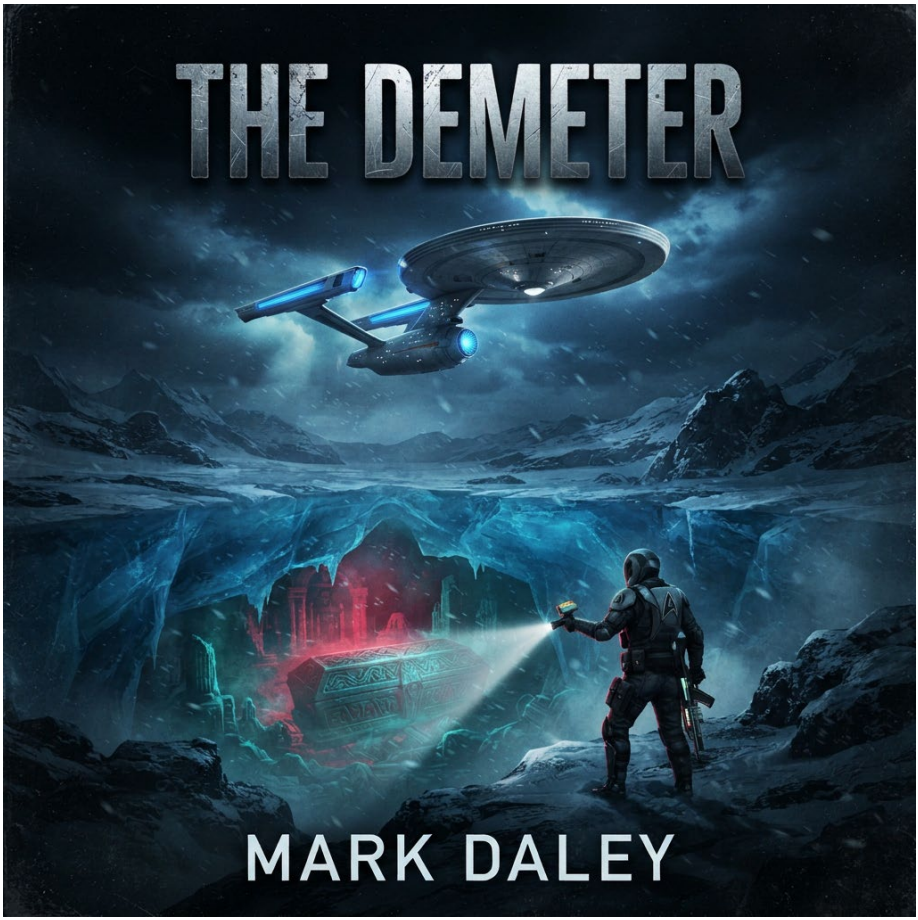

THE DEMETER
MARK DALEY

The DEMETER

By Mark Daley 2023©

The sky was like a leaden blanket only occasionally broken by lightning in the distance. Below was a huge expanse of trees, just kilometre after kilometre of forest from horizon to horizon.

Rem was hoping that when the shuttle got to the forward outpost the snow would have stopped, it had snowed every day in the week he had been on Suvin IV although the weather was set to improve slightly in the coming days. After a week of training and living in temporary accommodation, he was looking forward to an actual bath and maybe a beer or two in the mess hall of the purpose-built permanent settlement they were now approaching.

The shuttle dropped height and made a graceful turn to port to put down gently on the concrete shuttle pad fifty meters from the main engineering block. Through a gap between buildings, it was just possible to see the huge ruins that were the focus of attention here. The ancient Suvin ruins were to be excavated over the next two weeks.

The rear ramp opened and thumped down. A damp and icy cold vegetation smell rolled into the shuttle as Rem and his small security team collected their bags and trudged down the ramp, their breath generating clouds of white vapor. Behind them, there was the usual radio chatter between the pilot, ground control, and the ship in orbit.

Gomez, Killean, and Jenkins walked quickly behind Rem to get to the main block to the side of Engineering. They were only too keen to get inside out of the cold and snow. The temperature outside was minus fifteen degrees centigrade.

Rem dropped his bag to the floor once inside the door and turned to his team who were piling in after him.

“Right, get settled into your quarters and get some hot food in the mess hall. You have 16 hours before our assignment begins. One of you will have the pleasure of buying me a Guinness in the mess hall later. Just as soon as I have had a bath.” He grinned his shark's tooth smile at them.

There was a chorus of “Aye sir” from the three men.

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The local time was 06:00 and the ongoing mission was to provide security to the archaeological team digging in the ruins a few hundred meters from the base. Although Suvin IV was considered safe, it had not been surveyed in any great depth. It was sandwiched between Breen and Romulan space in the Typhon sector. Hence the need for security on site.

