

STAR TREK:
YESTERDAY'S ENTERPRISE
The Plague



By WCS Marsh

Star Trek

Yesterday's Enterprise

"The Plague"

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A short story based upon the legendary Star Trek: The Next Generation episode.

Star Trek: Yesterday's Enterprise – The Plague

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***FARSPACE STARBASE EARHART,
A SEEDY WAYSTATION ON THE EDGES OF THE
GREAT UNKNOWN.***

Little more than a frontier outpost on the fringes of Federation law, it attracted all sorts, from surly Nausicaans to Orion Raiders, and of course, the hardiest of human souls. A tourist destination inasmuch as a Starfleet foothold, Starbase Earhart had strangely enough become a sort of cement for this obscure corner of the galaxy that lay far beyond the established trading routes and shipping lanes of more ordinary interstellar space.

Perhaps that's why it was so popular.

There was still a Wild West tinge to these border worlds, and equally so amongst the far-flung ranks of Starfleet officers that served out here. Men like Anson Willis and Patrick Carr were blazing trails and leaving their mark across half the quadrant. Captain Rachel Cecilia Garrett was no different. Already branded as somewhat of a wild child herself, she too was burning through this part of space with that same indestructible aura broiling through her veins; an inherent drive that only comes with youth, and an indefatigable need to go faster and farther than anyone else had gone before.

"I've always found the Bonestell Recreation Facility to be somewhat drab," Rachel said casually to her Betazoid first officer, Commander Spencer Stadi. Whenever she was able to finagle her way into this sector, her usual seedy haunt was instead the much more flamboyant (and perhaps a bit coarse) Angelo's Diner just across the street. "Hal and I practically lived here back in the early days," she finished rather morosely as they stepped up onto the dimly lit stoop.

Spencer's telepathic mind could sense that this place still held a certain charm for her, even despite her shadowy past with a shaded man that had only just lately been convicted of domestic terrorism. The proprietor of the run-down establishment, Fiorello Angelo La Seveso, was loud and fat and shook a long metal spatula at anyone that

would listen. He loved to terrorize Starfleet Academy cadets, and would often spit epithets at them as they crept uncertainly into the darkened vestibule, then fled... yet those brave enough to venture further ultimately won respect and were thus greeted warmly. It wasn't so much a bar as it was a greasy-spoon diner, and Spencer could sense that this is what appealed to Rachel most as she slowly adjusted to a new life of sobriety, post-Hal.

As they saddled up to the bar, Angelo looked them both square in the eyes, and with a stubbly chin and dark meaningful eyes said: "What'll you have today, Diamond Sally?"

"A diamond is just a lump of coal that didn't do so well under pressure," Rachel explained to her first officer's puzzled look, then mirrored the old man's mottled grin. He had a funny little white sailor's cap on – had said once that it was from ancient Earth – and Spencer could sense that she could never quite take the old man seriously. He smiled.

"The usual, times two," Rachel grinned, holding up two slender fingers for the old man's inspection.

"Comin right up," Angelo said gruffly, eyeing Spencer with all-knowing eyes of olive. He then dove back into his battered kitchen and began clattering around the blackened grill with his well-honed spatula, all the while whistling a tune that was perhaps older than time itself.

"Sally?" Spencer mused.

"He always told me I reminded him of his brother Sal... I guess he was somewhat of a diamond in the rough too... was apparently killed trading in the Kevos System under somewhat mysterious circumstances... (she rolled her almond eyes) ...I can tell that it still eats away at poor old Ange though just a little bit more each day..." she trailed off, thinking once more of Hal. Spencer's telepathic paracortex reached out into the kitchen and tried in vain to get a clear reading on the old man. There was a depth there that went far beyond this dingy restaurant – farther even than the starbase. In fact, Spencer speculated that the intelligence at work behind that greasy grill encompassed the whole of the universe, and perhaps beyond. Both timeless and at once ageless. God hath no bounds.

With a start, two chipped plates were thrown down, each bearing a greasy cheeseburger and some yellowed, dried out fries. “I never said the food was good,” Angelo growled as Rachel and Spencer sat back in unison, noses scrunched. He waved his spatula at them like a foil, then retreated once more into his supernatural lair.

Rachel’s commbadge chirped, and she slowly dropped her head and let out a long, bone-weary sigh. Spencer too let out a quick puff through his nose. *And just when this was getting interesting.* He scrutinized the smoldering mass below him and raised an eyebrow, wondering at its complexity. *Interesting indeed!* as Rachel tapped the small communication device pinned to her left breast.

“Drop that thing in the fryer!” Angelo barked from the window, once more flourishing his spatula threateningly in their direction. Rachel flipped her napkin at him, then threw it like a sheet over the desiccated remains of her unfinished plate.

“Garrett here,” she responded with clear exasperation – to which point exactly, Spencer was not all too certain.

“*Sorry to cut your lunch short, Captain, but we have a priority mission for you, direct from HQ...*” The voice at the other end said this with all the usual cheery wit of a Starfleet trainee with something to tell.

“Tell them to go pound coal,” Angelo shouted out from the sizzling griddle, stabbing at the air over his right shoulder with the glistening spatula. Spencer laughed as the old man reached down with his other hand and pulled his greasy pants up over the half-moons of his sizeable rear end.

“Acknowledged,” Rachel giggled into her commbadge, then hollered to Angelo: “I’d pay ya Ange, but we don’t use money.” As Angelo waved his metal gauntlet back at her in mock salute, she surreptitiously slid away from the bar (and the flag-draped coffin of shriveled remains) then cautiously turned on her stool, hoping to escape unmolested. But Angelo spun suddenly and barked as the door creaked open, startling her, and scaring the shit outta some fresh-faced new academy cadets. He then chuckled with a deep wolfy growl as they turned and fled, and offered a stunned Spencer Stadi a dogged

wink of immeasurable profundity.

“I dunno why you’re still in business, Ange,” Rachel laughed at him, unaware of the true interchange taking place beside her as Spencer’s mind grappled with the infinite.

“Only the diamonds are strong enough,” Angelo finally smiled softly, then turned back to his careful work with an almost musical clickety-clang of his own particular tool of statecraft.

As the duo stepped outside, the red dwarf sun had momentarily peaked through a rare break in the stainless steel sky. The air still held that soft mist from the most recent shower, and Rachel and Spencer both inhaled deeply at the freshness of it all. Even despite the near constant rain, Van Biesbroeck’s star was actually quite a nice place to visit (if you could avoid the mud) mostly because it was so vastly different from the sterile reality of life-long careers awash with starships and orbital space stations. The two friends certainly had enough transport credits to beam directly back to the spaceport, but as the sun was now shining, and the day was still young, they decided to walk instead, and to enjoy just a few more moments of deep peaceful quiet and crisp restful air.

You can imagine their annoyance when they arrived at their shuttle some ten minutes later, soaked to the bone, and sporting ten-pound boots caked with sticky black muck. To be sure, there was nothing to be done about the uniforms, but in a rare moment of ne’er-do-well, the two officers kicked off their goloshes on the tarmac, then boarded the svelte little craft in smiles and wet socks. They knew full-well that Lieutenant Skyl would make them scrub the shuttle from top to bottom when they got back anyway, so why not mitigate some of the damage?

“Spaceflight Control, this is Captain Rachel Garrett aboard the shuttlecraft *Ignis*... requesting confirmation and approval of flight plan...”

“Ignis... flight plan and destination confirmed... rendezvous with Starfleet Heavy N-C-C-one-seven-zero-one-C at coordinates one-zero-nine by four-seven by three-two-two... acknowledge...”

“*Ignis* acknowledges,” Rachel replied gruffly, “departure in T

minus ten.” If she were alone, she would strip down to her skivvies and turn up the heat, but somehow, she didn’t think Spencer would quite be onboard with the idea. *But then again, the Betazoids did have a certain penchant for nudity...* she turned and smiled as Spencer’s cheekbones turned a faint crimson. The private thoughts of the two officers often skirted around the finer points of chemical romance, their youth sometimes betraying a decade and a half of Starfleet training, but professional to the utmost, they would never further complicate their already complicated lives. She was captain, he first officer, the chain of command sacrosanct.

As the tiny shuttle climbed up out of the thin atmosphere, VB 10 came into view in all its dim glory. A baby even amongst dwarves, the red little sun bathed their faces in its feeble sweet warmth.

“Spaceflight Control, request escape vector...”

“Ignis, adjust heading five degrees port, pitch plus ten... be aware of Federation Starliner Joshua Chamberlain at your three o’clock... safe journeys, and Godspeed.”

Godspeed, such a curious expression –
and Spencer Stadi thought briefly of Angelo and his spatula.

THE FEDERATION STARSHIP ENTERPRISE,
a shining new star blazing on the edge of the great
unknown.

One year into its two-year shake-down cruise, the brand-new ship had just completed six weeks of grueling warp trials. Structural integrity field tests, evaluations of the inertial damping system, maximum speeds and touch-and-go down warping – all done under the watchful eyes of a hundred or so warp field specialists that had nothing better to do than to drive the ship’s chief engineer nuts – and try the patience of her somewhat green and unseasoned captain.

Standing on the edge of the great unknown,
Rachel Garrett was ready to go faster and farther
than anyone else had gone before.

She simply had to wait. Another year would be spent testing every single aspect of this new and untried *Ambassador*-class starship before they would ever be allowed to sail into deeper waters. Her ship was now the largest and most complex deep space exploration vessel ever built by the vast Federation, and its little quirks were already almost innumerable.

There were also certain additional nuances of this, her first command, that Starfleet Command had failed to mention. While men like Anson Willis and Patrick Carr were blazing trails across half the quadrant, she and Commander Stadi were cooling their jets on routine courier missions, diplomatic receptions, and sense defying space trials that staggered the mind and hedged all bets on how long sanity could last. And then it got worse.

In place of the engineers, the ship was now filled with a hundred or so Academy cadets, and Rachel Garrett’s vaunted glory was equal to little more than the glorified warden of an interplanetary daycare. She had to keep reminding herself that she was a kid once too, but her high-warp days of exploring strange new worlds would just have to wait a little bit longer till this snot-nosed brood was safely pushed out of the nest.

The shuttle banked gracefully to the left and rose slightly to skirt round the starliner before homing in on the Federations newest ship of the line. It'd been nearly 15 years since the *Enterprise-B* had been destroyed at Station Salem One, and the fate of the galaxy was long overdue for another new legend to take the stage. Rachel and Spencer both leaned forward to catch their latest glimpse of this newest orbiting colossus – even after a year, it was still a treat to see their great lady placidly sailing along in that infinite sea of star-studded blackness.

“I’ll bet Skyl is veritably foaming at the mouth by now,” Rachel giggled, referring to her Vulcan chief engineer who they’d left behind to marshal the pimply-faced but eager crew of nineteen-and-a-half-year-old tenderfoots.

Spencer smiled. He was enjoying being first officer almost as much as she was enjoying being captain. As yet a bit young to sport such a posting, these two were still enjoying the flush of youth that comes with the upper 20s – and before the doldrums of the 30s set in and life takes on the monotonous humdrum of routine. He too was looking forward to terrorizing some of these cadets on this, their first training mission, in ways that only a first officer can do. It was a rite of passage that echoed back on down through the ages.

The shimmering star that was the *Enterprise-C* at last resolved itself into view and the duo were again enraptured. There was still that wee small corner in their collective minds that couldn’t quite accept the fact that they had just been allowed to *leave* with this expensive and shiny new plaything, and absolutely no one was looking after them, so to speak. It was like driving out of the driveway with your folks’ brand-new car when the ink on your license was not yet dry. Freedom. Independence. And responsibility as yet unrealized.

