there. He began snuffling again and began scrambling up the side of the hut.

“No!” Rachel hissed to herself. She skipped to the edge of the structure and leapt with all her strength to an adjacent hut. She flew through the air further than she expected, and she almost toppled off the edge, but keeping her momentum going, she turned and leapt to another, before jumping to the ground along some short grass and bolting for it. She didn’t dare glance behind her. With every part of her strength she ran and ran until she found herself in the forest. She stopped here and glanced warily out for chasers.

The clearing outside appeared deserted.

“Fine suit!” Rachel groaned sarcastically, patting herself over to make sure nothing had fallen off in the confusion. “I guess ‘repels scent and reduces footprint’ is not guaranteed!” She took a greedy breath of oxygen and checked her reserve. She still had a couple hours before she’d have to switch to reserves. She took note of her surroundings. The forest was quaking in a breeze overhead. It sounded a little different than she remembered the last time she’d been there – a couple days earlier.

It sounded “dry.” Rachel strode to a tall trunk and touched the bark. Even under her gentle pressure, a long slab peeled off in her hand and crumbled to the forest floor.

“Okay...that’s not normal!” Rachel noted to herself. She glanced to the other trees and she stood still listening. She let out all the toxic stress and anxiety of the past hour. The air was so still, as with anticipation – it reminded her of an autumn evening she’d once heard in North America while visiting her grandparents when she and her father came home on leave from the *U.S.S. Enterprise*.

“Do you hear that?” her grandfather had asked in the woods. “The trees are getting ready for a long sleep.”

Rachel studied the woods of Dubium carefully. “But you’re not sleeping...you’re dying, aren’t you?” she asked the forest. It didn’t have to answer. Rachel could feel it. She took a few discrete core samples and headed back for home.

The walk back was uneventful. No Cinchona appeared to give chase. Rachel crept in through the back of the Duck-blind and pulled her suit off with exhaustion.

“Let’s not do that again anytime soon,” she chided herself, stumbling to the Replicator. “Raktiajino. Eggs. Bacon,” she ordered. She hadn’t had breakfast yet and all the excitement had made her famished. And, yes, she wasn’t supposed to use the Laboratory Replicator for ordering food, but with no one there, she’d coded some “staples” as her little secret. Oh, the lengths she’d gone to protect Commander Crawford’s piece of birthday cake!

That afternoon, she studied the bark samples carefully with the lab equipment. They too showed a high concentration of the mysterious Fusile compound that the computer couldn’t identify. On a hunch she pulled out her Accelerated Relativistic Growth Spectroscope (ARGS)– a lab device designed to accelerate time locally inside an ampoule using temporal bending technology. It allowed Botanists to instantly grow a seed or seedling into its mature form – a useful technology to catalogue samples across their entire growth cycle. The large ones were in research facilities where massive trees could be grown instantly in the space. Rachel’s mobile kit only worked on small plants as it was limited to a cubic meter space. Well, that wouldn’t be a problem, in this case, as Rachel wasn’t trying to determine a growth cycle. She placed a small sample of the bark on a slide and pushed it into the kit.

Sliding it into place, she watched the sample under her scope and turned the ARGs unit on. She watched as the bark shriveled from a two-centimeter sample to a tiny grain of sand. Rachel peered in disbelief at what she was seeing. It was breaking down on a molecular level. She zoomed in on the atoms of the grain. They were vibrating to incredible oscillations, amplifying out of control.

Rachel gasped, "But that means..." An explosion finished her sentence and blew the ARGs in half, pushing her across the room into the wall. She instantly knew she was in shock, had a mild concussion, and had sprained her arm against the wall. Under flecks of debris, she crawled across the floor to her med kit and pulled it off the wall to clatter open by her head. She reached for the hypospray and with the last of her strength pressed it against her neck. She passed out. Instantly, darkness.

Then, slowly, she saw herself standing in a field surrounded by fire. The grass burned, the trees burned, even the soil burned. The flames grew higher. Rachel was burning!

She screamed, but that scream turned to ash, wafting away in the smoke, dissolving into the cloud of cosmic dust that had been Dubium.

Rachel woke with a start and panicked up from the floor of the Duck-blind. She saw the time – only a couple hours had passed since she'd lost consciousness in the explosion. All around her, the shattered remains of the ARGS were scattered. Rachel remembered the result of the experiment.