Rem trudged through the patchy snow to the main storage tent on site after he had deployed his men on the perimeter. He lifted the flap and went in. He was hit by delicious warmth and took his gloves off to warm his hands.

Immediately in front of him was a large metal box up on trestles. It had some ornate symbols chased into the metalwork; it was quite beautiful. He was admiring the craftwork when one of the xenoarchaeologists noticed him and came over.

"You must be Lieutenant Rem from Security. I'm Dr Lucy Cushing, the team leader here." A slim hand was thrust in Rem's direction.

Rem straightened to his full height of 1.3 meters and turned to shake the proffered hand.

"I am Lieutenant Rem, yes. I'm pleased to meet you." He gripped her hand lightly, being careful not to squeeze too hard and regarded her for a brief moment before releasing her hand. She was a young human female of average height, so she was thirty centimetres taller than him. There was a cascade of long, red hair and some, what was the word? Freckles?! She had sparkling blue eyes and a beaming smile. Rem was taken aback a little.

He recovered his composure just as she asked, "Do you know anything of our work here?"

"There was a civilization here thousands of years ago which got to a metalworking age before it collapsed suddenly. That's all I know."

Lucy beamed her wonderful smile again. "The artwork and complexity of the finds here are amazing. We have found countless items of interest."

She swept her arm in a circle to indicate the items piled up on tables around her.

"The prize so far is this box or casket, there is almost certainly a body in it. We can't penetrate too far through the metal, but we think there is a high level of preservation. It's going up to the *Demeter* soon and I can

examine it more closely there when we finish our dig. It's exciting to be this far out in the Typhon sector."

She gave off such enthusiasm when she spoke, such genuine excitement.

"To boldly go where no one has gone before." Rem said it with a slight smirk.

Lucy's eyes twinkled "That's so cheesy; right off the Starfleet Academy manual."

Rem gave a tight-lipped smile and not his usual shark tooth grin before replying, "I make no apology for cheesiness. I really would like to stay and chat, but I have to speak with Ensign Adams. Do you know where she is?"

Lucy jerked a thumb over her shoulder to point to the back room of the tent. "She is in there cataloguing our finds." She beamed her megawatt smile again.

"Thanks, I'll catch you later." He snuck a backward glance as he made his way to the rear of the tent.

She was somewhat interesting he told himself…

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The next two weeks were odd. Rem could not shake the feeling of unease when he was out walking the perimeter of the camp. It's as if the dark cold woods had intelligent eyes studying him. Numerous times he would get the impression he was being watched, the bristles on his scalp would rise and he would find himself reaching for his phaser. Once or twice, he thought he had seen luminous red eyes watching him from the trees, but just as soon as he had seen them, they were gone. Blinked out as if they were never there.

On debriefing the security team in the evenings, it became clear that the other three members of his small squad had been seeing the same things. Jenkins in particular had been badly spooked by his experiences and had taken to patrolling with phaser drawn. The wider science teams working the dig had reported hearing distant screams and guttural sounds from deep in the forest as well as seeing ghostly red eyes regarding them from the trees.

Rem had been told that there was no intelligent life on this planet other than the party from the *USS Demeter*. Concerned scientists had even flown a few shuttles out into the forest to do some scanning but, other than the expected harmless local fauna there was nothing untoward.

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Rem would swing by the main tent every day to talk to Lucy; they were getting on extremely well. Any opportunity he had he would swing by to see her. He was hoping to see more of her when the expedition upped camp and returned to the *Demeter*. His time on the *USS Demeter* would be short however, as he had to return to the *USS Canterbury* once the ships rendezvoused to exchange personnel.

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It was a hive of activity; all of the temporary structures had been pulled down and stored ready for loading into the waiting shuttles. There would be a skeleton crew in the permanent buildings waiting for the next dig in a month or so when spring would make life a little easier. It was the turn of the Vulcan Science Academy next.

The snow had returned with a vengeance, a steady, monotonous curtain of quietly falling snow from a slate grey, featureless sky. At least the temperature had risen a little, it was minus ten degrees centigrade. The shouts of the people loading the shuttles were quietly muted in the falling snow.

It would be hours before Rem could climb onto the last shuttle and leave this forsaken cold and snowy world.

***

The *USS Demeter* was a new vessel in the *Intrepid*-class. It hung like a bright jewel in the inky blackness of space as Rem's shuttle approached.

All of these Federation ships were sleek and beautiful. Rem always gazed in wonderment at these utterly amazing ships. His race didn’t have the like. Most Baatixian ships looked like root vegetables. They were built to be utilitarian and purely functional. Most were unpainted dull metal

shapes with what looked like random spacings of hatches and antenna arrays dotted over them, no-one could have used the adjective ‘pretty’ in describing them. Function over form was the motto of Baatix.