The clamshell doors of the aft shuttlebay had just finished opening as the *Ignis* glided silently into the cavernous parking garage at the rear of the ship and came to a soft landing on the titanium deck plating with a muffled metallic *chunk*. Skyl stared at them from the control room window, as stoic and stone-faced as ever, and Rachel and Spencer both turned their heads to smile at each other once more. The Vulcan was indeed perturbed, that much was obvious. They waited

impatiently for the outer doors to seal, and the hiss of air to conclude, before they were able at last to open the shuttle's hatch and step foot out onto the gleaming new deck.

"All I can say is, they don't train them like they used to," Skyl said flatly, his features sullen, and long before his two commanding officers could even step down off the platform in their wet socks.

"You told me you could have these cadets ready in 24 hours, I gave you 36... what happened?" Rachel said this rather blithely, casting one more sidelong glance at Spencer before offering Skyl her usual wry smile. Skyl glimpsed with disdain the wet carpet inside the shuttle and gave the two arrivals a cross look, taking note of their soaked uniforms. The trio then turned together and headed towards a hatchway that led into the honeycombed interior of the ship even as two cadets somewhere to their left began pounding on some hapless piece of equipment with a rather large and unfriendly looking wrench. Skyl let out a long weary sigh.

"I think you gave me too much time, Captain," he replied flatly, his emotionless, no-nonsense Vulcan veneer clearly on the verge of collapse.

"Very well, Mister Skyl, carry on," Rachel chirped glibly, cringing herself at the noise.

"Aye, Cap..." was all Skyl could mutter before the banging and all the resultant clatter increased twofold and he turned with a roar, "...*how many times do I have to tell you, **the right tool for the right job!***" and he marched off in their direction, his soul afire.

"I don't think I've ever seen him happier," Spencer chortled as they entered the small alcove, then turned to the right to board an awaiting turbolift.

"Bridge..." Rachel laughed, then: "I could use a shower."

"Yes," Spencer nodded, clasping his hands behind his back, and raising his nose ever so slightly.

Royal pain in the ass, Rachel thought, telepathy notwithstanding.

She rolled her eyes and pulled at her wet jacket. "Starfleet's got some nerve sending us out in this condition with this handful of kids... those engineer's left this place a mess!" The lift slowed to a

stop and the doors parted to reveal a command center cluttered with a half-dozen freestanding tool chests, and a veritable flock of chickens running around with their heads cut off.

“Captain on the Bridge!” someone called out from somewhere just as a tool chest was knocked over with a crash-filled string of colorful curse words.

“Captain, Starfleet transmission online...” the duty officer cried out from the Ops console.

“On screen...” Rachel acknowledged, sidestepping some unidentified gizmo and nearly twisting her ankle on another. She grabbed Spencer’s arm to steady herself as the noise increased and they stepped together up onto the command level.

“Can we have a little quiet, please...” (even more commotion) “...a little quiet... can we...” She waved her hands at them, a few even waved back.

“Attention on deck,” Spencer shouted, scaring the crap out of his captain, and causing the fledgling brood to flee into the darkened corners with a cacophony of barely stifled clucks and clatters.

“*Well Captain, looking a little damp, aren’t we?*” a man said on the viewscreen, eyeing her from head to toe – taking special note of her wet socks.

“Commodore... you caught me on the way to the shower,” Rachel rejoined, pushing Spencer a couple feet away. This was no time to be sticky and close, and God knows, when it soaks through to your underwear, then it’s time to call it a day.

“*I apologize for cancelling shore leave, Captain,*” Stillwell said ruefully, “*but we have an unusual situation developing in your sector...*” Rachel’s interest was suddenly piqued. A real mission perhaps, instead of all these damnable space trials?

“Go ahead,” she queried with a slight tilt to the head.

“*We have lost all contact with the SS Lenore,*” Stillwell continued, “*an archeological research vessel.*”

“And the details,” Rachel asked, placing hands on hips in her characteristic stance.

“*Well that’s the interesting part,*” the Commodore leaned forward, “*the ship is still on course and travelling at Warp Four*

towards its next port of call... ”

“A communications issue?” Spencer interjected.

“*All telemetry checks out,*” Stillwell replied, “*it’s like the lights are on, but no one’s home...*”

“But Commodore, surely,” Rachel began to argue, even despite her mounting curiosity.

“*...now I know the Enterprise is not exactly up to specs...*”

Stillwell stated flatly, palms toward her in a conciliatory gesture.

“With all due respect, Commodore,” she interrupted again, this time tendering her usual wry smile, “the *Enterprise* is presently a preschool playground.” The giddiness of youth is often hard to hide, regardless of any or all feigned reservations to the contrary.

“*You are the only ship in the sector, Captain,*” he rebutted, knowing all too well her jets were already burning. He had been young once too, with the ink on his license not yet dry. Rachel took two steps forward, her countenance eager, almond eyes fixed on the stars.

“Helm, plot course to intercept...” almond eyes glistening.

“*Godspeed, Enterprise,*” the commodore offered as blessing.

“*Stillwell out...*”

Rachel squeezed her shapely hips as she spun in a circle, surveying the Bridge. Though young, the faces staring back at her were all just as eager. This was their first training mission after all, and the cadets each had that edge-of-their-seat look painted on their cherubic features. They would prove to be a fine crew, she was certain of it, for this was the *Enterprise*, and the *Enterprise* always looked after her own.

“I’m afraid the ship’s hitches will have to be solved enroute,” she courted to their willingness, “since we’re undermanned, I’m counting on each one of you to give their best... end of speech.” The Captain smiled at Spencer Stadi who gave her a not-so-certain look before moving to the Bridge’s upper level to stand at Ops. Rachel for her part tapped a control on the armrest of the command chair before gliding in for a soft landing.

“Engineering...” she called out, facing forward, always forward.

“*Skyl, here...*”

“We’ll need all the power you can muster, mister...”

There was a crash in the background before he answered with an exasperated: “*Aye, Captain, Godspeed it is.*”

“Helm, let’s go get em,” she laughed, “engage.” And she turned just in time to see her first officer mask a most peculiar look, before smiling oddly.

Godspeed, such a curious expression –
and Spencer Stadi thought once more of Angelo and his spatula.

Author’s note:

Though flirting perhaps beneath the skirts of infringement, the latter half of this chapter pays homage to *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier* – that much maligned and berated masterpiece that still to this day remains my favorite of all the films.

–W.M.

***THE SOUTH POLAR MOON OF COR CAROLI VIII,
A WINDSWEEP WEARY WORLD NEARLY AS OLD AS
TIME ITSELF.***

There wasn't much left except bones and sand, the type of sand that gets into everything. Due to the lesser gravity, the dinosaurs here had been massive, even by Earth standards, and had roamed this small world unhindered in the jungles and forests of prehistory. Yet all climates must give way to change, and millions of years of change can spell the downfall of even the bravest. The humanoid mind has no concept of time on this scale; their own lifetimes measured in grains on a beach of infinity. The windswept sand eventually covers over all, the desert the great leveler.

They had come in search of wisdom, of enlightenment, they left with a mystery only the likes of which the *Enterprise* could solve.

Captain Rachel Garrett had gathered all in the rear Observation Lounge, just a half deck down from the Main Bridge; she at the head of the table, Spencer to her right, Skyl to her left. Doc Colett sat at the far end of the room, puffing away on contraband Rigellian cigarettes. This wizened old physician of the 'old school' listened to no one, and dispensed his own free form of advice that oft times was more sound than any medicine in his cabinet. He remained one of the few people in the galaxy to tell ole Bag-o-Bones McCoy, with a puff of smoke, just where he could stuff his vitamins.

The space in-between was filled with what few sparse officers were to be had on an untested ship full of trainees. Ensign Carmella Parker, a freckle-nosed, fresh-faced young dreamer from Alpha Centauri sat at Ops, and an even younger looking Ensign Atticus Hayes was manning the helm. So far, he had only dented the hull once, but the unfortunate incident could hardly be deemed his fault since the Admiral's shuttle had technically turned into *him*, and these *Ambassador*-class starships, like the *Olympic*-class ocean liners, were

proving notoriously bulky to handle.

Next to Skyl sat the shell-shocked and weary Ensign Kahler Fox, engineer's mate, who had slept little and ate even less since stepping aboard this ship run by an agent, he was convinced, of the Vulcan gestapo. These three had been out of the Academy over a year now, and had been handpicked by Rachel and Spencer to help guide this graceful (if not bulky) new lady out into the stars. They too had not expected to be saddled with a boatload of cadets and were attempting to look confident when they themselves were barely finding their way out into space without training wheels.

"Commander Stadi, the basics please," Rachel said cheerily, looking into faces that looked young even to her. On the wall-embedded viewscreen behind her, Spencer brought up the image of a small *Oberth*-class starship.

"The SS *Lenore*," he began thoughtfully, "a Federation research vessel... recently left a six-month paleo archeological dig on the south polar moon of Cor Caroli Eight."

"Paleo archeological?" Carmella interjected, her freckled nose scrunching up at the very profound sounding word.

"Dinosaurs, Ensign," Rachel said with a wry smile.

"Specifically," Spencer continued, "the cross-evolution and extinction of, across many worlds of the Federation. They predate the humanoid form by millions of years, and some even speculate that they may have been spacefaring..."

"Poppycock," Doc Colette blurted out with a cloud of smoke, two fingers pointing past the red glow at the end of his fingers. Skyl looked at him crossly, eyebrow upswept. Kahler tousled his hair, nervously awaiting the forthcoming exchange, eyes pleading with his captain to do something... anything... Rachel giggled.

"Come now, Doctor, young minds, fresh ideas, be tolerant." Colette harumphed, took a drag, looked away indifferently.

"At, uh, last report," Spencer continued hesitantly, but smiling, "the ship was on course for Tagus Three. All attempts to raise them by subspace have failed."

"Lieutenant Skyl?" Rachel queried.

"Analysis of telemetry from Starfleet confirms that all systems

on the ship are performing within expected norms.”

“I sent several pings to their communications array, Captain,” Kahler continued, “all returned as expected... they’re just not answering.”

“A ghost ship,” Ensign Hayes interposed, his face betraying his true feelings behind a casual smile. He was creeped out to be sure. Carmella giggled at him teasingly.

“What do we know of the crew?” Rachel asked, enjoying the flood of warmth that comes from youth. At thirty-one, she was subtly losing its grip, much to her lament. *Ah, to be young forever*, she thought, Spencer eyeing her all-too-knowingly.

“Various archeologists and climatologists,” her first officer continued softly, “all experts in their field... about eighty all told. The ship itself is under the command of Lieutenant Commander Sydney Van Dorne, team leader...” he brought up her smiling image, covered with dirt, hair askance... “she herself an expert on extinction-level events and other theories regarding the end of the Age of Titans.”

“Your thoughts, Doctor,” Rachel called down to the end of the room. Colett had just lit another cigarette and eyed her with apathetic surprise.

“They just went extinct, *poof*,” he answered with a miniature explosion of the hands. The youths all laughed and he grinned at them with a shining Jack Nicolson smile, before coughing spasmodically.

“Any thoughts on the *crew*, Doctor,” Rachel scolded him with mock reproach.

Colett then sat forward, more seriously. “Ah hell,” he said with a shrug, “the possibilities are endless... the plague, hypoxia, a Klingon death squad... who the hell knows till we get there. Maybe they’re hungover and just don’t feel like talking,” he finished with a wave of smoke.

“Very well then,” Rachel said with a somewhat exasperated sigh. She leaned forward herself now, bringing everyone to attention. “Helm, time to intercept?” Atticus squinted down at the embedded table-top controls and tapped several buttons to access navigation.

“About ninety minutes, Captain,” he answered a bit gingerly, his ghost ship comment not forgotten.

“Ensign Parker...” Carmella jumped in her skin, halfway through a silent and ghostly *wooo-oooo* to her spooked comrade across the table.

“Yes, Ma’am?” she gulped.

“Continue hailing them over subspace every ten minutes... Dismissed!” and everyone jumped up. Despite the possibility of something amiss, they were all still intrigued by the mystery, and eager to plow forward into the unknown. They were, after all, Starfleet, and this was indeed the *Enterprise*.