"In a matter of time, the Fusile compound will spontaneously combust," she said aloud, pressing her thumb to her head, trying to focus. "But on an elemental level. The very atoms will break down and a nuclear reaction would occur." She closed her eyes and tried to remember the real-time that the ampoule had experienced in the ARGS in what had been only a few minutes in the Duck-blind just before the explosion.

"21 hours," she whispered and opened her eyes in disbelief. "Now, 19!" The *U.S.S. Carver* was scheduled to return in 20 hours. She crumpled into her seat at the lab table. Her plants were scattered all across the room from the explosion. She hardly noticed.

"The planet is going to burn," she whispered. "Everything is going to..." It suddenly occurred to her that just as the plants had been taking up this Fusile compound, so had the Cinchona – in their food and drink and the air they breathed! "Everyone is going to

die!" she realized in disbelief. She cradled her head in her hands and looked up at the sky outside the window.

"Who are you?" she said angrily, facing the contrails still being laid down above her head. Tears brimmed in her eyes. "Why are you doing this!" She waited, half expecting a representative of the people out there to visit her with an answer, but no answer came.

What could she do? Was there any way of stopping what was happening?

"No," she whispered. The scale was probably global. Maybe she could do something local? Maybe she couldn't do anything about the planet, but maybe she could neutralize the compound here in this village long enough for the Carver to rescue...something? It was worth a try!

Over the next couple of hours, Rachel desperately poured over her data and worked the Replicator non-stop to produce reactants that might neutralize the unknown Fusile compound. But in the end, Rachel pounded her fist into the replicator's face. "No, no, no!" she cried at another defeat. She went back to the atomic scans of the deadly substance. The molecule looked a little like a long ribbon. Suddenly, into her mind popped

a substance she remembered hearing Professor Hue mention in a class about planetary soil-fires.

“Tri...Trilith...” Rachel struggled, snapping her fingers in the air. “Trilithium!” She cried, clenching the answer in her fist. Yes, that was the substance that a team of Bolian researchers had found a cost-effective means of replicating to combat natural occurring fusile fires – a rare, but not unheard-of phenomenon when uncommon radioactive elements in the soil spontaneously initiated a fusion chain reaction. Trilithium itself had been made famous by a madman named Soren who had used it to stop fusion in stars. The principle was similar.

Thankfully, the Laboratory-grade Replicator was sophisticated enough to produce a sample. Rachel took a piece of the bark and placed it under her Tricorder. If her calculations were correct, one molecule might be all that was necessary to do the trick. Using a pair of finely tuned graviton tweezers, she dropped one molecule onto the bark and waited. A few minutes passed and Rachel was really beginning to wish her ARGS hadn’t been blown to pieces when her Tricorder alerted her to a change. She glanced down and noticed the bark appeared to be “fizzing.” She checked the readings.

“Definitely reacting,” she commented and in a few more minutes, the reaction ended. “Amount of Fusile compound remaining?” she asked the Computer.

“Twenty-five percent of the Fusile compound is remaining,” the Computer explained.

“Okay, so maybe two molecules,” she smiled. “Computer, amount of Trilithium needed to react 3 cubic kilometers at present concentration of Fusile compound?” The computer chirped as it crunched the calculation.

“Approximately 20kg,” it replied. That was a good backpack full of the stuff! Up until now, Rachel hadn’t thought about how she was going to get it where it needed to go. Her eyes fell on the small, mobile Transporter pad that came with the Duck-blind for emergencies. They weren’t meant for continuous use and only had a rating for about 30 transports before burning out, but it might just hold out long enough for what Rachel had in mind.

That evening, as the Quasar descended in the sky and darkness cascaded over Dubium, shimmering blue lights appeared in the sky over the Cinchona village. In an unnatural grip-like pattern, they appeared suddenly, like a sparkling fountain, flashed brightly, and then

shimmered into the darkness – a couple seconds later, a few meters away, they appeared again and the vision repeated. Far below, the Cinchona crouched together in fear at the strange things they were seeing in the night sky. Many of them were beginning to look sickly – a strange weakness was eating away at them inside their bodies. The next morning, Rachel was up early outside the Duck-blind, scanning the ground carefully. She smiled at the readings through her blood-shot eyes.