As Starfleet was helping Baatix in updating its fleet, it was only a matter of time before some standardization took hold and the ships would more resemble the ones that Rem had served on so far.

Rem was basking in the warmth of his quarters, only too pleased to have put the bone-chilling cold of Suvin IV behind him. It was just a shame that it was back to sonic showers and not the luxury of a hot bath. He was going to swing by the Xenoarchaeology department to collect Lucy for some quick dinner after he had been to the department head's briefing. He changed into a fresh uniform and regarded himself in the mirror. He thought that perhaps his skin was a little bluer and blotchier than usual, the cold perhaps? At least the sparse bristles on his head had been trimmed back. He treated himself to a shark's tooth grin, the one that usually frightened people because of the double-serrated teeth. Good to go he thought, he keyed the lights and made his way to the briefing room.

***

Lucy was determined to get the casket open to see what treasures there were inside. The whole thing had been scanned and poked and prodded; now was the time to get to see what was inside. There was just enough time to do this before Rem called for her, or so she thought. She carefully aimed the cutter around the rim of the box, making sure to make as little damage as possible. Lucy had sent everyone back to their quarters promising to open the box in the morning, but curiosity got the better of her. There, the lid was free!

Finally, Lucy could peer inside the box after the lid was laid carefully on its side by the casket. As the scans had revealed, there was a body inside the box, lying on some dry soil. No surprise that it was humanoid as it was known that the Suvins had been. Height was estimated to be 1.8 meters. It was difficult to get any more detail than that as the body was naked, desiccated, and deeply wrinkled. However, there were some strange things about the body. The fingernails were quite long and sharp and there was a peculiar smell too. The smell was earthy, like the smell you get when digging over damp soil but there was an undercurrent of something else. Something

that she had smelled before but couldn't place. The hairs on the back of Lucy's neck were standing up; fear began to creep over her. She was a scientist and not easily spooked, there was a rational explanation for everything she told herself. There was a reason she was now frightened, but she didn't know what it was. It certainly wasn't the sight of a long-dead corpse as she had seen hundreds of them over the years.

Yet, she felt a great unease being alone with the body. Fear was crowding in on her thoughts and her rational mind couldn't explain why.

Lucy shuddered and decided to put the lid back on the box and surround the casket with a level four sterile field. She turned and stole a quick glance at the body. It was at that exact moment that it opened its eyes.

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Rem had finished his late meeting and was on his way to the Xenoarchaeology department. He had messaged Lucy to say he was on his way but had not received a reply. Not unusual for Lucy to not respond right away as she always had something to do that stole all of her attention. He had a bottle of Chateau Picard Cru Bourgeois Bordeaux with him, not an old bottle as they were simply too rare, but a decent vintage.

The door swished open into the lab and Rem walked in. What he saw rooted him to the spot in fear, his heart literally skipped a beat. He couldn't move, he was simply unable to comprehend what he was seeing. The bottle he was holding dropped to the floor with a sharp thump.

Lucy was lying on her back unmoving pinned down by a *thing*, a creature of dark, wrinkled, and withered skin. It was nuzzling its face into her neck; its tongue was lapping in and out. To Rem's shattered senses, it looked like it was drinking her blood.

The creature stopped what it was doing as it heard the door open and the bottle drop to the floor. It turned its head to glare with dark malevolence at Rem. It hissed and snarled with bloodied lips and sharp teeth before rising to a crouch. Suddenly, it launched itself at Rem and covered the distance between them in two bounds. Rem had just enough time to snap out of his fugue and put his arms up to protect himself. This creature or thing was much taller than Rem but was nowhere as strong,

Rem held it at bay, it kicked and struggled and tried to bite him. Its red eyes and blood-flecked face were terrifying to behold.

Rem shifted his grip and managed to get a hand around its throat, he squeezed and twisted. There was a sound like the snapping of a root vegetable stalk as his other hand was briefly able to grip the creature's head and turn it away from his face. Rem had twisted the thing's head off.

The body thumped to the ground, twitching.

Rem dropped the creature's head. It fell and rolled away. He looked at his bloodied hands and then at the twitching abomination lying at his feet. His heart was racing, and he was shaking, he had never been so frightened in all of his life before. He looked up with big round eyes. Lucy!

Rem jumped over the body of the thing and hurried over to Lucy; he gently cradled her in his arms before fumbling with shaking hands for her pulse. There was a pulse, weak but there. He wiped his face on his sleeve in nervous exhaustion before tapping his comm badge.

"Intruder alert, security and medical to Xenoarchaeology."

