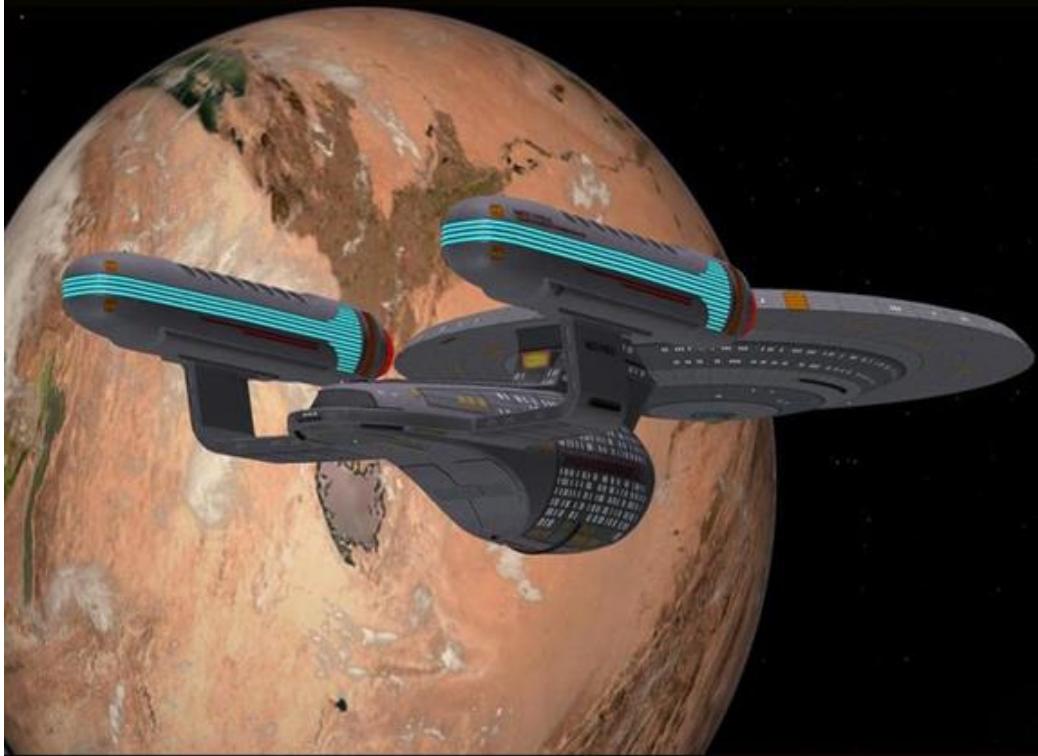


No Good Deed



Sean O'Keefe

No Good Deed...

by Sean O'Keefe 2013©

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Hearing Convened

Life aboard the *Enterprise* is never dull. The captain was well aware of that fact. It seemed no matter how mundane or routine a day appeared; something came out of left field. Always.

“Explain yourself, Captain! Why did you violate the Prime Directive?!”

Strong words, yet the commander of the *USS Enterprise* was not easily intimidated. If she was, she would never have been given her to command.

Rachel Garrett looked up at Admiral Granger, a tall, imposing man with balding, grey hair and more bark than bite. She wondered to herself if this was the last of the great sexists. His behaviour towards her in their previous encounters certainly indicated that. Including his vocal disagreement to her being assigned to the new *Enterprise* in the first place. He had stated that he believed she was unsuitable for such a command. It was a ship with a singular name and the list of candidates for her Captain had been miles long.

However, Garrett’s recent acts of gallantry had left the Admiralty with a clear winner.

Not to mention the missions they had performed brilliantly since the *Ambassador*-class ship’s launch. She wondered to herself if she has getting too big for her boots but reminded herself that she was only the top rung of the ladder that had brought them their success. The *Enterprise-C* was not only an extraordinary ship, but she had been blessed with a crew to match. One she was proud to lead.

Now, after all their achievements, her judgement was being called into question over a question of the Prime Directive. A hard and fast rule that had been interpreted and re-interpreted many times over - including and especially by the captains of previous *Enterprises*.

Curiously, they had been understood and even glossed over. So, why the interest in this one occasion? What made this instance different?