“It’s working!” she smiled. She’d only missed the northeast corner of the village – the Transporter had finally blown after about 5 hours of continuous use through the night (it must have had an impressive safety factor to have lasted that long!). But due to its endurance, and Rachel’s gentle coaxing, she had successfully beamed 18 kg of the Trilithium in discrete amounts into the air over the village, letting it settle down and scatter broadly to the earth.

But Rachel’s triumph didn’t last long. A hot breeze drifted in from the surrounding forests. Everything out there was as dry as tinder. Rapid desertification was setting in as grass and trees shriveled into dust. Straying to the boundaries of her “refuge,” she checked the soil temperatures beyond the treated zone. It was 450 degrees Fahrenheit, and increasing exponentially.

She checked the time. One hour remained till the U.S.S. Carver was due for return.

“Come on,” she whispered looking up at the ugly sky of woven trails, hoping to see the gleam of a starship. At least no new vapor trails were being laid. They must have ceased sometime in the night – their work done.

Slowly, reality set in on Rachel. She wasn’t going to make it. There was just no way, the time was going to work out. She needed an hour at least – and that was if the Carver was on schedule! Beneath her feet, the ground shifted. Seismic shudders shook cracks into existence in the earth beyond the refuge. Fires were starting in the dry brush out there. Rachel retreated back, invisible to all eyes, to the outskirts of the village. The Cinchona were nowhere to be seen – they had retreated inside their huts. Checking her Tricorder, Rachel could see that a massive inferno had broken out a couple hundred kilometers from their position. The infrared heat was reflecting off the web of high-altitude clouds, revealing the terrible blaze that was coming.

“The reaction must be accelerating on the other side of the planet,” she gasped, glancing uneasily around. She didn’t recognize this place any longer. In less than a week, it had turned from a beautiful temperate

paradise into what looked more like a southwestern desert on the edges of a forest fire!

Suddenly, her comm system scratched. No, it couldn't be...could it? Rachel gazed up at the sky. Was it possible the *Carver* had come early? Perhaps they'd detected the massive energy readings of the global holocaust from a distance and picked up their pace to arrive sooner? The possibility was worth trying to hail them.

"*U.S.S. Carver*, this is Cadet Rachel Dawson!" she yelled, hoping beyond hope she wasn't just getting EM interference from the inferno playing against the contrails in the Stratosphere. "I am requesting immediate transport from the surface...Do you read me?" Only silence answered. Her eyes burned into the sky, which was now a red and gold banner of woe. Suddenly, she heard a voice wrapped in static, breaking into her helmet, and then suddenly it cleared.

"Cadet Dawson, come in!" it sounded.

"I'm here!" she cried, breathlessly, leaping in her place. "It's me! I'm down here!"

"This is Captain Bilson of the *U.S.S. Carver*," the voice replied. "What is your situation?"

“Death!” Rachel screamed – it was the word searing into her mind. “I need immediate transport!”

“Understood, Cadet,” Captain Bilson answered. “We cannot locate you from orbit, so we’re coming down.” Rachel gazed frantically up at the sky. Suddenly, something glinted through a thick billowing contrail as it passed through the vapor and down into the terrible glow of destruction. It descended rapidly towards her. It was the *Carver*!

Rachel felt a tear of relief roll down her cheek. But then the Nova class starship disappeared behind a ridge on the horizon.

“Where...where’d you go?” Rachel whispered, afraid they couldn’t read her communicator. “Please, come back!”

Suddenly, a welcome vision appeared before her! Like a guardian angel, the *U.S.S. Carver* popped up above the horizon, gliding rapidly towards her. In one quick breath, it was passing over what had once been the nearby forest, now soot and ash on the edge of a terrible flashpoint of activation energy. The ship gleamed brightly through the clouds of dust and debris as it slowed to hover directly above her. The bright blue deflector dish, radiated hope. The warp engines glowed,

humming a beautiful sound that meant power and protection to Rachel. It was almost a supernatural experience. In that moment, Rachel felt the lifting sensation she always experienced when a Transporter beam found her. She was being caught up! The terrifying sight of the dying world faded in a shimmering sea of blue energy. She cast a final look at the grass huts where the Cinchona had retreated. To her horror, they were crumbling into ash! The ground flashed. Fire swept in from beyond the refuge perimeter. And then, it vanished as Rachel materialized on the pad of the Carver, collapsing into the arms of a Doctor.