The ship's klaxon blared into life as Rem pulled Lucy closer to him.

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"She will be fine Lieutenant, there is no need to worry. She lost an appreciable amount of blood which we treated with an infusion. Not much by way of injury really, just two puncture marks on the neck. No sign of any introduced pathogen from whatever it was that attacked her. I would say she got off lucky, if you hadn't been there, it would have been very different."

Doctor Elke smiled at Rem, her green eyes twinkling and her blonde hair shining in the harsh Medical Centre lights. She put a hand on his arm. "She really will be fine; she doesn't even remember what happened."

Rem sighed in relief. "Thank you, Doctor, I know Lucy is in safe hands. Will you contact me when she wakes up, please?"

"Of course, are you sure we don't need to look at you at all? You don't have any injuries?"

"I'm fine doctor, not even a scratch." He even managed a tight-lipped smile for the Doctor as he left the Medical Centre. Rem was nowhere near fine, the horror of what had happened was still only too fresh in his mind. His feelings of terror and revulsion were pushed down deep inside.

There was no time to dwell on what happened as he had to hurry. Senior command wanted a report in person.

The command briefing had been short, the first officer would investigate what had happened after the alien casket had been brought onboard. Rem was to ensure that all artifacts were subject to strict security protocols and were to be moved to the shuttle hangar and made off-limits.

The captain had ordered the ship to divert to Starbase 39 Sierra; ETA was seven days. Rem's battle with the creature and its subsequent demise was discussed after the first officer had thanked him personally for his quick actions in saving a crewmember.

The chief Xenobiologist, Dr Thrana, was very angry that a living Suvin had been killed when it could have been captured and studied. He had argued long and loud about the missed opportunities for study. That was until the captain had ordered him out of the room. Tellarites just loved to argue.

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Rem had put everything in place, all artifacts were to be stored under a level five screen in the shuttlebay with only authorized access to named individuals. No-one was allowed access unless permission from the first officer was given. The creature was dematerialized and kept in the pattern buffer as a precaution.

He was walking down the corridor on B deck when his comm badge chirped.

“Lieutenant Rem, can you report to the Medical Centre, please? Lucy is awake.”

“On my way.” He was beaming from ear to ear on hearing the good news.

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Lucy was sitting up in bed when Rem came into the room. Her long, red hair had been brushed back and she had a small dressing on her neck. She turned and beamed a smile as he stood by the bed. Rem’s insides did a flip-flop, but he composed himself. He sat down and held her hand, stroking it gently.

“How do you feel?” he asked.

“Pretty good considering I was the main course for a monster. Thankfully, you saved me from being the dessert too.”

“Happy to be of service ma'am. All in a day's work.”

She smiled at him warmly and he drank in everything about her. He couldn’t help but notice something was wrong, an indefinable something he couldn’t articulate. Lucy looked the same as he remembered, if not pale and somewhat drawn into herself. Something was nagging at the back of his mind. Something he couldn’t shake.

He stayed with her for thirty minutes chatting about what they would do when they could get some shore leave together and where they would go. Rem had to prise himself away eventually he had his duties. At least with the ship being diverted he would miss the liaison with his ship, the *Canterbury*. It meant he could spend a bit more time with Lucy. Lately, all he could think about was Lucy.

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Rem concluded the lesson with the reminder to clean the power cell contacts before handing in sidearms. All weapons must be cleaned before being handed to the armourer. This was the end of Rem’s weapons class. All recruits had to do the mandatory class despite what they had learned at the academy or in service. He didn’t want some newbie accidentally shooting someone or using the wrong power setting because they didn’t know the basics of how a phaser worked. At least he could observe everyone in the class and assess which ones could skip further classes and which ones needed further instruction. He was just about to start on his student assessments when his comm badge chirped.

“Lieutenant Rem please report to the Medical Centre.”

Odd, he thought, this must be about Lucy. Wasn’t she being discharged today?

He tapped his badge. “Acknowledged, On my way.” The computer was logged off and he quickly made his way to the centre.

Doctor Elke met Rem as he came through the centre’s doors. Her usual sunny smile was replaced with a serious expression. He immediately picked up that this was something very serious and not a bump in the road to recovery.

“Is Lucy OK? I thought she was being discharged today?”

“She has collapsed and is showing signs of organ failure. It came out of the blue, but we are doing what we can for her. As yet, we can't pinpoint the issue.”

Rem wasn’t listening, he dodged around the doctor and made his way to Lucy’s side. She was motionless on her bed and the readouts showed, even to Rem’s untrained eye, some worryingly low lifesigns. She was covered in a thin film of sweat and was panting for breath.

He turned to the Doctor who by now had caught up with him. “How could she be so ill? I only saw her a few hours ago.”