“Still no response from hails, Captain,” Carmella called out from Ops. Rachel looked over her left shoulder and nodded. Eagerness over the past ninety minutes had slowly been replaced by apprehension. All readings from the small research vessel had continued to be normal as the *Enterprise* closed in at a little over twice the *Lenore’s* normal cruising speed of warp four. As Commodore Stillwell had said, the lights were on, but nobody was home. In a matter of moments however, at least that part of the mystery may be solved. Against the backdrop of warp stars, the *Lenore* slowly came into view.

“Ensign Hayes, match course and speed,” Rachel ordered. Stepping down from his shadowing position at Ops, Spencer moved over to sit at Tactical next to Atticus. Normally unmanned during a shakedown cruise, this defensive station could in the end prove crucial, just in case of ‘Klingon death squads’ or some other such malice. Indeed, stranger things had happened, and as Kirk had once said: “who wants to be caught with their pants down?”

“Lieutenant Skyl,” Rachel called behind her, the hairs on the back of her neck strangely beginning to bristle. They were here now, and the uncertainty factor was palpable. At an aft science station, Skyl’s findings were conclusive.

“No life signs, Captain.”

“Damn,” she said quietly, standing. “Anything, Commander?” she whispered to Spencer just ahead of her. She placed a soft, slender hand on his broad shoulder. Her Betazoid first officer reached out with his telepathic paracortex and too sensed only the empty lifeless black

of outer space.

“Nothing, Captain,” he responded stoically.

“No battle damage, no other vessels within range,” Skyl continued to report. “All systems appear functional, Captain.”

“So do we board her?” Atticus asked apprehensively, turning his head to look at Spencer. The hairs on his own neck had been full-on bristling for over an hour now and his anxiety was hitting Spencer in slowly undulating waves.

“Not yet, Ensign,” he responded quietly. It was their job to leaven these young officers, to force them to give pause and utilize other options outside the normal train of thought. Safety, always safety, and it had to come first – always. If their tiny little tin bubble of air was compromised, there was literally no one out here to save them. Protect the ship at all costs, for in the end it was all they had to hold on to.

“If we gain control remotely,” Spencer continued to explain, “then we can get a better look around. Captain?” he said over his right shoulder.

“Agreed,” she said levelly, then stepped down off the command level and made an immediate beeline for her ready room.

Once inside her small oval-shaped office, Rachel went directly to the ancient wooden schoolteachers’ desk that dominated the tiny room and briefly studied its polished surface. The desk had been a congratulatory gift from her grandfather barely a year ago when she’d been promoted to captain and placed in command of the *Enterprise*.

Considered by some to be a bit eccentric, the beloved old man had devoted nearly sixty years of his life to the education of young minds. Rachel often thought that the only things in life that were really important, that truly mattered, had been conveyed to her by this one single person. She would not be where she was today if it had not been for his guidance. The desk continued to be a constant reminder of that. She laughed inwardly now at the thought of a hundred or so cadets that were now scattered throughout this ship... then shuddered. Now she was the one shaping minds.

She was also responsible for their lives.

Sitting down finally and touching the keypad on a computer console, she spoke plainly. “Computer, security override request...”

“*Identify...*” the computer responded in its usual cheery tones, the origins of which had long-since been lost to the pages of history. Rachel sat forward now and spoke a little more earnestly.

“Garrett, Rachel Cecilia, Captain, USS *Enterprise...*” the computer chirped its acknowledgement. “Request command control access, Federation research vessel SS *Lenore*, Sydney Van Dorne commanding...”

“*Enter access code...*” the computer responded levelly and without challenge.

“Sigma, sigma, tau, green, night-star, four, seven... Enable.” And the computer chirped again. Simple as that. Now back to the hard part...

As she stepped back onto the Bridge, Skyl was immediate in his report. “I have verified receipt of the access codes for the *Lenore*, Captain.”

“Well, that’s sumthin,” Rachel smirked as she climbed the several steps necessary to join her chief engineer at his aft science station. “Let’s see what we got, shall we?” she said to the Vulcan, gliding in next to him. The two ships were now basically operating as one, and anything they did here, almost seamlessly, happened over there.

“Interlock engaged, Captain,” Skyl confirmed.

“Helm,” Rachel called out, “drop out of warp, come to full stop.” She peered over the upper-level railing as Commander Stadi helped the young ensign make sense of his dual readings. Within moments, she could feel the great leviathan begin to slow, and watched out the viewscreen as the *Lenore* too began to creep to a halt. The warp stars were now replaced with the immovable and unchanging star-studded blackness of deep space. There was no doubt about it, they were alone out here.

As summoned earlier, Colett stepped out of the turbolift almost

as if on cue, and shuffled up to join his commanding officer. Remarkably, he was without cigarette, and seemed even more serious than usual. “Sickbay on alert...” he reported gruffly, “...such as it is. Damn kids don’t know a syringe from a Mickey Mouse straw.”

“Alright, Skyl, let’s have a look at their Bridge first,” Rachel ordered.

“Viewscreens engaging,” Skyl responded levelly and they all turned in unison to see what silence wrought. Death? Destruction? Bloody mayhem? Orion pirates?

No one.

The cramped and tiny Bridge was empty, and it made everyone’s skin crawl. No bodies, no blood, no nothing. Only in spacedock was a starship Bridge ever left unmanned – for a vessel at warp, unheard of. Mystery notwithstanding, it made no sense at all.

“Atmospheric checks?” Spencer called out from the front of their own spacious command center, still sitting defensively at Tactical, awaiting ambush.

“Hull intact, atmospheric pressure stable,” Skyl stated conclusively.

“Then where the hell are they?” Colett expunged with some measure of annoyance. Up front, Spencer could sense an even level of anxiety coming from the stone-faced old doctor as well... the aged physician didn’t like the burgeoning facts of this mystery any more than they did. His world was always straightforward and simple. Find the illness, fix it.

“Engineering, all angles,” Rachel ordered next. If something happened on the Bridge, then Main Engineering was the next default command center. On their own viewscreen, six squares appeared, each with a different view of the tiny ship’s cramped engine room. Everyone on the Bridge sat forward and scanned breathlessly for someone, anyone, alive or dead.

Again, no one.

“Sickbay, dammit,” Colett barked. Unlike the others, he hadn’t been excited about all this from the start. A ship out of contact meant trouble – always. Most just vanished – such was the nature of deep space exploration – but this one was right here in front of them, and not a damn thing was wrong with it. He approached the upper-level railing, leaned up against it on the verge of pushing it over as the viewscreen displayed six more images. Still nothing. “Well, I’ll be damned,” the doctor puffed, turning to his captain exasperated.

“Ops, continue scanning, deck by deck,” Rachel instructed, then spoke to Colett directly. “Doctor, let’s do a deep-scan analysis of their atmosphere... tell the transporter room to beam over a sample.” He nodded. She next turned to Skyl. “Lieutenant... lifeboats, shuttlecraft?”

“All auxiliary craft docked, Captain,” Skyl reported, “all lifeboats stowed and accounted for.”

“Well shit, I guess we’re just gonna have to go over there!” Rachel acquiesced at last.

At the front of the Bridge, Atticus Hayes bristled. He didn’t like the sound of that; he didn’t like the sound of any of it. *Ghost ship be damned*, he thought, *let the dead lay, and let’s get the hell out of here*. Except there weren’t any dead! Something was at work here that was bigger than they were able to yet see, and they were all afraid of the dark.

Spencer Stadi could barely cloud his own anxiety
in the hazy sea that surrounded him.

***FEAR NOT DEATH, FOR THE HOUR OF YOUR DOOM IS
SET,
AND NO ONE CAN ESCAPE IT.
-VIKING FOLKLORE***

“The air’s clean, Captain,” Colett said conclusively, pointing with two fingers through smoke and cinder towards the sample jar across the room. The two stood in a small lab just down the corridor from Sickbay and pondered again the near perfect readings. “No pathogens, no viruses, no bacterial agents... just pure clean recycled starship air.” The doctor took a final drag from his cigarette, then stamped it out in an ancient glass ashtray.

“Then grab your kit, Doctor,” Rachel said cheerily, “let’s go have a little look-see, shall we?”

More ominous words could never have been spoken.

“Oh no, you don’t,” he coughed, “my sense of adventure died with my sex drive thirty years ago... take that little birdbrain over there with you.” Colett lit another cigarette as his captain peered into the far corner of the darkened room at an unsuspecting cadet in a white lab coat. “That one doesn’t know a needle from a matchstick.” The cadet fumbled with a handful of glass vials before dropping them all on the floor with a smattering crash. She could do naught but laugh as the good doctor pulled another cigarette out of his pocket and attempted to light it before choking on a cloud of smoke from the one in his mouth.

“Enough to drive a man to drink,” he muttered. “Don’t teach these brats anything anymore... Get over here!” he shouted and Rachel laughed.

“Yes, Doctor?” the young man said as he scurried over, lab coat fanning out behind him like a cape. His heavy Indian accent matched perfectly with his rust-colored skin and deep black unibrow that had somehow managed to survive seven years of medical school. Popular guy.

“What’s your name, son?” Rachel asked with a warm smile,

trying not to giggle.

“Chandra Parvati, Physician’s Assistant... is there some trouble?” His dark eyes looked up at her with all the eagerness of a fresh new graduate ready to help.

“Grab your gear, kid, we’re going on a little trip,” was all she said as she turned and breezed out the door. Bewildered, Parvati looked to the aged doctor for some illumination just as Colett slammed a black leather satchel into the young man’s chest with a puff of smoke.

“But please, Doctor Sir, who is she?” he beseeched, half strangled.

“That’s the Captain, you twit, now get moving!” the Doctor barked, grabbing him by the shoulders and steering him out the door. Fumbling with the satchel and twisting an ankle, Parvati turned and scurried after the woman just as she disappeared around a corner.

“Wait, oh, wait please, I am coming!” he shouted ahead, and Colett laughed as a cloud of white smoke trailed along behind him, cape billowing in the wind.

“Garrett to Lieutenant Skyl and Ensign Hayes,” she giggled into her commbadge as she willfully tried to outrun the hapless lad, turning a new corner just as he’d turned the last. *Ah cadets, such fun...* she chuckled. “Report to the Transporter Room at once,” she then ordered. Almost immediately, Spencer’s voice echoed out of the tiny communication device, and she could sense by the tone that he was less than enthused.

“*Captain,*” he scolded, “*surely you’re not thinking of leading the Away Team?!*” It was a leading question, and she skirted it with Vulcan logic.

“Lieutenant Skyl will be point-man, Commander,” she smiled at her own cleverness. Practically out of breath, she paused at the door to the Transporter Room and waited for Parvati to catch up. Within moments, the poor kid nearly plowed into her as he came to a screeching halt on two heels in front of her. He clutched at his side and said nary a word.

Moments later, Stadi rounded a bend and approached with a cross look that was nothing to the ash-grey glaze painted over the face

of Atticus Hayes. That poor man was scared shitless, and Rachel couldn't help but think it would do the young officer good. They all needed toughening up at that age, cadets and ensigns alike. Doctor Bag-o-Bones McCoy had once put it best: *One tiny crack in the hull and your blood boils in 13 seconds... space is disease and danger wrapped in darkness and silence.* A life in Starfleet was not for the faint of heart. Deep space was the absolute antonym to anything *Life*.

Apparently, no one dared speak, so Rachel turned and the doors parted in her favor. She glanced at the chief as she bounded up onto the transport platform. "Set coordinates for the Bridge of the *Lenore*, Chief... ah, Skyl, nice of you to join us," she smiled, as everyone, bar him, still appeared to be out of breath – or perhaps breathless? Skyl raised an eyebrow and stared at his captain querulously. Spencer merely glowered at her as he nodded his unwilling consent to the transport chief. His telepathic paracortex, and indeed his own gut instinct, was telling him that she wasn't quite taking this as seriously as she possibly should.