Garrett looked up at him with no malice. She didn’t feel any towards this man. Only curiosity as to his motives. “Which instance are you referring to, Admiral? Technically, I’ve violated it several times. I’ve looked over your own record. You’re not exactly squeaky clean in that department, either.”

Granger’s liver spots darkened along with the rest of his face as he growled: “I am not the one on trial, here, Captain! You are!”

Rachel was not about to let him get away with that one. She kept her tone even and managed to keep the flare of anger she felt out of her eyes. “I was not aware that I am on trial here, Admiral. I was given to believe this is only an inquiry.”

The Admiral stepped backwards from her when he realised he had exceeded

his authority. He reigned in his temper and glanced at the other two command-level officers present - Captains both and people chosen because of their allegiance to him.

“Of course, Captain. You’re right. This is a formal inquiry into your activities on Epsilon Perseus III, not a trial. However, should this board so advise it, the next thing you will see is a court room.”

Full of people you put there to hang me, Rachel knew. The Admiral was one man, but he held a lot of influence, and his reach was great.

“Now, Captain. You haven’t answered my question.”

The man’s silky-smooth presentation didn’t fool her. She knew this man was out for blood - her blood - and there was no way he was going to leave without getting some. Fine, she thought. If he wants to know the details she was going to start from the beginning. Whatever the outcome, at least it was a good story.

“We were tasked with investigating Persephone, as the locals called it, by Starfleet when one of our long-range probes discovered the planet was inhabited. We arrived in orbit without incident and sent down Lieutenant Commander Earhaht, a Horta and a geologist, who was on loan from Admiral Piper’s office, to make the initial observations...”

The Mission Retold

“The culture is comparably primitive, Captain Garrett,” Earhaht said with her voice that sounded like granite grinding. Even through the “voder” she carried, the oversized, animated rock still sounded feminine, if a little hard on the ears. “However, with some simple cosmetic applications I am certain you, or any other human, could pass as a local.”

“Such as?” Garrett asked. She was always curious about differences in species, but also the fact that she hated wearing prosthetics. The thought reminded her of her third officer, Lt. Commander Bat-Levi, a woman who was more prosthetic than human after a tragic accident. She felt for her, but she was also keenly aware that Darya would stand out like the proverbial sore thumb on the planet. She would not be joining them on this mission, that was certain.

“For one, you only have two nostrils. You will need another two. Not to mention your chest. You will need another two breasts.” As a Horta, Earhaht did not consider the niceties of human conversation and the fact that discussing such matters was often considered something of a faux pas with humans.

Garrett grimaced. Getting down to business was the kind of woman she was. However, the notion of walking through the *Enterprise*’s corridors with an extra two mammary glands would be a talking point amongst the crew forever. Even her new First Officer, Commander Halak, who was still finding his way with her, would probably never let her live it down. “Couldn’t I just wear a nice, thick coat?” the captain complained.

The answer was a definite negative. “Sorry, Captain. Everyone lives in the equatorial regions - that’s where the water is. If you go too far north or south, you wind up in a desert. There are some areas of wilderness, but they are not inhabited by the intelligent native species. Bitzas, they call themselves,” she added as an afterthought.

Something about what Earhaht said told her she would not like it. She turned her head and gave the Horta a sideways look. She wasn’t always certain where to focus on - Earhaht had no face. “What’s the bad news, Commander?” she asked.

The Horta shifted, uncertain how the captain would receive the news. “The locals wear only the briefest of clothing due to the heat. Essentially tank tops and shorts. I’ve uploaded some images into the computer for you to peruse. The replicators should be able to synthesise something to make you fit in.”

Garrett sighed. It could have been worse. Wearing a bikini was something she hadn’t done for years - and there was no way she was going to go naked as the locals did on some temperate worlds. She wondered to herself whether it would be possible to argue that she had needed a pair of breasts removed but discounted the thought without voicing it. The odds were the locals were centuries away from that level of medicine. “Could you give your report to Doctor Stern so she can prepare the appropriate prosthetics?”

“Aye, Captain.”

“Dismissed.” As Rachel watched Earhaht go she began mentally picking out her away team – people who would not only be competent but who she could count on for their discretion.