“We don’t know,” said the doctor. “This was so very sudden, she has not responded to anything we have given her, and despite all of our efforts, she is losing the battle. I called you because the next hour or so could be Lucy’s last.”

Rem’s head was spinning, he just could not process what was going on, he could not bear to lose her. He just couldn’t.

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Lucy’s final moments were peaceful, her breathing became shallower, and she slipped away as Rem held her hand. He held her hand for a few more minutes and angrily waved away the nurse when she came over. Finally, some calm came over him and he gently placed her hand back down on the bed and rose to adjust his tunic. The doctor appeared, her face a picture of sorrow and concern. She dropped any formality and addressed him by name.

“Rem, I am so very sorry. We did everything we could to save her.”

“I know that you did your best, but I need answers. Why was she fine in the morning yet dead seven hours later? This has to be something that the creature did to her when it attacked. You found nothing though, no pathogen or infectious agent? Is that right?” There was a hint of anger in his voice when he said that.

He quickly added, “I’m sorry, Doctor, I didn’t mean to be disrespectful. I apologize.” His grief had overwhelmed him.

“No apology needed,” she replied, placing her hand on his upper arm. You have just lost a dear friend.”

Rem thought for a moment about what the doctor had just said. The entire ship had been aware of the bond between him and Lucy—they went everywhere together. He had never explored the relationship; it was just accepted. Whatever it was it was now gone, and he had to come to terms with that no matter how painful it was.

Rem excused himself and returned to his quarters, not caring about the tears pricking his eyes.

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Rem had just finished a class. Although he was only assigned to the *Demeter* as security for away team missions, he had to keep busy. When he was alone his thoughts would wander off into a dark place, and keeping occupied was a distraction he needed. He had persuaded Ensign Bright in security to let him teach some hand-to-hand techniques for his small team.

The distraction was welcomed, it had only been a day since he had paid his respects to Lucy. He was deep in dark thought trudging down a corridor on A-deck when his comm badge chirped. “Lieutenant Rem, please report to the Medical Centre urgently.”

He tapped the badge. “On my way.” He started running down the corridor. *What now*? The voice over comms belonged to one of his team, Jenkins.

He arrived a little breathless at the Medical Centre to be met by Jenkins at the door. Over his shoulder, he could see Doctor Elke sobbing on the shoulder of one of the nurses.

“Jenkins, report. What’s going on?”.

Jenkins, who was visibly shaken, said: “Over here, sir. Nurse Amagda has been murdered. He turned and led Rem into a back room. The door swished open. On the floor lay Nurse Amagda, deathly pale and with a fan of hair framing her head. Rem carefully knelt to examine the body, the only injuries he could see were two small puncture wounds on her neck. He straightened and looked around. The room was basically a storeroom, with nothing of any note apart from the box with Lucy’s body in it over in the cold storage part. His heart sank when he saw the box and he quickly turned away from it. He beckoned Jenkins over.

“Guard the room, no one is to enter except medical staff. Get D’Souza down here for backup and organize someone to go through computer records and CCTV.”

“Aye, sir,” said Jenkins.

Rem tapped his comm badge. “Lieutenant Rem to Commander Tsang.”

A tinny voice responded almost immediately over the comms badge. “Lieutenant Rem, go ahead.”

“Sir, I need to restrict all nonessential crew to quarters, and I need to speak with you in your office as a matter of urgency.”

There was a pause before the Commander answered, “Very well Lieutenant, come to the captain’s ready room. He’ll want to hear what you have to say as well”.

Rem replied, “On my way, sir.” He then approached Doctor Elke who was trying to regain her composure. She turned to face him with a tear-streaked face.

He reached out to lightly grip Dr Elke’s arm in a comforting gesture. “I am so sorry, Doctor. I will not rest until we have answers to this senseless murder. Jenkins will stay here with you and there is another member of my team on their way. As soon as I have finished on the bridge, I’ll come back.

The doctor nodded to say that she understood as she was too upset to speak.

At that moment the computer announced over the speaker that nonessential personnel were to return to quarters until further notice.

Rem made his way to the bridge. He couldn’t help thinking there was a connection between Nurse Amagda and Lucy.

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Captain Shiva listened carefully to what Rem had to say about the murder of Nurse Amagda and what steps had been taken so far. First Officer Tsang was busy making notes, he preferred to write things down rather than have the computer do it for him.

The captain took a sip of his coffee and directed his gaze at Rem. “Lieutenant Rem, it will be three days before we get to our destination. As

the senior security officer, you will continue to head the investigation into Nurse Amagdas' death. But I need to ask if you think your emotional state would cloud your decisions after the demise of Dr Cushing."