"It's been certified safe, Commander," she argued to his grim composure. The three other officers gathered around her, Hayes and Parvati a bit less stoic, and a great deal more hesitant, than the Vulcan chief engineer, who now raised a single finger.

"Actually, Captain..."

"Stow it, Lieutenant," she growled through gritted teeth, balloon somewhat deflated. "We have a job to do, people," she said more sternly now, reminding them all of who they were... and just *who* she was. "Now let's get it done," she ordered firmly, "energize, Chief."

Mere seconds later, four columns of swirling energy materialized on the cramped and purely functional Bridge of the *SS Lenore*. There was no command chair here, no typical helm and Ops, just a small round room surrounding a small round control station with four round padded stools encircling it. Any number of science stations circumscribed the perimeter, and all dutifully reported back to the center. There were three different viewscreens embedded into the walls at equidistant locations, and a wide alcove in the rear led into a

small square science lab with a tabletop display console about the size of a pool table. Several stools surrounded it as well.

This was a scientific research vessel, pure and simple. It was no Starfleet capital cruiser, or ship of the line, it was never meant to be a long-range deep-space explorer, the *Oberths* were just supposed to park in orbit and do the dirty work. And that's just what they'd been doing for the past six months back at Cor Caroli... only there was no they – *they* were all gone – the ship was cold and empty, its soul as forsaken as an empty house.

Rachel shivered. “Skyl, why the hell's it so cold in here?” Her Vulcan Chief Engineer even now had a tricorder up and at the ready. She often wondered if he slept with the damn thing. She exhaled and caught a glimpse of breath.

“Temperature reads standard, Captain, twenty-one point five degrees C.” Skyl and Rachel began to fan out, but Parvati and Hayes stood back-to-back, frozen in the cold.

“Come on boys,” she scolded. “Let's check the consoles, see what we can glean from the main computer.” Hesitantly, they both moved to the center, bumped shoulders as they both reached for the same terminal in unison. Rachel just sighed. “Skyl, check the engineering terminal, I'm going to have a look inside Commander Van Dorne's office.” She didn't have to look, of course, to know that Skyl was already almost there.

With a *whoosh*, tiny doors parted and she passed without ceremony into the small room. There was a console table in here too, though higher, and several high-backed leather bar chairs. No desk, much to her lament. She loved a good desk. The room was light and airy, and would've been quite a nice place to work in, but to Rachel the air felt close. She took several deep breaths, but didn't feel like she was getting any oxygen, so gave up on the idea. Scattered across the table were dozens of papers (yes, *actual* paper) with penciled scribbles detailing a few of the monstrous dinosaurs they had been studying, plus innumerable notes in the margins. Behind her, the two doors slammed together with a sharp *crack*, causing her to jump, and forcing her to stifle a yelp.

“My God,” she said sheepishly, “that'd take off some fingers,”

and the lights went out.

It was dark, deep down in a cave dark, without so much a computer screen to provide reference. “God dammit,” she muttered, “Computer... lights!” Nothing. Even that soul had departed apparently. Turning, and raising her hands defensively, she carefully paced out the three steps she’d made and reached for the door. Nothing. Cautiously she stepped three more times. Nothing. Frustrated and annoyed, she turned slightly to the right, reached out further. Nothing. Three more steps... still nothing. Reaching for her commbadge, she was blinded as the doors parted mere inches from her nose. All was light inside and out. Her three comrades stared back at her as if she had three heads.

“Skyl,” the Captain demanded, “what happened to the lights?!”

“Ma’am?” the Vulcan merely replied, raising a single upswept eyebrow at her.

“Oh, Jesus, never mind... just watch that door, it’ll take your hand off,” and it slid shut behind her as casually as a man in a bar slides in next to a beautiful lady. Awkwardly, Atticus Hayes looked down at one of the computer terminals and keyed in several mock commands.

“Nothing out of the ordinary, Captain,” he reported. “As near as I can tell, every interface on the Bridge was operating... well, *is* operating normally. No command lockouts, nothing was safed-off, everything has just been sitting here running unbothered since they... um...”

“Left?” Rachel finished for him. “But where did they *goooo*?” she said, shuffling her hands back and forth – and immediately regretted letting her own uncertainty bubble to the surface. She must remain the rock here.

“Captain,” Parvati said next (still uncertain if that was indeed what he should call her), “atmospherics continue to check out... I’ve gone back through the readings for several months... nothing, and I mean nothing is out of the ordinary.” His terracotta face peered at her from beneath that ridiculous unibrow. “The chief engineer had this ship running perfectly.”

“Almost too perfect,” Rachel mused. “Well, I don’t see any point in exploring Engineering or Sickbay, or any of the other places we’ve already scanned with CCTV, so I suggest we go down to the crew’s quarters and continue there... Agreed?” Atticus and Parvati both nodded noncommittedly, while Skyl for his part seemed distracted, distant. As she turned for the turbolift, her mouth fell agape. A cloudbank of dense white fog was slowly falling out of the back science lab and clawing its way across the floor towards her.

“Um, Skyl,” she said with stunned amazement. Glancing up, the Vulcan too betrayed a hint of surprise through his carefully manicured veneer.

“The air is getting colder,” Atticus quivered as the first wisps snipped at his ankles. Skyl consulted the Engineering readouts, then spoke conclusively.

“The *Lenore* has been running unattended for nearly twenty-four hours, Captain, discrepancies are beginning to appear in numerous routine operations.” Rachel knew that machines as advanced and complex as their modern-day starships needed nearly constant monitoring... but fog? *Come on!*

“Come on,” she said aloud, and she didn’t have to ask twice.

Deck three was as quiet as a kirkyard, in fact, the whole damn ship was quiet... too quiet. It was unnerving to see a vessel so devoid of life, especially one as small as the *Lenore*. It’d been a while since Rachel had served aboard the *Hathaway*, a *Constellation*-class short range explorer, but the size was similar. The corridors were cramped, corners tight – these smaller class ships were built for functionality, and functionality only. She was amazed at how quickly she’d become accustomed to her new *Enterprise* with its broad corridors and its bright and expansive work and pleasure spaces. Starfleet was fortunately beginning to learn that to keep a crew happy – and sane – things had to be opened up, and well-lit.

“Alright, everyone pick a room,” she ordered. Atticus was again as white as a sheet, whereas Parvati seemed to have that dim-bulb sort of look about him that denoted extreme intelligence, with a complete lack of situational awareness. Skyl remained oddly pensive.

The Vulcan still continued to scan with his ever-present tricorder as they passed down the hall. Despite his readings to the contrary, the ship still felt cold, and as they walked, they passed through pockets that were colder still. She wasn't sure, but she thought she heard Atticus whimpering slightly behind her and smirked. Mystery notwithstanding, she found this to be exhilarating... indeed, perhaps because *of* the mystery! She still felt this was a good safe way to break these young officers in, even if it was admittedly starting to give her the heebie-jeebies as well.

The first door they came to read: **Dk 03 | Rm 306 Commanding Officer** – and Rachel thought *what the hell*, she'd survived the Ready Room... "I'll take this one," she stated, then pressed her thumb against the keypad. The doors parted with a whoosh to reveal quarters that were at least half the size of her own. There was a nostalgic grace to it though that dated back through fifty years of Federation history. The windows were small, the space limited, but it was still homey all the same. She immediately began to get a sense from the décor that she would've liked this Sydney Van Dorne. No doubt intelligent, the woman also had taste and grace.

Behind her, the doors slammed shut with a resounding *crack*, even louder this time, and Rachel again jumped out of her skin. She let out a weary sigh. *The chief engineer had this place running like clockwork?!* She took four steps in and was again in the dark. Strangely enough, she couldn't even see the stars out the small windows. It was just deep dark down in a cave *black*... and cold too! "Are you effin kiddin me," she blurted out, reaching for her commbadge. She touched it and spoke plainly. "Garrett to Skyl..." As soon as she let go, the small device emitted a shriek that unnerved her to the bone. She touched it again to hopefully stifle the sound, and that's when she felt the warmth of breath on the back of her cool neck...

Whirling around and striking out, she caught nothing but frosty air and panicked. Sticking her arms out, she charged the four steps back to the door. Nothing. Four more steps. Nothing. Whirling again, at a loss for her bearings, she stepped five times now. More nothing. She whimpered involuntarily in spite of herself and this time the breath

was cold. Charging forward undefended, she slammed into something mere inches in front of her. It moved – she whirled – and the doors parted to bright light both out and within.

“Okaayyy,” she whispered to the empty corridor, turning to peer back inside Van Dorne’s empty rooms. “This is definitely a strange new world.”

Skyl walked into an adjacent set of quarters and his heightened Vulcan sense of smell was immediately assailed with a stench he could barely tolerate – even with the olfactory inhibitors he routinely used. (Humans themselves were barely tolerable.) The room was small, by *Ambassador*-class standards obviously, but functional. He often found his VIP quarters aboard the *Enterprise* to be unnecessarily extravagant, and much preferred this more simplistic ‘old-school’ design of Starfleet’s past... and especially before this new breed of ‘ships counselor’ burst onto the scene and wanted to change everything.

Stepping forward, upper lip scrunched, he surveyed a table set for two. On it, two meals, blackened and crawling with maggots, slowly rotted in the various dishes and platters scattered across the table. But it made no logical sense. This was days of decay... the crew of the *Lenore* had been reported missing barely twenty-four hours ago. Hearing an unfamiliar sound, Skyl next directed his attention towards the small windows.

Approaching cautiously, he was much intrigued to see them swarming with ordinary Terran houseflies – again, in defiance of all logic. Houseflies took *days* to mature, not *hours*. This disregarded the fact entirely that there were houseflies here in the first place. In the sterile environment of a starship, it was the classic ‘chicken or the egg’ paradox of ancient Earth yore. They simply should *not* be here. His Vulcan composure at its limits, he slowly stepped back away from the windows. Mysteries were anathema to his people’s way of life. Everything in the universe had an explanation. Right now, the *Lenore* was defying explanation, and this vexed him. But it also determined him. In his world, there was no room for flies. His commbadge shrieked, and he shivered.

Atticus Hayes was sick to his stomach and perspiring heavily, even despite the chill air. Shaking like a leaf, he swiftly surveyed the sparse quarters wanting to get this over with as quickly as possible. There was no one here dammit! So why the charade of a door-to-door search? Unless all eighty bodies were stuffed into a closet somewhere, they weren't likely to be found anywhere on the *Lenore*. That was a lot of bodies to hide. Slowly, and with all due hesitation, Atticus approached the doorway to the room's small bathroom and continued to mutter vexations to himself. He couldn't wait to get the hell off here. Pressing his thumb on the pad, a blood-curdling shriek nearly put him catatonic as something grazed his leg like a bullet and blasted out the main door into the corridor.

"Fucking cat!" he screamed, having a general aversion to the animals in the first place. He placed his hand on the doorframe to peer inside, and with a **CRACK** the door slammed shut on his wrist. The pain, so unbelievable, wouldn't let him utter a sound as his teeth involuntarily clenched, and drool poured out from his lips to merge with the streams of tears sheeting down his cheeks. He spasmodically jerked, but the door held fast. He cried out, but there was no one there to listen. Bones cracked. His knees became weak. He pulled, the door pulled harder. He cried out again, eighty screams answered him. At this point, he didn't care if he ripped his Goddamn arm off, so he pulled even harder. The door released and he fell backwards, falling and clawing in the air... within moments, he was back out in the corridor.