For the hundredth time that day Dr Jo Stern reached up to scratch the itch on her nose and had to stop herself from damaging her handiwork. “I wish these things actually worked,” she grumbled. “There’s something in the air here that’s stuffing up my nose.”

Rachel glanced at her old friend and tried to keep the smile from her lips. “Didn’t you take an antihistamine before you beamed down?”

Jo gave her a grimace. “With all the fun and games of making us up to look like natives I kind of forgot.”

As the Captain slipped her a small tin of her emergency supplies, the Doctor gave her a grateful smile. She paused as they walked along the road, shook the dust from her sandals and dislodged a small stone that had been bothering her, giving her a great sense of relief. She then opened the tin and took out two small, white pills and dry swallowed them.

“How do you do that?” Rachel asked. “I can’t even down an aspirin without a glass of water.”

“I left my China behind on the ship.”

Commander Samir al-Halak, the *Enterprise*’s new First Officer, was trying to keep his eyes on the road ahead. With his companions being so briefly dressed, and the fact that each had been “enhanced”, he had been finding it difficult to keep his eyes on their faces. “You should consider yourself grateful that they don’t work, Doctor. You’d be twice as stuffed up.”

“What doesn’t work?”

The unknown voice seemed to come out of nowhere and brought the party of four pilgrims up short. As one, they turned and took in their visitor.

The ship’s “counsellor”, Dr Yuriel Tyvan, appraised him with an analytical air. There appeared to be nothing unusual to this being. He was obviously male, solidly built, relatively young and had the look of someone who had spent a lot of time out in the sun. Probably in the fields of grain they had been passing through on their way to the settlement. He held the pitchfork in his hand casually, but Tyvan knew instinctively the man could use it effectively if combat was required. An odd notion considering this planet’s relatively low population. “My friend was simply stating that the dust is getting up her nose,” he said, trying to use a little levity to appear disarming.

The man nodded his head, a smile creeping across his face. He kicked his foot against the dry road, bringing up a small cloud of the red dust. “I can understand that.” He stepped forward and ran an appraising eye over the small group. “You must be from one of the old cities. I had heard most of them were abandoned, but, sooner or later, someone shows up from one of them.” He stepped forward, his hands off to his

sides, palms outward in a gesture the landing party understood was inoffensive and welcoming. He then bowed forward.

The *Enterprise* crew gave one another a glance and silently agreed to mimic him.

Their host righted himself and seemed pleased they had honoured him by returning the gesture. “You are welcome in my home and our city. There’s not much to the town of Pegasus, but it’s home.” He stepped past and walked them towards the planet’s only centre of civilisation.

“We were hoping for find some lodgings in Pegasus,” Rachel said, wondering to herself how the place had a name from Earth mythology. “Then perhaps we could find some work.”

The young man flashed her a friendly smile. “There’s always work to be done in Pegasus....” He suddenly realised there had been no introductions. “Apologies, my lady, I don’t know your names. My name is Josh.”

As his name didn’t sound too unusual to their ears each simply volunteered their first names.

It was clear some of them were a little too odd to his ears, but he didn’t question them. “Which city did you come from?” he asked.

“Ouch!” The Doctor hopped around for a moment and kicked out her left foot, seemingly trying to dislodge another stone. It was a simple ruse, but effective as she managed to change the subject. “I hate these sandals!” she said angrily, meaning every word.

Josh looked at her feet, then up at Jo’s face as if seeing her for the first time. He was intensely curious, and the captain put herself on guard regarding him. He was obviously an intelligent young man with an inquiring mind.

“You’re very pale, Jo,” he said, curious and slightly suspicious. “Don’t you spend much time under Persephone’s sun?”

The Doctor looked back at him wearing her biggest lopsided grin. “My husband didn’t let me out much,” she said, doing her best to sound like a down-trodden spirit. She wasn’t much of an actress and so came off a little insincere.

“Husband?” He mimicked, seemingly curious. Whether Josh was buying it or not he didn’t let on. He turned his attention to Garrett and found her skin a little pale as well. Both women were shaded by straw hats, but they didn’t cover their legs, which were showing the effects of too many hours under the *Enterprise*’s artificial lights.

Oddly, Josh seemed to change tack. “Where are your children?”

Jo covered for her friend by stating baldly: “I’m barren. I have no children.”