“We’re going to take care of you,” he said. “Don’t worry. My name is Raquel, and Captain Bilson will get us out of here!”

Rachel nodded as the Doctor struggled to remove her helmet, sizzling hot from the external heat. She froze and stopped him.

“No!” she cried. “We have to save the others!”

“What others?”

“The Cinchona!” she answered. “Please, beam them up!” Raquel nodded to the Transport operator, but he only knit his eyebrows in confusion.

“Uh...I’m not reading any life-signs down there,” he reported. Rachel panicked.

“Take me to the Captain!” she screamed, struggling for the door. “Let me see the Captain!” Raquel considered her for a moment, but then nodded.

“Very well,” he acquiesced. “We’ll go to the Bridge quickly, but then to Sickbay!”

Down a short corridor of the cozy ship, Raquel stumbled onto the Bridge with his charge. Rachel’s legs were liquefying under her distress, and she was held up mostly by the Doctor. Captain Bilson rose from his seat in alarm.

“Cadet Dawson!” he said. “What a relief you are safe! We feared we were too late and that you had perished in the catastrophe down there.” Rachel glanced to the Viewscreen and was awash in shock as she saw what looked like a star. Where were they?

Then she realized it was the retreating form of Dubium – its crust burning so brightly it shone like the sun as the Nova class starship retreated into the safety of space! She felt herself waving her hands, and she heard her voice from a far away distance.

“No, no, save them!” she heard herself say. The Captain blurred in place.

“The planet is gone!” she heard him say. “There is nothing left to save.”

Rachel collapsed to her knees, and Raquel struggled to keep her from crumpling over the deck. She felt her mind sinking into madness.

All that work, just to save myself? All those beings! Everything gone! She thought. Gone?

She heard a strange sound, growing on the edge of her perception. It reminded her of the sound of her grandmother’s old tea kettle when it was boiling over on the ancient induction stove – a high pitched whistle that got everyone’s attention. But where on this Bridge could it be coming from? It was loud and it wouldn’t stop. Then in an instant, Rachel realized it was coming from her. She was screaming – an uncontrolled shriek that was ripping through her entire being. She vaguely was aware that Dr. Raquel had reached into his coat and pulled out a hypospray. She remembered no more.

While she lay unconscious, sedated, in sickbay, Dr. Raquel scheduled her for emergency Betazed Trauma

therapy – an adept of the science, Elsin Trunai, was luckily interning at their destination – Star Base 72.

“I concur with Dr. Raquel,” Elsin reported to Captain Bilson and Admiral Hue, a few hours later in the Infirmary on the Starbase. “Cadet Dawson has suffered a complete psychotic break. It is a product of the trauma she experienced. It is a common experience with those who have lost their people, planet, or reason for existing. Now, beneath this shock, I have read in Rachel’s mind strong emotions of shame or disgrace. I believe she feels she betrayed the Cinchona – that, like children, they needed her to protect them, and she failed them. I will know more once she is awake. But I can tell you it will likely be a tough road to full recovery. However, I do believe that she will be able to participate in the investigation.”

Yes, there would have to be an inquiry into what had happened on Dubium. The news of the tragedy was kept under wraps while the investigation was still ongoing. It didn’t take long for the Federation to learn the awful truth.

Not long after Rachel’s rescue, the crust of Dubium finished burning off and the fusion reaction dampened and then ceased altogether, leaving behind only the mantle and core of the planet. Two days later, a small

armada of ships appeared in orbit around what was left of Dubium. The *U.S.S. Carver* and a Defiant wing on loan from Starbase 92 met and impounded what appeared to be an industrial flotilla of mining and ore processing vessels. They were a detachment of the 4th Division of the Bothoric Mining Guild, operating under a Bolian charter, and were clearly intent on excavating the planet's rich mantle and core. The entire operating management of the 4th Division was placed under arrest, pending an inquiry.

Extensive interviews were conducted at Starbase 72 under the purview of a noted Interrogator from Starfleet Intelligence, named Parker Kline. He'd been known to break Vorta, just with a staring contest. Their interviews were short, and within 12 hours, the Guild's Operating Officer, an Ansil Chellas, and a few of his deputies, were arrested on charges of "conspiracy to commit genocide." His signature had been the authorization for the "salvage" of Dubium.