Chandra Parvati cupped his ears against the screaming. The room was cold and dark, and from what he could tell, *The Stars and Stripes Forever* by John Philip Sousa was playing at pretty much max volume. "**COMPUTER!**" he screamed, "**STOP PLAYBACK!**" and the resulting silence was so absolute that it became almost as deafening. The room itself, from what he could see in the dim light, was a complete trainwreck. Whoever it was, he was glad he didn't have him for a roommate. *Is that a busted table?!* Much to his chagrin, Parvati had somewhat of a reputation at Starfleet Medical of being a bit

obsessive about his things. He about died of apoplexy when his classmates discovered the hidden tape measure he used to align his furniture, and the framed art on his walls. The game then began of surreptitiously moving things – a mere centimeter would do – and the next five and a half years of ‘harmless fun’ gave him a nervous disposition and nearly put him into an institution.

Walking up to a small desk in the corner, a laptop computer sat open and running as if the user had only just recently gotten up and stepped away for a beer (judging by the veritable mountains of cans). On the screen, an old man with a salt and pepper beard was speaking, and Parvati assumed it was likely some lecture on paleoarcheology. Intrigued, he reached down and clicked to unmute.

“Come around to zero-nine-zero, take her up twenty-two degrees, proceed at Warp Four... Come around to zero-nine-zero, take her up twenty-two degrees, proceed at Warp Four... Come around to zero-nine-zero, take her up twenty-two degrees, proceed at Warp Four...” repeated ad infinitum. When Parvati clicked to mute it, it merely got louder. *“Come around to zero-nine-zero, take her up twenty-two degrees, proceed at Warp Four... Come around to zero-nine-zero, take her up twenty-two degrees, proceed at Warp Four...”* He clicked again, and it got louder still. *“Come around to zero-nine-zero, take her up twenty-two degrees, proceed at Warp Four... Come around to zero-nine-zero, take her up twenty-two degrees, proceed at Warp Four... Come around to zero-nine-zero, take her up twenty-two degrees, proceed at Warp Four... Come around to zero-nine-zero, take her up twenty-two degrees, proceed at Warp Four...”* His compulsive side immediately went to *Tilt*, so slowly, deliberately, he backed away, nerves fraying his unibrow into undulating waves. Louder still it came. *“Come around to zero-nine-zero, take her up twenty-two degrees, proceed at Warp Four... Come around to zero-nine-zero, take her up twenty-two degrees, proceed at Warp Four...”*

Baffled, he crossed to the small bathroom, saw the *back* of someone’s head in the mirror, giving him a start at first, till he realized it was his own. Turning from side to side and studying it, he remarked to himself that he could use a trim, then paused as that dim bulb slowly began to brighten. He was looking in the mirror at the *back* of his head and this time the start became a shriek. *The Stars and Stripes Forever*

resumed at full volume, and he spasmodically cupped his ears at the deafening roar. In the mirror, his face turned to him and smiled.

Out in the corridor, Rachel pressed her thumb to the keypad and shut the door to Sydney Van Dorne's quarters forever. She turned to see her three colleagues staring at her from the grave. Chadra Parvati had a haggard look about him like he hadn't slept in untold days. Atticus Hayes was a blubbering mess and clutched at his wrist as if a Jihadist had just cut off his hand with a long sword. Even her Vulcan chief engineer, ever-stoic, looked disheveled and ready to unravel.

"It's all in your mind, Gentlemen," she attempted to admonish them, but her rock of certainty had shifted now and stood at the brink of a landslide.

"That may indeed be true, Captain," Skyl responded evenly, holding up his ever-ready tricorder. "Oxygen levels on this deck have fallen to fourteen percent. There is a malfunction in environmental control." Ever ready and eager to help, with his medical training automatically kicking in, Parvati dashed over and quickly glanced for himself at Skyl's readings.

"We are all suffering from acute hypoxia, Ma'am," he stated conclusively, "we need medical attention immediately."

"Well, that explains that," Rachel said with a sigh of relief. "Ensign Hayes, are you alright?"

"M-m-my, my wrist is broken, Ma'am." Grabbing the tricorder from Skyl with a flamboyant flare bordering on insubordination, the young doctor scanned the ensign's wrist, then shook his head with a cluck of the tongue.

"You are fine, it is not broken," Parvati half-scolded him in his heavy accent; which may have been funny mind you if they all weren't ready to kill each other.

"Tri-ox, Doctor?" Rachel attempted to urge him. He stared at her blankly and nodded only vaguely. She nudged him further with her nose until the bulb finally brightened enough and he remembered at last the black leather satchel he'd been clutching like a life vest ever since they'd left the *Enterprise*.

“Uh, yes of course,” he acknowledged, still not getting the drift.

“Let’s get to the Bridge,” she commanded, tired and sick, hoping the fresh misty air might do her good.

Behind them, 80 sets of eyes stared at them from the cold dark depths of hell.

The shriek they made would raise the dead...
if only someone would listen.

**DOES THE DANGER LIE IN APPROACHING THE
QUESTION,
OR DOES THE DANGER LIE IN PURSUING IT?
SOMETIMES ANSWERS CAN BE JUST AS
DANGEROUS.**

Their quick return to the Bridge had been uneventful, and none spoke a word about their experiences. It was just a given that they had all experienced *something*; whether the result of hypoxia or not remained an ominous question that none were willing to answer. The odd pockets of cold also remained an unanswered question (the small turbolift had been an icebox) and they merely chalked this up to the growing malfunctions in Environmentals, not willing to let their wild imaginations take it any further. Rachel remarked inwardly that it was not surprising that she and her human companions were ‘unsettled’, but it unnerved her to see Skyl as such as well.

Remember the ancient Klingon proverb:
“When a Vulcan looks scared, run.”

“There is a possibility we have not considered, Captain,” Lt. Skyl said pensively, standing in the knee-deep fog. He tried not to flinch as Chandra Parvati pressed a hypospray to his neck and injected the highly-oxygenated compound directly into his jugular.

“Go on,” Rachel said, intrigued. She too flinched as Parvati attacked her next. His bedside manner needed leavening.

“It is possible that the crew yet remains on the south polar moon of Cor Caroli Eight.”

“That is certainly an intriguing proposition, Mister Skyl,” she agreed, “and it also opens up another fresh box of fortune cookies.” The Vulcan merely stared at her as Unibrow attempted to jab himself with the butt end of the stick – *was his oxygen mixture right?*

“But that means we’d have to go there,” Atticus Hayes wilted.

“Good idea, Ensign,” Rachel replied cheekily. “Go to the helm, come around to zero-nine-zero, take her up twenty-two degrees,

proceed at Warp Four...”

“But I don’t wish to remain aboard, Ma’am...” he blurted out, white and shaking.

“I don’t believe that was a request, *Ensign*,” the Captain replied tersely, then called out into the comm network: “Garrett to *Enterprise*...”

“*Stadi here, Captain, go ahead...*”

“Red rover, red rover, send Fox and Parker over...”

“*Ma’am?*”

“Lieutenant,” she then said to Skyl, “you and Ensign Fox stabilize Environmentals and bubblegum together anything else that might need a’fixin’... I have a special assignment for Miss Parker.” Skyl gave her a baffled look and watched as Parvati flipped off a stool, upsetting a freestanding tool chest. With a crash, he and the contents disappeared beneath the fog. He sighed. *Humans... definitely too much oxygen.*

Barely an hour passed before Lieutenant Skyl and Kahler Fox had the *Lenore* running right as rain again. Other than the stark emptiness, nothing untoward had happened in all that time bar a few unexplained noises, and those bizarre pockets of cold that continued to persist, even after the fog had lifted, and despite all their best efforts to the contrary. Rachel herself couldn’t shake the feeling that someone was still breathing down her neck, and as the newcomer, Carmella Parker felt several times that someone (or some-*thing*) had brushed up against her. Taking it in stride however, the freckle-faced girl couldn’t help herself from teasing the stark-white Atticus Hayes about his ‘ghost ship’, much to his chagrin.

“Well done, Mister Skyl, you and Mister Parvati return to the *Enterprise*,” Rachel acknowledged as the Vulcan engineer made his final report. She was equally impressed with Kahler Fox, though the poor young man’s nerves always seemed strangely on the edge of splintering. She decided to give his worries a lucky break. “Ensign Fox,” she commanded, “you may remain aboard as acting Chief Engineer,” and the young man let forth a sigh that would’ve cleared Mt. Everest of snow.

“Ensign Parker,” she called out across the Bridge smiling. The young girl, braids a-bouncin, trotted quickly over and stared up at her captain with cherub cheeks and an aura of innocence that would make a crow blush.

“Yes, Ma’am,” she said with brown, expectant eyes.

“Ensign,” Rachel said softly, “I am granting you a field promotion to Lieutenant.” She then announced clearly for all to hear: “Computer... transfer all command codes to Lieutenant Junior Grade Carmella Rain Parker... voice authorization Garrett-beta-nine-three.”

The computer cycled through several melodious chirps. *“Transfer complete... Federation research vessel Lenore now under command of Lieutenant Carmella Parker.”*

“Captain on the Bridge,” Rachel nodded tenderly, offering the young girl her hand. Carmella grinned a smile that could split infinitives, then listened intently to her orders. “You three,” Rachel continued, “will bring the *Lenore* back to Cor Caroli at best possible speed and rendezvous with us there... understood?” Carmella nodded with a grin, even as behind her Atticus Hayes went even whiter, peering over the precipice of nausea and sliding on its gravelly edge. Clearing the snow from Mt. Everest with another contented sigh, Kahler Fox sat back in a chair in the corner and put his feet up on the Engineering console. All was sunny at his parade, and not even the Vulcan gestapo could reach him at this elevation.

Sitting in the command chair at the center of her own spacious Bridge, Captain Rachel Garrett watched the *Lenore* disappear from view as the *Enterprise* slowly swung around to port. She was humble to admit that she was happy to be home. She’d grown accustomed to this leviathan, bulky as it may be, and had grown even more accustomed to the fact that it was *hers*. At the helm in front of her sat a cadet of dubious distinction... Casper Sheldrake, the sixteen times great-grandson of Khalid Sheldrake, an English pickle manufacturer and King of Islamestan – though you couldn’t tell by looking at him. Over Rachel’s left shoulder, another cadet sat at Ops... Allie Al-

Shamahi was an expert at linguistics whose skill rivaled even that of Commandant Uhura. Allie's dissertation on the mathematical language of the Numera Tribe of Altai VII had made her the youngest recipient ever of the Zee-Magnees Prize.

To round out the triad of replacements, Cadet Genevieve Caldwell sat on her hands at an aft science station and was afraid to touch anything. A farm girl from the panhandle of Oklahoma... she bore no distinction at all, *but boy could that girl sing*. Yet, this was Starfleet – all makes, all models, all peoples - and they all came together as one to make the whole stronger. And supervising them, Spencer Stadi stood protectively over Casper as he engaged the warp drive in hopes that the trainee didn't vaporize them against the side of the first asteroid the kid came across. At 214 times the speed of light, The *Enterprise* would get back to Cor Caroli in half the time it would take the *Lenore*.

As the great ship leapt out of normal space, Doc Colett charged onto the Bridge in a shroud of smoke that would put a forest fire to shame. "I've found something interesting, Captain," he announced, holding one lit Rigellian cigarette and smoking another. "That twerp in the lab can be pretty smart when he wants to be," he finished as he vaulted the steps to an upper-level science station.

"Welcome to the Bridge, Doctor," Rachel said ruefully, and just under her breath enough to make Casper laugh. She and Spencer smiled at each other as they rounded the railing and climbed to join him. Genevieve whimpered as the doctor puffed a cloud in her direction; yet once safe, leaned forward, actually intrigued. The doctor punched up several displays, then poked at the screen with crumbling embers.

"We were analyzing trace gases and it there it is, Captain..."

"What, Doctor?" Rachel said, staring at the hexagons spilling out of the display.

"Smoke, but only just barely," he replied decisively, "in the parts-per-billion in fact."

"Oh, I didn't know you went over," Rachel jabbed drolly as the doctor flicked ashes on the console. Genevieve recoiled, as shocked as anyone that *smoking* was still a thing.