Her confession caught the young man’s full attention and saved Garrett from having to be reminded once more that her son lived with his father’s family on Betazed, not with her.

Josh bowed graciously and said: “I apologise, madam. It was rude of me to inquire. As you know, all our women have as many children as they can before....” While Garrett itched to ask, she was glad that not only she, but the rest of her people,

were savvy enough to realise he was not asking a question, but simply leading towards a knowledge he assumed they were already in possession of. It was a truth she ached for and hoped to have revealed in short order.

Honesty seemed to be the name of the game on Persephone, Rachel gathered in the quiet of her thoughts.

The one person Josh didn't have a problem with stepped up next to him and indicated they should continue with a flourish. "I'm looking forward to a good drink when we get to town," he said cheerfully. "Sometimes there's nothing better after a day in the sun."

Josh nodded and turned back towards the still distant town. "Yes, Samir. You're right." He took up a brisk pace and they found themselves grateful they kept in shape as he had a fast gait.

It only took an hour to reach the town, and yet by that time the landing party was glad they had not only shaded themselves with hats, but the women especially had lathered on sunscreen. The UV that day was particularly high, and Rachel felt she could feel her skin burning even through the ointment. She wondered how the locals handled it.

She had part of her answer when they entered the outskirts. For the only remaining population centre left on the planet, there wasn't much to see. There was a modest "suburbia" with houses dotting the landscape, but to Rachel's eye the place seemed peculiar. The homes were a mixture of relatively new and positively ancient. Most of the newer buildings were of mud brick but the oldest of them seemed to have been constructed from bluestone.

Funny, she mused to herself. The stuff seemed to be everywhere in the galaxy.

As they walked Stern mentioned: "I don't see many people about."

Josh nodded. "As you know, they're doing their best to avoid the Burn."

Rachel noticed her friend frown in frustration. She, too, was going to have to be patient and let the answers to come to them without asking peculiar questions that would bring undue attention to themselves. She decided to continue along that line. "Yes, we should get inside ourselves. I'm surprised you've been able to stay out in the sun as long as you have without getting burnt."

Josh gave her a modest smile. "Yes, my family has been blessed with dark skin. We seem able to tolerate it longer than most."

Much was gathered from his statement. A belief in God for one. Fair skin being the norm, the other.

Stern thought to herself: "Yeah, but it can't be good for your eyes."

Within moments they came to the town public house. It had two stories, a balcony with an iron railing and supports, with a corrugated iron roof. The walls were of bluestone, which did a marvellous job of keeping the interior cool in the harsh sunshine. Garrett and Stern recognised it for what it was: the local bar. It seemed that, no matter where you went in the universe there was a drinking establishment ready to

satisfy a thirst for refreshment and companionship.

Josh held the door open for them. To Tyvan's eyes he seemed proud to be introducing the newcomers to his oversized village. One other thing was it obviously wasn't the first time. He gave him the impression of being a tour guide as well as a farmer. Like he was the self-appointed welcoming committee.

Samir went first and had a quick look around making sure the way was clear and safe for his crewmates. All he saw were a number of locals spread around the mostly wooden room chatting whilst cradling a local brew. He expected suspicion and got the opposite. A number of men and women came forward and greeted them warmly. The men with a slap on the shoulders, the women with a forceful hug. As most of the women were buxom - twice over - Samir found himself blushing from the feminine attention.

Captain Garrett followed suit and greeted the locals in like manner. She was glad the Doctor's appliances were stuck tight to her. The men were quite forceful with their greetings and practically crushed her chest.

Before she could say a word Josh introduced them with a wide grin. "My friends, this is Samir, Rachel, Jo and Tyvan. They have come far and walked hard. Their families are lost to them, but I know we can make them welcome in ours."

Both Tyvan and the Captain noticed that no-one made themselves known as some kind of leader. Indeed, there appeared to be no hierarchy at all. Everyone was treated as equals.

A younger male led them to an empty table. "Please sit. You must be weary after your long journey!"

Rachel warmed to the people of this haven in the dust and gave him a smile from the heart. "We appreciate the welcome, friend."

The boy/man, someone the captain believed could not have been older than eighteen, smiled and said: "All newcomers are welcome to Pegasus and to my home, Rachel. My name is Jared, and I am at your service."