He fixed Rem with his intense brown eyes, his slick-backed shiny hair, and his grey-flecked beard giving him the air of authority. Even amongst senior officers, Captain Shiva had a reputation as a straight talker.

"Rest assured, sir. Nothing will stand in my way," Rem vowed.

"Very well, Commander Tsang will escort you out and give you any further instructions, please liaise with him directly. Dismissed".

"Aye, sir" said Rem and rose with the first officer to leave the room.

Once outside Commander Tsang said, "As the Captain said, please reach out to me personally if you need anything. The sooner we have the person responsible for this murder the better. The restriction on crew movements is to remain in place for now. I don't have any further instruction; you are a capable officer and know what to do."

"Very good, sir," said Rem. "I will set up my temporary office in the Medical Centre. There is something that doesn't sit right about what we brought aboard and what happened to Dr Cushing and Nurse Amagda. Having me at the crime scene puts me in the middle of my investigation. I have my team combing CCTV and computer records as we speak, and I will have answers very soon."

The real reason of course was that Rem didn't want familiar surroundings just yet. There was also the fact that Lucy was down there, and he was sure she was implicated in the murder somehow although he dared not think it. The creature that had been brought aboard was scanned as very dead and had been underground for centuries.

The first officer raised an eyebrow at the idea of a temporary office in the Medical Centre but said nothing. "Keep me informed, Lieutenant." He turned and walked off down the corridor, his boots clicking on the polished surface. He had some reservations about Rems's mental state but decided to give him the benefit of the doubt.

***

Rem set up his office, which consisted of a chair and a computer terminal dragged in from the room outside. The doctor had retired to her

quarters, and as there were no patients there were no medical staff on duty. The EMH could be triggered if there was a medical emergency.

Jenkins had been relieved from his post to get some rest and D'Souza would be sent to patrol the corridors around the Medical Centre for another two hours before she could be relieved. The first part of his evening was taken with reading the medical report on Nurse Amagda, her autopsy had been just completed. Lucy's autopsy would be in the morning.

It was a baffling read. The cause of death was exsanguination, which meant most of her blood had been drained—not all of it, but enough to stop her heart. The thing was the crime scene, in which Rem was seated at present, had not one drop of blood in it. There was nothing on the floor. He took a moment to run another search of the room using his flashlight to peer under shelves and storage racks but found nothing. Rem considered how the creature had consumed Lucy's blood—and now Nurse Amagda had been murdered, drained of her blood.

Whilst he was reading about what had killed Nurse Amagda and performing searches for evidence, it felt a little unnerving being in the storage area with Lucy lying just three meters away in cold storage.

The usual steps were taken immediately after the discovery of the body, and everyone's movements could be accounted for. All nonessential personnel were confined to quarters, and they were still there. He just could not get his head around what had happened. There was still a thought swirling around that the creature and Lucy were involved in some way in the murder, but it did not make any logical sense. He put the report down and took a long swig of water from his bottle.

At that moment D'Souza checked in over Comms. Nothing to report, everything was normal. Rem asked her to do another two circuits before calling it a night. He settled down to do some crew background checks. This wasn't his usual ship, and he was unfamiliar with the crew.

Around thirty minutes later Rem stood up to stretch his legs. He heard something from the back of the room. Some thermal settling maybe, or a fridge compressor kicking in. He strained his ears trying to pick up what the sound was again, there it was again—a definite sound! He moved closer.

The lid on Lucy's casket or box was moving. To his horror, a hand eased out of the box and lifted the lid. His fears about Lucy were now confirmed.

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Rem was rooted to the spot his scalp bristles were sticking straight up, he could hardly breathe. His breath was catching in his throat.

Lucy emerged from her box. She moved with inhuman agility, lightly jumping down from the box and laying the lid back on top with a fluid motion.

She was preternaturally beautiful to Rem, her skin shone with an inner radiance. The red hair which Rem loved was glowing in luscious waves onto her shoulders. Lucy smiled a glorious smile showing her bright white teeth and red lips. “Rem come to me, kiss me.” Her voice was like birdsong, beautiful and melodic to hear.

Rem almost ran to her but there was an undercurrent of horror; he knew what she had become, and he stopped himself.

Lucy beckoned to him with her white alabaster arms. “Kiss me, Rem.”

She came forward with arms outstretched but Rem stepped back. He fumbled with a shaking hand to his phaser. He couldn’t lay a hand on her, but he had to stop her, if she came closer, he didn’t know what would happen.