Less than a week later, the trial was held in the Judiciary Holo-suite of the Starbase, where visual and physical evidence could be presented with ease. The room they replicated was in the style of a 21st Century courthouse, which Rachel had once seen in a history documentary in primary school. Rachel was the court's

special witness, and she gave her testimony first to the judge and jury, under the supervision of Dr. Elsin.

Chellas was present with his defense attorney. Rachel had expected him to be a hunching, soulless monster, staring out from under a cowl with heartless, shifting eyes. Instead, the Bolian painted the picture of a gaunt, scholarly figure – with clear signs of suffering abuse and hardship. Rachel kept a brave face for as long as she could struggle through it, until she collapsed into a sobbing mess at the end as the flood of agony burst through her.

“They were defenseless! They were...children!” she cried. “And they were burned to death – alive!” She pointed at Chellas. “You!” she screamed. “You burned them alive! I hate you! I’d kill you if I could!”

The judge gently ordered Dr. Elsin to remove her from the stand, and as she was huddled out of the courtroom, she stared down the stoic face of Mr. Chellas, who sat quietly watching her without an emotion on his features, but with deep, pain-streaked blue eyes.

The Defense did not ask to cross-examine Rachel as her testimony was, apparently, not in dispute.

Renowned Prosecutor Ras Athes, an intimidating Andorian, called Chellas to the stand, and 8 hours of cross-examination began. Rachel was allowed to return to the courtroom and observe the proceedings.

It came to light that Chellas had been one of the first scientists to launch a mineral survey mission into the Gamma Quadrant, and he also had the distinction of being one of the first representatives of the Alpha Quadrant to be interned as a prisoner of the Dominion – before the Federation even knew of their existence. For the first few years, the Vorta had done inexhaustible medical experiments on him. When they were finished, they thrown him into solitary confinement to rot away through the beginning of the Dominion War on an asteroid penal colony – the sport of bored Jem'Hadar soldiers, who taunted him when Bolarus IX was under seige.

“Soon, your kind will come to an end,” they laughed. “And it will be a slow, painful death for your children – one which the old will have to watch, knowing they will be last to be born!”

When the war finally came to a close, Chellas was released as part of the terms of surrender, and he returned home, a broken man, to a world he hardly recognized. The War had hit Bolarus IX hard, but worse,

he discovered his captor's taunts were true in part. Nearly 20% of all children below the age of 12, were infected with an aggressive Lymphoma. It was synthetic, resulting from a weapon that had penetrated the defensive lines and struck the atmosphere, raining a biological weapon in the Stratosphere spreading the disease around the globe. It only attacked the adolescent immune system.

Chellas suspected that the experiments the Vorta had conducted on him provided the knowledge of Bolian anatomy they needed to develop the weapon that had ravished his home. Chellas' son, Mytal was among the many infected.

The Federation had raced to find a cure, but all they could develop was a treatment synthesized from the rare and difficult to replicate mineral Dariumite. Chellas enlisted in the Bothoric Mining Guild with the sole purpose of locating and recovering as much Dariumite as possible. Naturally occurring in the mantles of exotic planetoids, it was difficult to find and even more difficult to reach. The standard mining technique had been to stimulate eruptions at volcanic sites, bringing mantle products up to the surface for recovery. It was time-consuming, with low returns, and reachable deposits were running out, just ahead of the time running out for children on Bolarus IX.

In desperation, Chellas formulated a cost-effective proprietary mining technology called Pyro Ablation – a technique by which drone sprayers laced the upper atmosphere of an uninhabited planetoid with a fusile reactant compound that would settle out onto the planet's surface and absorb into the crust. Designed as a time-released fusion catalyst, it would eventually initiate a nuclear chain-reaction that would literally burn the crust off a moon or planet to expose the rich products beneath for mining. After a designated time, the fusile material would transition into a Trilithium compound, which would stop the fusion reaction, leaving the planet “open for business,” as it were. The out-of-the-way planet of Dubium was to be the test-case - preliminary scans had revealed an extremely rich source of Dariumite in the mantle.

Under the mounting pressure of lost time, Chellas admitted he had cut corners in the operation. He further stated that he had ordered a life-form survey of Dubium, but he had suppressed the portion of the report about the small humanoid population when it was sent back to the Director of Operations for approval.