At that point Josh, who was standing next to their table interjected: "All newcomers first stay with Jared here while a home is organised for them so they can become a part of the community."

Tyvan raised a curious brow. "You seem to have an almost ideal community here, Josh. Am I correct in believing that all things are shared here?"

Josh gave him an almost shocked look. "Is that not the way where you come from?"

While a good part of Rachel wished she could agree with him she gave him her best poker face when she lied: "Of course, Josh. However, we have found during our travels that not everyone is as generous as you."

The notion seemed totally foreign to the young men, who just looked at her, perplexed.

"It seems an odd way to be considering the times are harsh since the Burn." Josh shook his head in wonder. "What a way to be?" He was truly amazed. "Surely

we are stronger together than warring amongst ourselves for the meagre resources we have.”

It was a thought none of them could argue against. “Very true, Josh,” Rachel said. “We, of course, will do everything we can to help the community.”

Tyvan gave the captain a side-ways look. He wondered if she was putting it on a little too thick. They were only here to observe the locals, not interfere. He had to wonder if their presence was already going to send ripples through the town. With such a tight knit community their sudden departure would no doubt create much confusion, perhaps even anxiety. He made a mental note to talk to the captain about it at their earliest convenience.

Even though the local’s notions of charity warmed his soul - they mirrored his own El Aurian ethos - he had to wonder whether it was truly practical in the galaxy at this time. This planet’s people had come to their attention, it was only a matter of time before they would come to others. History was replete with examples of conquerors and the conquered.

The notion brought an involuntary shudder. Top of the list of oppressors in his mind was, of course, the Borg. The beings who had practically wiped out his people, but also a race the Federation was not ready to meet. It was best to keep the knowledge of them to himself for the time being. Humans, especially, were all too curious. If they got word of the existence of the Borg, they might go looking for them. The results would no doubt be disastrous. Even terminal.

He wondered to himself, as the psychiatrist, whether his experiences had made him paranoid. If they had, he had no answer for his problem. Physician, heal thyself had no power for a counsellor.

Jared returned after a moment with four mugs of chilled ale, which the landing party happily drank from, enjoying the mildly bitter flavour.

Tyvan ushered Josh to a chair and engaged him in some small talk which brought a small smile to Rachel’s face. The man was a natural at asking innocuous questions that brought relevant results. He was disarming in his manner, but she knew from experience he could nail someone to the wall with those eyes if he chose to.

She took her mug in her hands and casually wandered over to the front window, shadowed by Jo. Rachel leaned against the frame and looked up and down the street. There were many shop fronts of varying types. Hardware, linen, even ice cream. How they kept things cool in this climate was anybody’s guess.

She noticed the haberdashery offered cotton and wool, including ribbons and laces. Not much for the frillier styles, Rachel almost let her eyes wander to the next store when it hit her. The Universal Translator made it possible for her to understand the languages of others and for them to be understood as well. However, it didn’t render the written word.

The signs were all written in English. At least a dialect of it. There basics were there, with only minor variations one would find from drift over time.

“Do you see it?” Rachel asked Jo, excited. She indicated the shop across the

street, and it took the Doctor a moment to realise that her Captain wasn't buzzed about the apothecary, but the fact she could read the sign.

"How is that possible?" Jo said, with a sharp intake of breath. "I've heard of parallel development of cultures, but not to that extent."

Her eyes widened; Rachel added: "It even explains their names." She whispered: "Is it possible that these people are some kind of human colony?"

Jo gave her a lopsided grin. "Then how do you explain these?" she gave her extra breasts, which were next to her own, a squeeze by bringing her biceps together.

Rachel's eyes wandered around the room. "Genetic drift? Experimentation?" Her eyes drifted to Jo's pouch. "Is it possible to take a scan of their genome while we're here?"

The Doctor gave her a mute nod. "I suppose anything's possible." She turned her back on the vista and drew Garrett to the corner of the room so they could talk without being overheard.

They took a seat on a pair of extra chairs and continued in hushed tones. "If they were ... are human, where does that leave us in regard to the Prime Directive?"

Garrett gave the notion some thought before replying. The revelation of the possibility that they were dealing with their own kind muddied the waters. If they were human, they were kin to her, and blood demanded action considering their circumstances. "We need more information before a judgement can be brought."