“Very funny...” Colett inhaled the words along with another great draught from the cigarette still in his mouth. Genevieve blinked with surprise as it burned out on his lips and, not missing a breath, the doctor brought the other cigarette up to replace it.

“Surely they didn’t just burst into flame, Doctor,” Spencer said incredulously. Though he’d become accustomed to the doctor’s strange habit, it was something that had never even been dreamt of on his homeworld of Betazed. Why would anyone intentionally *inhale* smoke? Humans...

“Well of course not, Son, don’t be daft,” Colett scolded, drawing Spencer’s attention back to reality. “Spontaneous combustion is a fantasy, if you don’t believe me, look it up on Wikipedia.”

“Well then, what’s your point?” Spencer demanded, trying not to be annoyed.

“I just said we found something interesting,” Colett retorted, “I didn’t say I was clairvoyant.”

“*Please...* keep us posted on any further developments,” Rachel intervened, deflecting the flames. “Thank you, Doctor,” she then said conclusively. Without ceremony, he puffed, harumphed, and left, apparently indifferent to what they or anyone else thought. And as her Captain and First Officer turned and walked away, Genevieve studied the hexagons and the oxides and the rest of the atmospheric data that the good doctor was good enough to leave behind. Yes, the smoke was there, albeit subtle, but there was also something more. *Where had all the oxygen gone?*

The south polar moon of Cor Caroli VIII hung under the planet in perpetual silence, caught in a peculiar Lagrange Point that left it wobbling for all time in peaceful obscurity. The poor little moon’s only claim to fame had come millions of years ago when an unusually large breed of dinosaurs had roamed its surface... and then vanished. On Earth, at nearly the same epoch, climate change, continental drift, and eventually of course the Chicxulub Impact, had shaped the destiny of its own great beasts for millennia – but on the south polar moon, they just *died*. Eons later, the desert came to make its claim – but not before. Now, there wasn’t much left except bones and sand, and it was

the type of sand that gets into everything. Spencer Stadi muttered as windswept waves of grit filtered in through his collar and settled eventually into his underwear. The desert, the great leveler.

With him, Cadet Genevieve Caldwell surveyed the next hutment for any signs of life, or even a body, that might lead to a clue for the disappearance of the crew of the *Lenore*. There was nothing. Sand and grit had penetrated the seals of the various labs and living quarters, but little else. No one had been in, or out, for weeks. As reported, they had returned as scheduled to the ship at the beginning of the stormy season and no one had returned since. From orbit, Allie Al-Shamahi at Ops had confirmed the planetoid ‘dead’ before they’d ever even beamed down, so the search for bodies had begun. But after nearly two hours of grit and windblown silt penetrating his very pores it seemed, Spencer had decided to call it.

Genevieve came up to him with a huge grin on her face. The Commander sympathized with the Cadet... but however exciting this was to her, he had sand in his shorts and his disposition was acerbic. “Ready to get out of here, Cadet?” he shouted against the howling gale.

“I’ve found something interesting, Commander,” she shouted back, holding up a tricorder. He tried to hide his eyeroll as he came up close to study the small device. Turning their backs to the tempest, Spencer tried to focus through a bloodshot blur that was being fueled by a growing headache. Giving up on dried out speech, he merely shrugged.

“There’s a shortage of oxygen,” she screamed, pointing at the small screen. “It’s just like the *Lenore*... no wonder everything here died!” *Well, that explained the headache...*

“We’ll have a sample beamed up after we return,” Spencer attempted to shout, but a particularly obnoxious gust nearly knocked them over and tore sheets from several of the nearby hutments. “The storm’s getting worse,” he cried out, “we have to get out of here!”

Genevieve nodded as he tapped his commbadge. “Stadi to *Enterprise!*” The gadget crackled and filled the air with static. “Stadi to *Enterprise,*” he yelled even louder, “Captain, can you hear me?!?!?” The wind howled and they were forced to duck behind a hutment as more sheeting sailed overhead, warbling in the squall like a half-

drowned duck.

“*Cap... you... me,*” was all the *Enterprise* received. Sitting up on the edge of her chair, Rachel turned towards Ops. “Cadet, can you clean that up?” Allie had been typing frantically at her console even before the captain spoke, and now shook her head conclusively.

“The storm is increasing in intensity Ma’am, I’d suggest pulling them out of there regardless of what they want...”

“Garrett to Transporter Room Three...” Rachel called out with some urgency. “Beam the Away Team back immediately.”

“*We’re having trouble maintaining a lock, Captain,*” the chief replied. “*Windblown static is scrambling the targeting scanners...*” he then attempted to explain, but the captain would have none of it.

“Get them back *now*, Chief,” she insisted levelly even as Casper Sheldrake interrupted her from the helm.

“Long-range sensors are picking up the *Lenore*, Captain,” he announced with a certain inflection that caused Rachel to turn slowly in his direction.

“Report, Cadet,” she half-whispered, slowly rising. Something was making the hairs on the back of her neck bristle.

“Well, it’s kinda strange Ma’am, they seem to be coming in awful hot...”

“Allie, hail them!” Rachel ordered. She heard the tones of a universal hail coming from Ops and held her breath. *Nothing*. “Lieutenant Skyl, report to the Bridge immediately... Transporter Room Three, get them the hell out of there *Now!*” The two cadets on the Bridge both looked at their captain in unison. Fear gripped them just as it gripped her. She was supposed to be their rock, but for the moment the rock was sliding on the edge of an avalanche.

“Allie, full sensor scan on the *Lenore...*” Rachel clung to find purchase and took a breath, trying to exhume calm. She could see their stricken faces, and she needed them focused – cadets or not, the next few moments would be critical. Skyl popped out of the turbolift and went immediately to an aft science station. She eyed him knowing instinctively that her chief engineer would tackle the transporter problem while she confronted more pressing matters.

“I’m reading no lifesigns, Captain,” Allie reported, and that’s all Rachel needed to hear.

“Helm, break orbit,” she hissed at Casper, then jumped forward to plop down at Tactical beside him. The *Lenore* was entering the system at warp four... she might be a little hazy on the math, but she was certain it was going to be one hell of a bang. What her somewhat imprecise mental calculations didn’t show was that the *Lenore* was carrying the potential energy of 3.5 million megatons of TNT – approximately 70 billion Tzar bombs, 35,000 dinokillers, or 4,274 Death Stars – all packed into a package not much bigger than an ancient Earth aircraft carrier.

And its speed was terrific.

In the blink of an eye, the tiny ship slammed into the south polar moon at 68 billion miles per hour. The flash momentarily blinded the *Enterprise* before pelting it with pulverized debris. Fortunately for all, Rachel had just managed to get the shields up in time, and now she was using the phasers to blast a path through the Everest-sized chunks of molten rock. Cadet Sheldrake, for his part, was literally fighting for his life as he turned the *Enterprise* over, then over again, then spun the ship around in tight circles as his captain blew holes through the debris field. Feeling nauseous was not an option as the Inertial Damping System fought to keep up. The struts and stringers of the ship’s skeleton groaned and shrieked as each new turn became tighter than the last. For a moment, they were losing, until mercifully, that last hole opened up, and he punched it.

Frozen in fear, Casper about shit himself as the *Enterprise* plowed through a final cloud of sand and emerged nose downwards toward Cor Caroli VIII at nearly full impulse. “Jesus, what do I do?!” he moaned as the wispy atmosphere of the gas giant loomed ever closer on the viewscreen.

Rachel could see he was in a full body lock as his hands hovered over the console, shaking in rhythm with the shuddering deck. In a decisive move, she reached over and pressed two key commands. With a low throaty growl, the *Enterprise* went suddenly nose-up, and slammed into the upper atmosphere at nearly half the speed of light.

The shields immediately flared into a nova's ball of flame as the great ship skipped once, twice, three times, before launching itself out into deep space with a tail of wraithlike fire.

"I-I-I'm s-s-sorry, C-C-Captain," Casper whimpered, body still locked, hands still hovering.

"It's quite alright, Cadet," Rachel said cheekily, jumping up, "Ensign Hayes would've died of a heart atta..." and she trailed off. Ensign Hayes was dead – as was Carmella Parker and Kahler Fox. *Oh my God, Spencer...*

"Lieutenant Skyl," she croaked in a dry throat, looking up to her Vulcan chief engineer with lips quivering, palms sweaty. The turbolift doors opened and she turned to see Spencer Stadi and Genevieve Caldwell smiling at her. "You could use a shower," was all she said as the *Enterprise* slowly cooled off in the cold dark black of interstellar space.

The souls of the departed shrieked from hell,
turning and burning and forever yearning,
but no one was there to listen.

***SOMETIMES, IT SEEMS, THERE CAN BE
HIDDEN CONSEQUENCES TO OUR ACTIONS.
WE ARE ALL VICTIMS OF OUR OWN DEMONS.***

The *Enterprise* was dim and empty... and oh so very quiet. There were after all only 117 cadets and officers aboard on a ship built for 840 – and most of these were asleep. Absent were the usual sounds of people and machines working together in harmony. Absent were the motions and the commotions that usually went along with the management of a ship this size. Absent perhaps was that spark of life that made it a home. Right now, it was just a single lonely captain and her starship, all alone in the dark, searching for an inner calm. There wasn't much to do on a Bridge at night, so the good captain had just sort of wandered off into the dark corridors of the *Enterprise* and gotten lost for a while. She needed time to think. There was absolutely no one about, and the ship seemed so peaceful... almost as if it were resting after its fierce fiery flight from Cor Caroli.

Only in the dark of night
does a starship captain contemplate death.

As she wandered the corridors, the captain thought back to her most recent experiences aboard the lost *Lenore*. The ghost ship. It too had a stark emptiness about it, but that was different. It had even *seemed* dead. So, was the *Enterprise* really alive then? Not in the traditional sense, no, she supposed; but she could certainly feel its energy flowing through her now. That spark of life, of home, of peace in togetherness. It was so easy in the modern age to take all this technology for granted, to forget sometimes the importance of the symbiotic relationship the crew shared with this mere machine. One could not live without the other, and it most definitely went both ways. Outside this tiny tin bubble of air was certain death, nothingness... inside however, was life – and most of all, happiness – at least most of the time.

A ghost ship – and she felt suddenly cold. Far off in the

distance, in the dim lighting of a long, lonely corridor, the captain thought she saw a shape – but more importantly, she thought she saw it move. Her heart leapt for a moment as she stopped with a start and kind of hung there behind a bulkhead. A house can have ghosts, so why not a starship? You never know what’s lurking there dead, hiding in the shadows underneath your bed, teeth ground sharp and eyes glowing red. With guarded trepidation, the captain crept a little farther down the corridor. She knew she was being ridiculous, but at the same time, it somewhat fascinated her that this ship may not be as empty as it seemed. The undying explorer in her? Very little of the galaxy had been charted. Very few of the millions of life forms had been catalogued. Was it really that far beyond the realm of possibility that she was not alone here after all? *Hmmm, turn around, blink and sigh.*

Humanity had once held a very narrow view of what constituted life. To them it was simply what was found on Earth, and nowhere else. But those early space explorers quickly discovered that life utterly abounded... as long as you knew where to look. From the very first microbes on Mars, to the giant ice-whales of Europa, life in its many and varied forms was undeniably everywhere... so why not here, red and black, and all slimy green? Not all things live in the light; some thrive quite nicely in the shadows of the night. Her heart pounding, the captain continued to creep down that long, lonely corridor, allowing her mind to play tricks on her. *Fun?* Maybe. Why do people watch scary movies?

The deep cold intensified, a strange new wind blew spiders through her hair. Rounding that last corner, she was slapped in the face with a blood-curdling scream. The turbopumps for the port-forward reaction control thruster sprang suddenly to life and scared the ever-lovin’ bejesus out of her. With a cry, the captain stumbled backwards and half-fell against the wall, trembling from head to toe. *Okay*, she quickly concluded, *that’s enough fun for one evening!* In a most uncaptain-like way, Rachel Garrett turned and fled. All those dark and sinister creatures of the night, filling your dreams to the brim with fright, can have the dark! *And they can keep it!*

Eventually, Rachel found her way to the only logical place that

made sense...