Lucy saw Rem's hand steal to his phaser and her demeanour changed in a heartbeat. She roared an inhuman animalistic roar and leaped for him. Her face changed to a fiendish picture, a caricature distorted by hate and bloodlust. She was astonishingly fast and was on him in an instant, teeth snapping and hands clawing. It was all Rem could do to fend her off; his arms and chest were scratched and gored by long, sharp fingernails but he restrained her by gripping her throat, he still didn’t want to hurt her. The phaser on his belt clattered to the floor in the melee.

Rem never heard the door to the room swish open, but he did suddenly feel the wash of a phaser blast on stun that made him blackout for a moment and lose his balance. The second, much larger blast blinded him and burned his face and neck. He shrieked in pain, that blast was on “kill”. He fell and rolled over and slipped into unconsciousness.

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D’Souza was on her last perimeter sweep and was approaching the doors to the Medical Centre to report in when she heard a blood-curdling roar coming from the back room where Rem was on guard. She flipped her phaser from its fastening and keyed it to heavy stun before moving quickly into the room. What she saw amazed and horrified her.

Rem was grappling with someone. At first, she thought it was a crew member and took a step forward. It was then she realized that Rem’s assailant was the xenoarchaeologist who had *died* a day or so ago after coming back onboard. This couldn’t be—did she not die or was it someone else?

She raised the phaser and fired out of instinct at both struggling figures. Rem staggered and slumped, but the other figure shook its head and turned towards her regarding her. Heavy stun had no effect! This creature was not the doctor who had died but some creature, it was streaked with blood and had blood-red eyes. It opened its mouth to display large, pointed incisors, this was no human mouth.

D'Souza had the presence of mind to thumb her phaser to level three just before the creature was going to pounce. She fired, even though Rem was very close and would be caught in the blast.

Her shot was on target, the thing caught the blast in the chest, a smoking hole appeared, and it fell over backward, writhed as though in great pain then lay still.

She thumbed her phaser to level four and approached the scene. No movement from the thing or creature or whatever it was. The ship's alarm suddenly sounded, deafeningly loud in the confined space as the computer detected phaser fire in the ship. Help would be here in seconds.

Despite the din from the alarm, she rolled Rem over onto his back to check on him whilst still covering the creature with her phaser. He was breathing but he had some extensive and deep burns and other wounds to his face and neck. His eyes were milky white, but it was just some sort of nictating membrane covering them.

His arms were covered in deep, bloody scratches as was his upper chest, the amount of blood everywhere was frightening to see. She only hoped she hadn’t blinded him with her shot, she only had a split-second to fire. Her thoughts were broken by the outer door swishing open and a security team rushing in.

***

Rem couldn't open his eyes; were they taped shut? He reached up and his hand hit something over his mouth and nose. Feebly, he tried to pull it away, but it stayed where it was. It was too much effort to stay awake and he slipped back into slumber. He dreamed of happier times in his home world of Baatix, hunting for fish with his friends in the coral seas, cooking their catch over driftwood on the beach.

Suddenly, he heard a voice as if from far away. He recognized that it belonged to Commander Tsang. What was Commander Tsang doing on Baatix? Realization dawned that he was somewhere else other than Baatix and that the officer was speaking to him. There was some background noise, the room had an echo in it.

"Good, he is waking up. Lieutenant Rem, take it easy. You are in the Medical Centre aboard Starbase 39 Sierra. Stay with us."

The officer's voice faded, and sleep claimed him again.

He was down too deep; his lungs were burning and spasming. The surface of the water was far above, shimmering in the sunlight. The only hope was to surface slowly, releasing air as he went, if he didn't, he would get the bends as Nitrogen could not escape from his blood slowly and would form bubbles. The agonizing ascent continued, small bubbles escaping from his mouth. As Rem's head broke the surface he awoke from his dream.

Numb fingers fumbled for the mask he could feel over his nose and mouth, and he tore it off. There was a beeping sound and a hazy shape appeared at his bedside.

"What, whe…where am I?"

A female voice said, "Please, sir, relax. You are coming out of sedation. If you can sit up a little, I will make you more comfortable. Do you need any water?"

Rem struggled to comprehend what had happened but slowly the memories came back as he sat up in bed and took the offered beverage. His vision was strangely blurred and there was not much light in the room. There were transparent strips over his eyes restricting light. He could feel them but didn't feel like he should pull them off.

"What are these on my eyes? I can't see properly." He believed he was addressing a nurse.

A baritone voice made him jump. “I am Doctor Akamai, and I will be looking after you. Please, don’t be alarmed.” A huge hand gently touched Rem's head, tugging at the dressings.

“These dressings are not quite ready to come off. You suffered some pretty nasty burns which, owing to your physiology, were difficult to treat. I had to contact Baatix for some help. As for your eyes, they are healing nicely but I need those dressings in place until tomorrow. The brain swelling however is a little more serious, you will need extensive convalescence for that one.