Stern shifted in her seat. At times like these, she didn't envy her friend. In matters of the Prime Directive, things often got messy. If a wrong call was made things could get very bad for all of them - very quickly. The Admiralty often got testy when they thought it had been violated. "I'll do what I can."

Rachel nodded and sipped her brew. They had hours before the sun outside became tolerable to the locals once more, and she was determined to blend in.

Lieutenant Commander Darya Bat-Levi pushed a frond out of her way and stepped into a small clearing. The servos in her artificial legs were whining again, and she knew she would have to do something about them soon or she was going to avoid becoming incapacitated.

At that moment she found herself wishing she was with the captain infiltrating the local population. It was always fascinating to observe other cultures, but the ever-regretful officer was not the one to enjoy herself. If a situation came up like that, she would probably excuse herself from it.

Her life had become a living penance for the death of her twin brother, a demise that she could not have altered, yet one she felt she was responsible for. Many times, she had been offered upgrades for her mechanical left arm and legs, yet she insisted she retain her clunky old ones citing downtime as her reasoning.

Few realised the depth of pain the woman harboured and those who knew her, cared for her, even loved her, she had a tendency to shut out and keep at arm's length. She was harder to get close to than a rabid porcupine.

She took a breath of fresh air and tried to push the delighted feeling that threatened to pop up in the back her mind without total success. She had to admit it was nice to breathe natural air for a change and not the carbon scrubbed and filtered atmosphere aboard the *Enterprise*. If she was right, there was a slightly higher concentration of oxygen here that was making her feel a little lightheaded.

“Garden variety geology here, Darya,” her companion noted.

Her gaze fell upon their recently acquired addition to their crew: Earhaht. While she had never served with a Horta before, she found it peculiar to be sharing a conversation with a living stone. She wondered for a moment what her Rabbi would have said about that one. The effervescent Ben-Judah would probably have said: “I don’t think Moses struck a Horta! It would probably have eaten his staff!”

Earhaht shuffled next to her and covered an outcropping of granite. Darya detected a slight hissing sound, then the Horta shifted back again. A small piece of the rock was missing, the surface flattened to the consistency of glass and still glowing from the heat. Darya marvelled at her ability to do so and also mused to herself that the female Horta was not someone she wanted to be on the bad side of. “Nothing but garden variety granite,” Earhaht reported. “Tasty, though.”

Darya would not have imagined in a thousand years that a rock would be in any way palatable. Just another example of God’s sense of humour, she thought.

They were interrupted by a young male Terran, Ensign Slovac, who was part of the botany department. “Commander, I couldn’t find Lieutenant Betrell, so I thought I should tell you this right away.”

“Why didn’t you use your communicator?” Darya asked, immediately seeing the flaw in the Ensign’s statement.

Slovac gave her an embarrassed grin. “I could see you, Commander, from where I was standing, and I thought you’d want to know this as well.”

Bat-Levi’s patience was beginning to wear thin. “I hope you’re planning on getting somewhere with this,” she said acidly.

Slovac, to his credit, didn’t back down or bite back. He simply stated: “Some of the flora here is terrestrial in origin.”

His statement got the attention of both officers. “Which ones?” Earhaht asked, curious.

The ensign considered his audience and dumbed it down. “Some of the grasses, particularly those that are grain bearing. I’ve found some wild wheat and barley, and even some fruits - apples, peaches and such.”

The Horta wasn’t surprised. She had encountered such conditions before. “Sounds like someone was making sure the humans on this planet had something to eat.”

Bat-Levi’s brows shot up in amazement. “That’s a leap if I’ve ever heard one.”

Earhaht shifted. “Not really. When terraforming a planet, you introduce species to the biosphere that will sustain the new inhabitants. While Persephone has native flora, it seems to be compatible with Terrestrial kinds. My guess is that

someone, some time ago, introduced some humans to the planet for reasons unknown.” She paused for a moment as a thought came back to her she had considered earlier. “It answers one other thing,” she said. “I thought the planet’s name was odd to begin with. Persephone is a name from human mythology.”

Bat-Levi had to give her that point. “You think the locals named it from their memories of Earth?”