Dk 04 | Rm 247 – Executive Officer. She pressed her thumb to the touchpad, but no one answered, so in a rare moment of ne'er-do-well, the captain keyed her security code and just let herself in. She knew instinctually that her First Officer was not yet sleeping, and also knew from experience that his telepathic mind already knew why she was there anyway, so let's just skip the formalities, shall we? She puffed out her lips, frustrated, surprised at how flushed she still was. Unclasping the gold catch at her right shoulder, she ripped open her uniform top and began to survey the expansive quarters that spread out before her. Spencer always seemed to have a somewhat eclectic taste that she enjoyed and it immediately relaxed her.

Rooms of this size were only reserved for an admiral on smaller ships of the line, but this, like hers, went above and beyond. Placing the officers' quarters on the edge of the saucer section was somewhat of a new concept unique to the *Ambassador*-class starship. Instead of being buried way down deep in the bowls of the primary hull, their positioning here gave broad sweeping views out into deep space and the galaxy's breathtaking spackling of stars. She stepped forward slowly, almost solemnly, and looked out the centermost of a bank of large oval windows. Sometimes she saw the stars, sometimes she saw only the black space between. *Hello darkness my old friend*, she whispered sullenly.

Three young officers had died under her watch today, the first since she'd taken command of the *Enterprise*, and this had left her melancholy and morbid. She heard the shower stop, so she plopped into a plush chair, kicked off her boots, and put her feet up on the coffee table. Death was a part of life of course; she'd learned that at a very young age. And a career in space, in Starfleet, brought with it certain degree of danger that they all had accepted – and too in some ways, feared. *One tiny crack in the hull and your blood boils in thirteen seconds... space is disease and danger wrapped in darkness and silence.* A life in Starfleet was not for the faint of heart; deep space was the absolute antonym to anything *Life*. She thought of Atticus Hayes, scared shitless, and smiled. They all needed toughening up at that age, cadets and ensigns alike, but had she pushed it too far?

“Can I get you anything, Captain?” Spencer said quietly, coming out in shorts and a loose-fitting black T-shirt.

“Why’s it so hot in here?” she asked instead, leaning forward now and pulling off her heavy uniform jacket. Her own grey T-shirt, in contrast, was tight and form-fitting. She may be in her thirties now, but by gosh, at least she hadn’t lost that sharp tone of youth.

“Betazed norm,” he merely replied. The lush tropical world of his birth was much warmer than Earth, but much to his vexation, Starfleet ships all leaned heavily towards Earth standard. He’d have to work on her about that. Technically, the *Enterprise’s* home port was Betazed, and most likely would be fully crewed from there someday. It didn’t matter that she’d grown up in the frozen north, she’d just have to get used to the heat and humidity, and that was that.

“It’s never easy,” Rachel said solemnly, “but this time it seems harder...”

“These are your first losses as Captain,” he explained. “At Mordan Four, aboard the *Falcon*, you were merely First Officer.”

“True,” she conceded. “But more than that, I ordered them to their deaths.” Rachel let her head fall back and she closed her eyes.

“Classic self-reproach,” Spencer tried to mollify her. “You ordered them to take command of the *Lenore*, nothing more. What happened to them after that is where we really need to focus our attention.”

“You sound like Skyl,” she half-scoffed, her head popping up as he set a teacup and saucer down next to her filled to the brim with steaming hot cider.

“Wise man,” he rejoined with a smile. “Every mystery has a solution, Captain...”

“Do they?” she shot back somewhat hotly. “Perhaps not this one... not much of a case, counselor,” she then added drolly, “when you destroy all the evidence,” and he laughed. It certainly had been one hell of an explosion... good thing the south polar moon was uninhabited. The bulb brightened, and Spencer paused.

“Hmmmph,” he puffed out suddenly.

“What?” Rachel asked, burning her lips on the scalding cider.

“Something Cadet Caldwell said to me just before we beamed

back... she said: ‘no wonder everything here died.’” Spencer sat down on the edge of the couch adjacent to her. Placed his hand on his chin and pinched the skin. “There was a shortage of oxygen, just like on the *Lenore*,” he mused.

“A clue?” Rachel surmised.

“Perhaps... her readings seemed to indicate that more than just simple climate change had turned that moon into a desert.” The room felt suddenly cold and a chill ran up Rachel’s spine. She felt something brush up against her leg and jumped. Spencer looked at her strangely; the human mind was such a cluttered place. She scowled at him.

“Why’s it so cold in here?” she shivered, and her commbadge chirped.

“*Cadet Caldwell to Captain Garrett...*”

“Yes, Cadet, what is it?” She eyed Spencer with concern – it was late.

“*I’m sorry to bother you, Ma’am, but I think somebody’s missing...*” Rachel jumped up and jerked on her uniform jacket as Spencer fled to his bedroom to get dressed.

“Meet us in the lab, Cadet,” Rachel commanded. Then: “Garrett to Doctor Colett... respond please...” There was a moment’s pause, then a throaty cough.

“*What the hell is it? It’s two a.m. for Christ’s sake...*” There was more spasmodic coughing in the background. She heard the flick of a lighter.

“Meet us in the lab, Doctor, it’s important,” she ordered as Spencer came out in a fresh new uniform. “Let’s go,” and the two of them breezed out into a cold wind.

“I was analyzing the sensor readings from the *Lenore*,” Genevieve explained, “and cross-referencing them against my readings from the south polar moon...”

“And?” Colett said gruffly, inhaling a deep drag. He had little patience for Starfleet cadets, and even less at two-thirty in the morning. Genevieve hesitated, intimidated.

“Well,” she continued uncertainly, “I decided to run a scan on the *Enterprise* as well... and that’s when I found *this*...” and she keyed

in several commands. One hundred and sixteen lifesigns.

“Sonuvabitch,” the Doctor coughed into a cloud, “there’s somebody missing!”

“Full sensor analysis of the atmosphere *now*, Doctor,” Rachel almost whispered. “Commander Stadi, wake everyone, put the ship on yellow alert... I want a full security search of every deck... and find out who’s missing for Christ’s sake...” She touched Genevieve on the shoulder and smiled. “Capital work, Cadet... now stay here with the doctor and find out what’s contaminated my ship.” The cadet wilted as a cloud of smoke enveloped her.

A coordinated search of a ship this size took hours. Commander Stadi had split the hundred and sixteen cadets and officers into pairs, and now Allie Al-Shamahi, sitting at Ops, was directing their efforts from the Bridge. Only those very few at the top had that sickening feeling that there would be no body to be found. That missing person was simply that: missing. Just like the eighty scientists aboard the lost *Lenore*, then Parker, Hayes, and Fox – all had simply vanished without a trace. Still, they searched though, just in case something else untoward may have happened. Accidents, though rare, did occasionally happen aboard a starship... and even, sometimes, murder. The personalities of a hundred worlds often collided in a ship of this size, and sometimes those collisions led to calamity.

And to Lt. Skyl, this was calamity. PA Chandra Parvati had talked almost incessantly for the past hour and a half, and Skyl had at last grown weary of it. Even a Vulcan has a limit to patience, and he was beginning to think about taking up smoking. They were in the very bowels of the ship now, surveying the vast cargo bays and equipment rooms of the *Enterprise’s* lowermost decks. Their search of course had brought up nothing, as expected... the missing cadet would’ve had no cause to be down here in the first place, but still they searched. Bodies could be hidden anywhere, and every so often cadets were known to wander off with space sickness, looking for a place to die alongside the beloved family pet. Life aboard a deep-space starship was not for the faint of heart.

At present, Skyl was holding up his ever-ready tricorder and

scanning another one of those bizarre pockets of cold.

“Did you feel that?!” Parvati said suddenly in his heavy Indian accent.

“Feel *what*, Doctor,” Skyl responded evenly.

“It just felt like something brushed up against me,” he fired back rapidly.

“You are letting your imagination run away with you *again*, Doctor,” Skyl said coolly this time. “What do you make of these readings?” He held out the tricorder for Parvati to inspect; cringed at the proximity of the human, and his *odor*.

“It is a zone of reduced humidity and oxygen, just like last time,” Parvati concluded, shaking off a chill despite the sweat on his brow.

“Indeed,” Skyl merely mused, “but why...” The Vulcan didn’t like mysteries; they went against the very nature of his peoples. He regretted not applying his olfactory suppressant but had unfortunately left his quarters in haste. The human behind him was gaining strength with each passing moment as the man stewed in his anxiety, even despite the cold. *What the hell do these people eat?*

“What is that smell?” Parvati said next, and Skyl paused in quiet reflection, centering his nerves.

“Smell, Doctor?”

“Yes, like rotting flesh...”

“I smell nothing, Doctor,” Skyl lied. “Nor is my tricorder picking up any trace contaminants that would suggest decay.”

“Hmmmph, must be my imagination.” Somewhere, down the long dark corridor ahead of them, they did both hear a strange banging though and decided to investigate. Then they both thought they saw a shape – but more importantly, they thought they saw it *move*. You never know what’s lurking there dead, teeth ground sharp and eyes glowing red. With guarded trepidation, the duo crept a little farther down the passageway. Hearts pounding, they continued to creep along step by lonely step, allowing perhaps for their minds to play tricks on them both. The deep cold intensified, a strange new wind blew spiders through their hair. Rounding that last corner, Skyl was at last slapped in the face with a blood-curdling *crack*.

The Vulcan took a breath. All of this, whatever this was, was illogical to the extreme. There were no such things as ghosts! He knew he was being ridiculous, but at the same time, it somewhat fascinated him that this ship may not be as empty as it seemed. Was it really that far beyond the realm of possibility that he was not alone here after all? Hmmm, *turn around blink and sigh*, and slowly he turned.

“Doctor Parvati?” Skyl froze, then touched his commbadge. “Doctor Parvati, respond please...” Silence. He held up his tricorder. Nothing. Fear is just the beginning of loneliness and discontent. And now Skyl was all alone in the dark, and quite possibly, *afraid*.

Six little Indians playin' with a hive,
a bumblebee stung one,
and then there were five.

***DEEP INTO THAT DARKNESS PEERING,
LONG I STOOD THERE WONDERING, FEARING,
QUOTH THE RAVEN NEVERMORE, TIS THE WIND AND
NOTHING MORE...***

“I’m tellin ya, Captain, the air’s clean!” More ominous words could never have been spoken. Doc Colett was as frazzled as everyone else. The sudden disappearance of PA Chandra Parvati had left everyone on the edge of a slippery roof with rain in the forecast. He jabbed at the computer screen so hard that the cherry came out of his cigarette and the hapless doctor now stood there chewing on the dried-out butt in a sort of nervous frenzy. Rachel Garrett and Lt. Skyl stood around him trying to make their own sense of the strange readings Skyl had picked up with his tricorder, while Genevieve Caldwell hovered in the background, chewing on shredded fingernails, wondering who would be next.

Here I opened wide the door, darkness there and nothing more.

“Skyl,” Rachel asked pensively, “was there anything strange about Parvati himself before he disappeared?” Visibly shaken, the Vulcan met his captain first with silence.

Anything strange?! He was human! “The doctor was sweating profusely, Captain...”

“And...” Rachel urged, sensing her chief engineer was holding something back.

“He had taken up somewhat of a strange odor,” Skyl finished off matter-of-factly, though Rachel had known the man long enough now that she could recognize the deeply suppressed emotional shame. The Vulcan sense of smell was somewhat of a planetwide paradox, the fact that they had to use nasal suppressants somewhat of an interplanetary imperfection. It was not logical.

“Like what?” Colett shot back incredulously, lighting another cigarette.

“Ammonia, Doctor...”