“The rest of your wounds have been treated and you will be ready for discharge in two days after I am happy with your brain scans.” He chuckled to himself. “What some people will go through to avoid work.

“If you are up for visitors Captain Shiva and Commander Tsang are here to see you.” He lowered his voice and added a conspiratorial whisper. “Don’t worry. I will limit them to twenty minutes and make sure they bring ice cream.” With that, he chuckled in his rich baritone voice and added: “Captain Shiva, Commander Tsang. Lieutenant Rem is ready for you now, but please remember you only have twenty minutes, and don’t forget the ice cream.”

Two smaller shadows appeared at Rem’s bedside, and he asked, “What happened to me? There was a shot on stun followed by one on a higher setting. After that, I don’t remember anything until I woke up.”

Commander Tsang glanced at the captain before he answered. “Security specialist D’Souza came into the Medical Centre after hearing sounds.” He paused at this point, only too aware that what he was about to say was fantastical and upsetting in equal measure.

“She saw you fighting or grappling with Dr Cushing and fired on stun. Dr Cushing was unaffected by this. Fearing for your safety and before she could be attacked, she fired again on a kill setting. Dr Cushing was killed in that encounter. Unfortunately, you were caught in the blast. You are lucky to be alive.”

Before Rem could answer he added, “Dr Cushing was confirmed deceased when she expired in the Medical Centre two days before the events that took place where you were injured. What happened to her is still being investigated, but there is a link between her death after being attacked by the creature from Suvin IV and her…” He cleared his throat.

“Um…reanimation. This is very upsetting for you I know given your relationship with Dr Cushing.”

Rem lay there in shock. The half-formed theory he had about the creature, Lucy, and Nurse Amagda had been confirmed. The worst aspect of all of this was that Lucy had died twice.

Captain Shiva pondered what had been said for a few moments before saying. “After your ordeal and what is likely to be a protracted period of convalescing, I would like you to take a month's leave. Go home and spend some time with your family. Take time to heal properly. I shall inform your Captain on the *Canterbury* that you will not be rejoining until fit to resume your duties.”

Rem tried to protest weakly but the captain interrupted. “You are on leave Lieutenant. That’s an order”.

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Two days later, Rem was in his quarters packing for his trip home to Baatix. He was still weak, and his eyesight was a little fuzzy, but he could get all the medical help he needed when back home.

The door to his cabin chimed. “Come in,” he said.

D’Souza came in and stood to attention just inside the door. “I came to apologize, sir.”

Rem turned and faced her, he could see just well enough to notice tears in her eyes, and he said, “Apologies for what, saving my life?”

She replied, “I should have made sure there was enough distance between you and…and Dr Cushing before firing.”

Rem was a little taken aback. He didn’t know D’Souza well, but she was a security specialist. She was as tough as they came, nothing fazed her. Yet here she was standing before him, about ready to burst into tears.

Rem replied, “You did your duty. I would have expected nothing less and would have done the same in your position. The situation was assessed, and action was taken. One life was saved instead of two or more being lost. That’s a good outcome.”

She replied, “I understand that sir, but your injuries! You could be on sick leave for a month or more.”

Rem put down the clothes he had in his hands and walked over to D’Souza, and gently took her hands in his. She stiffened at this, not used to

the informality. He said, “I have lost Lucy, not once but twice. Anything that has happened outside of that I can deal with. Please don’t beat yourself up over what you did, I told you that I would have done the same. I really would.”

He squeezed her hands gently and said, “This recuperative leave is just what I need to heal body and mind. In a month or so I’ll be back, stronger than ever. Please, don’t worry. I have spoken to the First Officer and have placed a commendation on your file. You showed remarkable courage.”

He let her hands drop to her sides and added further, “I’ll be late for my shuttle; just some last-minute packing to do.” Rem came to attention and said, “That will be all, D’Souza. Dismissed.”

She saluted smartly and said, “Safe journey, sir, and thank you.” She made her leave and the door swished shut behind her.

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The journey back to Baatix would take four days so there was plenty of time to catch up on sleep and do some careful exploration of his emotional roller coaster of emotions for Lucy and how even in death she had a hold of him. He had never experienced such strong emotions before. The psychological therapy he would have at home would be tough.

The return to duty would be a difficult one physically and mentally. Perhaps the Vulcans did have an edge when it came to dealing with profound emotional upheaval, the trade-off for detachment and lack of empathy would be too much though. The constant checking of emotion against an internal set of rules becomes simply too much. Where is the spontaneity in that when every emotion has to be submerged? Rem would bear his pain; his character would be the better for it.

He learned that Sir Alfred Lord Tennyson had summed it up five hundred years previously: “It’s better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.”