“Yes.” Earhaht’s plates ground as she considered the situation. “I think we need a team to investigate the oldest of this planet’s settlements,” she said. “I’m sure we’ll find some more clues there.”

The servos in Darya’s left arm whined a little as she ribbed her chin in thought. With the Captain and Halak undercover in the settlement she was concerned about blowing their cover by trying to contact her. Earhaht’s suspicions that the locals might indeed be some kind of humans remained just that without more information. Garrett gave her some latitude for judgement, so she decided: “Earhaht, you and I will beam back to the *Enterprise* and use the ship’s scanners to locate the oldest city so we can explore it.” She tapped her uniform insignia which now doubled as a communicator and said: “Bat-Levi to Betrell. Continue your scans and beam back to *Enterprise* when you’re finished. Commander Earhaht and I will be returning to the ship.”

“Acknowledged.” Betrell was a no-nonsense officer and was economical with his words.

Darya tapped it again. “Bat-Levi to *Enterprise*. Two to beam up.”

Whilst the Captain enjoyed her ale, Darya put the resources of the ship to good use and, within half an hour, had located what she believed was the planet’s oldest - and largest

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settlements.

It was too large to explore efficiently on foot, and there was only so much information she could gather using the *Enterprise*’s sensors in orbit. Wanting to make the best use of her resources, she ordered five large shuttles down to the planet carrying personnel carriers that would allow them to move about quickly while their scanning equipment did their job.

Once on the ground Darya brought her people up to speed. “We are looking for evidence of the origins of this planet’s inhabitants. While the *Enterprise* could find no signs of life here, don’t take anything for granted.” She indicated the buildings that surrounded the open city “square” they were parked in. They were caked with dust and clearly crumbling. However, their architecture suggested a more advanced culture than what was found elsewhere on Persephone. “These buildings could prove to be our biggest danger. Watch out if you decide to go inside one. Make sure it won’t fall down on top of your heads. I don’t need the paperwork.”

There were a few chuckles at the Commander’s dark wit.

“If you find anything check in with me immediately.” She gave them all a nod of confidence. “Be careful.” She wanted to say: “Good luck,” but even the non-superstitious Darya Bat-Levi didn’t want to mozz her people. She’d had enough of

that in her time.

The other officers were divided into four groups of three and boarded their vehicles - a kind of twenty-fourth century version of a dune buggy, but one that was armed with a phaser cannon - just in case. You could never be too careful.

Each vehicle started with a quiet whirr and left the square in different directions, full of eager faces looking forward to discovering something new and unexpected.

It was that that had Darya worried. The Universe was a dangerous enough place without going to look for trouble. Bitter experience told her that was what you usually found.

All the same, she and Earhaht had saved the most interesting part of town for themselves. Their shuttle was parked immediately in front of a large, sprawling complex that fairly shouted: "I'm important!" While the building was quite large - roughly a kilometre long and half that wide - it also sporting two floors - Darya was confident they could tackle it alone. Earhaht was practically impervious to harm. She mused that, if the building collapsed on her the Horta would simply tunnel out from under the debris.

As for her personal safety, it wasn't high on her list of priorities. If the building came down on her, that was simply kismet.

Like many buildings of import found throughout the galaxy, this one demonstrated its importance by having steps - a lot of them - which elevated its status above that of the rest of society.

When they got to the top Earhaht "looked" back on them and said: "At least they would have kept the people who worked here fit!"

The walk up them simply reminded Darya that she had to bite the bullet and get her legs serviced. The servos in them were still complaining even now they were walking on level ground. "That's if you care about such things," she said, more to herself than anyone. Once more she worked to stifle her own self-loathing. Now was not the time for distraction. Whether Earhaht was the same rank as her or not - Earhaht technically outranked her due to her greater experience at that level - as Second Officer of the *Enterprise* the Horta was part of her crew and therefore her responsibility.

"Why wouldn't you?" Earhaht asked innocently. "Isn't it logical to maintain your peak level of efficiency?"

As the silicon-based life form made her way through the central archway and into the interior the comment left Darya thinking. She owed it to every crewman under her to give them her very best. If her bionic parts were threatening to break down at any moment, she could find herself responsible for their deaths.