“Oh, you mean cat piss,” Colett coughed out a chuckle.

“Doctor, please,” Rachel reprimanded him. “Any theories on why?”

“Well,” the Doc said more seriously now, “the smell itself can come from a lot of things, but the chemical makeup is nothing more than nitrogen and hydrogen.”

“Hmmm, so nothing out of the ordinary there,” Rachel ruminated pacing. “But why would he smell like that?!” she finished off, hands on hips, more rhetorical than anything.

“It seemed to be related to his excessive perspiration,” Skyl added.

“The man was scared to death,” Collett blurted out, not recognizing the double entendre in his words. “Of course he was sweating!”

“Hydrolysis,” Genevieve said meekly behind them. She had been hovering still in the shadows, not really sure what a mere cadet would have to offer. But the trio of senior officers all turned on her like wolves in the night.

“Explain, Cadet,” Rachel queried even as Colett began to punch at his computer screen in a smoke-filled craze.

“It’s a chemical reaction, Captain,” she began to explain timidly, “where water breaks down various chemical bonds... perhaps his sweat was somehow creating ammonia gas?” and she trailed off feeling stupid as Skyl and the Captain turned away from her.

“Doctor?” Rachel said cautiously.

“I believe the Cadet may be onto something,” Colett answered pensively, “but I sure as hell don’t know what.” He stood up and stared at his screen, puffing away in rhythm with his heart.

“Well, keep at it, Doctor,” the Captain said quietly, and Colett merely harumphed. She turned to Genevieve and nodded a smile.

“*Bridge to Captain Garrett... urgent...*” Rachel inhaled deeply, bracing for what she knew was coming.

“Go ahead, Commander...” Even despite the urgency, Spencer’s voice was hesitant.

“*Whatever this is, Captain,*” he finally announced, “*it’s spreading fast... now reading one-hundred-six lifesigns aboard...*”

Colett practically inhaled his cigarette as Skyl drew in a deep sigh. Genevieve, in turn, drew her head deep into her shoulders and looked warily up at the ceiling, wondering where the lightning bolt of death's finger would strike next.

Rachel stood up straight and tugged her uniform jacket tight. "Inform Starfleet of our situation, Commander," she ordered, "and have them dispatch another starship to intercept us... they may have to destroy the *Enterprise*." And Genevieve whimpered.

A certain purveyance of cold permeated the Bridge in those early morning hours of July 26, 2323. The life-count now stood at one hundred, and the grim reality of just what was in store for the rest of them had settled in with the pre-dawn damp of a mornings frost. No one spoke, and Rachel paced. Spencer leaned against one of the upper-level science stations and stared placidly across the Bridge and out into the dark of night displayed on the main viewscreen. Next to him, Skyl worked quietly at an adjacent console, making his own valiant attempt at a solution to this most fateful of quandaries. Casper Sheldrake still sat at the helm, unrelieved for hours, and up at Ops, Allie Al-Shamahi too worked valiantly at her own duties proving that fourth-year cadets were indeed equal to the task.

"Message coming in from Starfleet, Captain," she reported as her terminal beeped gently. No one noticed her sweating. The anxiety Spencer sensed came from all, and came from all equally. As such, he paid her little mind.

"Let's hear it, Cadet," Rachel flipped her hand, ceasing her pacing for but a moment. Anything to break the monotony! When death knocks, everyone jumps.

"Situation acknowledged," Allie read, "and the *Starship Levant* is on an intercept course... ETA three hours forty-seven minutes."

"Well at least we know *when* were gonna die," Casper said glibly from the helm. He thought he'd been quiet enough that no one would hear, but Rachel wheeled on him anyway, ready to strike, then softened. If she was afraid, then what must these cadets be feeling?! Their first ever training cruise, and they were being plucked off the

wire by some no-good rotten kid with a BB gun. She smirked and Spencer studied her quizzically. The human mind was such a scattered place.

“Does anyone else *smell* that,” Casper chirped up suddenly, and it set Rachel’s teeth on edge. Spencer jumped up and approached the upper-level railing just as Skyl, with his keen sense of smell, turned towards Allie.

“Cadet, are you alright?” he asked cautiously. Allie didn’t turn, she merely shivered. With a sharp *crack* that shook the Bridge and filled their pants with fear, Allie evaporated right before their eyes in a flash. The wispy cloud of smoke then filtered up towards the ceiling and was vented out into space. The Fire Suppression System had done its job – the spark was gone forever.

“Skyylll, *why* is my ship killing cadets?” Rachel asked calmly, her insides quivering. Unwilling to approach Ops, Spencer turned to a science station behind him.

“Taking the Fire Suppression System offline,” he said breathlessly.

“*What the fuck,*” Casper whispered. He had jumped up from the helm and now stood with his back to the ship’s dedication plaque in the far-right corner of the Bridge.

“Lieutenant,” Rachel half-shouted, then with gritted teeth: “*Report!*”

Skyl shook his head – he too was visibly shaken – twice in one day. His Vulcan grandfathers must be rolling. “Checking for software faults, Captain... running a scan for computer viruses...”

“God dammit, Skyl, you’re answering the *wrong* question!”

“Captain?”

Spencer intervened. “There was obviously something *wrong* with the Cadet that set off the FSS, Skyl... we need an analysis of her physical condition!”

“*Spontaneous combustion,*” Casper trembled, still holding the bulkhead up with his own form of plaster.

“Don’t be stupid,” Colett barked, charging out of the turbolift in a swirl. “What the hell’s going on up here?!” he then shouted at anyone that would listen. “We’re down to ninety-three people for

Christ's sake." Genevieve coughed in his smoke trail, struggling to keep up. She had the stricken look of a soldier crossing a field of mustard gas. The two of them bounded to the upper level as Casper Sheldrake began to sweat profusely.

"I don't wanna die," he whimpered.

"Cadet, please, resume your station," Rachel tried to coax him, to calm him. This was unraveling very quickly. She too began to sweat. Beads formed on her upper lip, rolled down her forehead. "*Doctor,*" she insisted. Rats in a cage, that's all they were at this point, and the good captain was chewing at her own tail.

"Fire reported in crew quarters, Deck Six," Spencer shouted, paused. "Looks like they got it out with hand-held gear..." Casper started to shiver, to whimper even louder. Rachel raised two palms towards him in a supplicating gesture.

"It's going to be alright, Cadet," she lied. She felt like her own insides were burning. Allie Al-Shamahi, an expert at linguistics whose skill rivaled even that of Commandant Uhura. Her dissertation on the mathematical language of the Numera Tribe of Altais VII had made her the youngest recipient ever of the Zee-Magnees Prize. Carmella Parker, promoted to Lieutenant and placed in command of a starship at age twenty-three. Kahler Fox, a warp field genius that had impressed even the unimpressible. Chandra Parvati – graduated second in his class, an expert in gene therapy... how many more must she lose? Casper began to shake; she could smell that awful smell. Ammonia. The smell of cat piss.

"An enzyme!" Genevieve blurted out, then shoved the Doctor out of the way. "Put that fucking thing out," she growled, typing anxiously into Skyl's science console.

"My God, Cadet," Colett breathed the clean air for the first time, "that's brilliant..."

"What if you..." Skyl began, then halted as the girl went beyond him. His eyebrow rose as she inputted a chemical formula that defied all logic.

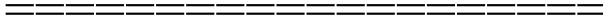
"Computer..." Genevieve shouted, "raise shipwide temperature to fifty degrees C, raise humidity to ninety percent, and release the following protease into the ventilation system..." and she

typed even more desperately than before as Casper began to scream.

“*Command authorization required...*” the computer responded obstinately and the poor girl wilted.

“Garrett-alpha-one-priority, override!” Rachel cried out, coming to the poor girl’s rescue. With a *whoosh*, the Bridge suddenly became a sauna, and everyone scrunched up their noses at the strange smell of citrus mixed with mint. Bizarrely, Casper began to giggle as the superheated vapor tickled him in a most unsuspecting way. Rachel began to approach him cautiously even as he leapt at her, wrapping his arms around her waist in a take the plunge, make apologies later, bear hug. Flummoxed at first, she then too began to laugh and wrapped her arms tightly around his shoulders. At least one had been saved, and she thought of all the others, including those eighty scientists aboard the lost *Lenore*.

Nameless here for evermore.



“Well, Ensign, your final report?” Rachel looked at her squarely across the conference table as the rest of the senior officers present looked on. Genevieve Caldwell beamed from ear to shining ear as she looked back into her captain’s expectant eyes. Her promotion had been somewhat informal, but she would take it back to the Academy with pride, nonetheless.

“It was a very unusual quantum-level enzyme, Captain,” she began to explain, “that served as a very powerful catalyst...”

“That’s why the ship’s sensors didn’t pick it up?” Spencer asked, intrigued.

“Yes, exactly,” she responded levelly. “We’ve never seen anything like it on a subatomic level. It was airborne and it was fast, and strangely enough, it worked along the same principles as photosynthesis.”

“So, that would explain why the south polar moon of Cor Caroli Eight was a dead world,” Rachel hypothesized.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Genevieve answered grinning. “The catalytic

properties of this particular enzyme create an incredibly aggressive hydrolytic reaction in all living things...”

“Dumb it down for us, Ensign,” Spencer smiled at her cordially. Neither he nor his captain had been aces at chemistry, and she mentally thanked him for pumping the brakes. Genevieve folded her hands for a moment in thought, then leaned forward and spoke very casually. Rachel was astonished at this young girl’s transformation. Her newfound confidence would take her far; she’d have to keep a watchful eye on this one.

“Hydrolysis is a chemical reaction that breaks down water into its constituent atoms,” Genevieve explained, “hydrogen and oxygen... some of the hydrogen fused with the nitrogen in our bodies to create ammonia...”

“And the remaining hydrogen became a highly-combustible gas,” Rachel finished for her, nodding with understanding.

“Yes! And the freed oxygen gave it all the oxidation it needed...”

“Wait, I don’t understand,” Spencer interjected, “then why was the Fire Suppression System blowing everyone up?!”

Skyl this time explained: “A hydrolytic reaction creates positively and negatively charged hydrogen ions, Commander. The FSS senses ionized gases and makes a preemptive strike so to speak... it creates a forcefield around the zone of ionization and accelerates the process.”

“So, if I hadn’t turned off the FSS...”

“We likely wouldn’t be here,” Genevieve warned. “The concentration of enzymes throughout the ship had already reached critical levels when Doc Colett brought me to the Bridge... the *Enterprise* was literally ready to kill us all.”

“Just like the *Lenore* killed its own crew,” Spencer concluded thoughtfully.

“Interesting...” Rachel reflected. “Any additional thoughts, Doctor?”

“I’ll be God-damned if they didn’t spontaneously combust, Captain,” was all the good doctor had to add, and they all laughed apprehensively before becoming pensively quiet. Remarkably, the

aged old physician was without cigarette, and Rachel couldn't help but ponder if recent events hadn't helped clear him of the habit once and for all. The thought of bursting into flames was enough to steer one clear of most anything!

"Well, Ensign," Rachel concluded, "I presume you'll be writing a paper for the scientific journals?" And Genevieve gulped. The Captain smiled and nodded at Colett... he would help her; it was clear the old man had become enamored with her.

"You'll have to give it a name, too," he said gruffly. Genevieve thought for a few moments, then looked at them with the face of youth, of adventure, of boldly going where no one has gone before.

"Well," she offered, "I guess I'd choose the Greek word for fire, and *ox* for oxygen... so how bout – *The Phyrox Plague?*"

"Sounds ominous enough," Spencer congratulated her. They'd barely survived with their skins on this one, and indeed, many hadn't. To the nameless here for evermore, and for the sorrow of the lost *Lenore*, 'twas truthfully the wind and nothing more.

In the darkness that covers the stars,
In the wind that washes over our scars,
Think of them in the silence,
Think of them in the silence...
Lost, forevermore.