“We honestly didn't think too much about it,” he said, shrugging his shoulders and running a finger up his

Bolian ridge. "The place hadn't been claimed by anyone, and it was out of the way with no evidence that anyone had visited it."

"What of the Cinchona?" Mr. Athes asked, his antennas drawing back like cobras preparing to strike. Andorian interrogators were very intimidating.

"Who?" Chellas had asked in frustration.

"The pre-industrial culture you wiped out in your mining operation on Dubium?" Athes reminded him, slowly, stressing every word.

"What about them?" Chellas shrugged. "They'd hardly crossed the line of what the Federation considers Sentience! We honestly didn't think the creatures were worth the trouble, and we weren't going to look any closer than we had to. Besides, there were under 100 life signs – we almost missed them with the first sensor sweep, and we were behind on our production quotas and needed a quick fix. We honestly didn't think anyone would ever know!" He stared Athes down and sat rigidly forward, leaning in on him.

"The question you should be asking," he whispered, "is 'What about the Bolian children?'" He sat back and addressed the court. "Do you know how many lives the

Dariumite Ore down there will save once we recover it? One metric ton of raw ore produces one ampoule of the Lapsus treatment, which can prolong the life of a Bolian child up to one year who is suffering from Dominion Lymphoma. You do the arithmetic – it takes a lot of ore! Since I became chief of operations, we've mined over 3 million Metric tons of the stuff– that's 3 million lives given another year to live!" He rubbed his blue fingers against his bald blue scalp and then pounded his forehead into his palms.

"But for a year now," he continued sadly, "supply has been dwindling, and the situation on Bolarus is desperate. Shortages began 2 months ago, and at least 102 children died this month for lack of the treatment – that's more than what the entire population was of that planet you're holding hostage right now!" He jabbed a finger at Athes and swept it accusingly around the courtroom.

"If you want to know what made me do it, now you do," he said defiantly. "I did it for the 100 children that will die next month – that's what was driving my decisions. So, if you want this a moral issue, how's that for a moral issue?" He bent over and shook uncontrollably – his voice was raw with feeling.

Rachel was shocked at the emotion. He was supposed to be a monster, not a person with feelings! The guilt of his part in the holocaust of his people was clearly strangling him. After all, it was his body that had given the Dominion what it needed to kill thousands, and potentially millions of his people, including his son. Mytal had died from the Lymphoma last year.

Rachel felt her confidence waver. She focused again on the faces of the Cinchona, of Drey, staring in terror at what was happening around them. A whole world, with all its life had been snuffed out. It was genocide. And yet, it was not done with malice or hate. It was done under the moral banner of a man who was desperate to save many millions of lives by his one act of indifference to the 100 Cinchona.

During the trial, she watched as the defense attorney show holographic recordings of thousands of Bolian children suffering from the effects of the terrifying Dominion biological weapon, tormented by a tortuous decline to death with only one hope. Was there another way? Was a cure on its way?

Experts were called forward, and the court heard from Starfleet Medical that a possible cure was still a year away from clinical trials. Could Chellas have found a different source of Dariumite Ore? Perhaps. But how

many more would have died in the meantime? It all came down to this: did the lives of the many outweigh the lives of the few? It could have made sense. And yet, is not each life infinitely valuable?

“What about Cadet Dawson’s distress call?” the Prosecutor asked, dangerously. “We have evidence that it was received by your Stratospheric pilots.” Chellas sighed.

“I don’t know what you want me to say,” he said, defensively. “I told my men to report the distress call as sensor backscatter. What was one more life, balanced against millions?”

Rachel always felt that these words were what tipped the balance against him, not the loss of the simple Cinchona. After all, the defense had made a case that the Cinchona weren’t even sentient beings. The holographic scenes captured by the Xenopological team did little to dispel that claim, as the reptilian herbivores appeared to hover somewhere around Earth’s Chimpanzees. If they weren’t sentient, then that would have made the charges against Chellas lessen somewhat. Rachel, however, was sitting right there – a competent Starfleet cadet who was clearly an intelligent and resourceful young woman of culture and society – one of Starleet’s best and brightest. What was her life worth? They valued her, and Chellas was admitting he had been

willing to sacrifice her life. In the end that was where the rubber really met the road.

Chellas and several of his fellow officers were prosecuted for 3 counts of “atrocities against sentient life,” and 7 counts of “destruction of unique habitats.” Chellas went down swinging, yelling out that the whole trial was an atrocity against dying Bolian children. Rachel felt sick. The man was trying to save children, which was a good, by wiping out a whole planet, which was bad. But inversely, if Chellas had been stopped (a good) that would mean dooming children (a bad). There was no doubt in Rachel’s mind that what Chellas had done was wrong, evil even. But if Rachel had been in his place, she knew she would have been tempted to do the same for the “greater” good. Again, the visuals of the dying Bolian children cascaded in front of her mind. Nothing felt right. It was then that she realized how flawed the Universe truly was. There were no-win scenarios after all.

After the verdict, Rachel was congratulated by many for her testimony and praised by all for her courage and resourcefulness in surviving the holocaust of Dubium.

Yet, in the end, it all sounded empty. She took some small comfort that her grief over the Cinchona was shared by Cynthia Crawford and her team, who had all

lost something dear to them on Dubium. And yet, no one had quite lost what Rachel had. She was drowning in survivor's guilt. How was it that she alone survived and not so much of a blade of grass had be rescued? Surely, if she was saved, she could have done something, anything more to have ensured the Cinchona were saved too! She woke in cold sweats screaming out for Drey, who was burned, always burning, in the terrible heat before her eyes. She knew what she needed to do.

As a sort of personal penance, she traveled to Bolarus IX to see the children suffering from Dominion Lymphoma with her own eyes. She hadn't visited the planet since she'd been a child and toured the Ferengi zoo with her father. It was not as she remembered, and the suffering of its people shook her. She left with a clear directive, and she lobbied the Federation Council to allow the mining of Dubium's remains for the Bolian's sake. Her emotional testimony swayed them and a mining permit was ratified in the end.

After that, she spent a lot of time on Bolarus, until a cure was eventually developed by a brilliant doctor named Julian Bashir. A few years passed and eventually Rachel returned to Starfleet Academy, but she abandoned her earlier Exobotany track instead for Xenopology – her time among the Bolian people and

her experiences with the Cinchona gave her a new appreciation for the fragile nature of all sentient life.

She graduated from the Academy with high honors and rose up the ranks faster than pips could be stuck to her collar.

Within only a few years, she found herself in the spotlight again when she rescued the aborigine of Pelrili from a Romulan genocide in the Neutral Zone. That experience bolstered her resolve and her conviction, so much so that she risked her career a few years later to blow the whistle on a Section 31 program to forcibly relocate the Maltain from their home world for the strategic location it provided. The years that followed saw her involved in many frays for the rights of “dehumanized” peoples.

On the ten-year anniversary of the *U.S.S. Enterprise's* intervention in the Son'a attempt to exterminate the Ba'Ku, Captain Picard personally invited the now Commander Dawson to give the keynote speech at Starfleet Academy on his behalf. Rachel hated the limelight, even more than Captain Picard disliked it. She preferred the quiet, lonely role of a watchful guardian on threatened and endangered worlds. But her deeds occasionally required that she step up onto the stage to

witness for the vulnerable and testify to the frangibility of life, which all took for granted.

To all the new graduates – a sea of young faces, Dawson concluded her speech:

“I want you to look at me. See this conviction in my eyes! The ends never justify the means, nor do the means always justify the end. The needs of the many never outweigh the needs of the few, nor do the needs of the few outweigh the needs of the many. It is the greatest paradox of all. One you must study and learn in your life. Whatever you do, do not give way before harm. We cannot let expedience inspire us to it, nor stand by and allow it for the sake of convenience. Above all, it is our sacred duty to protect those who do not know they need protection. Be the voice of those that no one hears. To do good, even when injured by the ones we help. To stand up and entreat for those that may even hate us. To do to everyone – for everyone – what we would want them to do for us – to us. That is the Golden Rule, the only true rule that matters out there in the cold Universe, if doing good matters. I commend our future into your hands. Handle it gently. And may you boldly go where no one truly has gone before, but not haphazardly, not blindly – rather with the knowledge and experience of those who have come before to guide you from straying into the dark matters

of self-interest and self-justification. This is my prayer. Live in whatever time you have, and prosper your heart and mind by prospering others. Thank you, and goodnight.”

Rachel Dawson still visits Ansil Chellas at the Federation Penal Colony on Reyvad 8. He asked for her forgiveness, and she gave it. They have become good friends.