It was not a pretty thought. The notion of her own demise didn't bother her, but the thought of more lives being lost because of her was not something she was willing to tolerate. She determined that, upon the completion of this mission, she would report to Engineering for an overhaul.

Earhaht produced a tricorder and began scanning. The report brought her up short. "Darya, I don't think it's safe for you to go in there," she said, her concern heard even through the mechanical voice of her voder. "The superstructure seems brittle."

"You only live once," Darya said with false confidence and strode past her. She took out her tricorder and did her own analysis. "As long as we keep clear of the weaker sections, we should be fine."

Her companion rumbled. "That's easy for you to say, Commander, but you don't weigh close to a ton. I could easily fall through some of these floors. I may be hardy, but I'm not indestructible."

Darya raised her brows, curious. She was aware that the Horta was a long-lived race, but she had practically accepted the notion that she was beyond caring about such things as possible harm. "Alright, Earhaht. We'll be careful." Once more she moved forward through the dusty building.

As she walked, she took a moment to observe the architecture. She had taken a minor in engineering at the Academy, and it was enough for her to admire the skill taken to create the elaborate spider-web of glass and steel above her. It was marred here and there by shattered panes, but the overall effect was still beautiful.

The space they were in was largely built of a kind of orange marble, with large pillars supporting the roof. The walls were fairly distant, and the overall effect was one of space. Darya mused they could probably hold a cricket match in here and never worry about a pane of glass being broken.

To their left and right were large hallways with ramps leading up to higher and down to lower floors.

"Should we split up?" Darya asked, already knowing the answer.

"Ah, no," Earhaht said. "I'm not letting you out of my sight. Captain Garrett would never forgive me if I let something happen to you."

Darya reacted angrily and had to bite her lip to keep herself from saying something stupid. Instead of the caustic retort she had planned she said frostily: "I can look after myself, Commander."

Earhaht seemed not to notice her change in demeanour. She said: "After you."

Darya randomly chose a direction and started walking – noisily.

By mutual agreement, the people of Pegasus began emerging in the afternoon light to resume their daily chores. Captain Garrett marvelled at the motley collection of old and young. She noticed that each individual seemed to know exactly what was expected of him or her. She watched from her new position on the bar "porch" where she was seated next to Jo.

Samir and Counsellor Yuriel Tyvan had left with Josh to help him on his farm whilst surreptitiously pumping him for information. Rachel remembered with embarrassed delight the disgusted look on the Psychiatrist's face at the notion of good, old-fashioned manual labour. He'd been sitting on his leather chairs in his office too long, she thought. A hard day's work wouldn't go astray. Hopefully his lack of

condition wouldn't make him stand out too much.

Rachel turned her head so she could see the sun out the corner of her eye. Of all the worlds she had explored this one seemed to have the brightest. It wasn't conducive to continued healthy living, with premature aging and melanomas a distinct probability.

"If I had to choose somewhere to retire it wouldn't be here," she said quietly, so only Jo could hear her.

"I hear you," the Doctor replied. "I'd probably be spending most of my time treating the locals for all kinds of maladies."

The notion gave the captain pause. "Perhaps we should have a look at their state of health. There's got to be a reason why these people are so few in number."

"You mean, aside from the fact the sun's worse than a Sunday afternoon BBQ?"

Even though they were old friends, sometimes Rachel wasn't certain whether the Doctor was being cynical or just plain sarcastic. Either way, her observation had merit. "All the same, I think we should look a lot deeper into this place. There are too many unanswered questions."

"And if there's something in this universe you simply can't leave alone..." Jo observed without having to finish the thought. She took a final sip of her ale, now her cup was dry. She set it down thoughtfully. "If I advertise that I'm some kind of healer, wouldn't we be breaking the Prime Directive?"

Hearing Suspended

“When your ship’s Doctor pointed out the recklessness of your activities in flying in the face of the Prime Directive, was it your ego that got in the way? Were you playing God? Have you spent too much time in the Centre Seat?”

Rachel looked at the blotching on the Admiral’s face and wondered whether Jo would prescribe some medication for his high blood pressure. It was a mental game she was playing to keep herself from reacting to the man’s charges. “Admiral, ship’s captains make life and death decisions all the time without thinking for a moment that they’ve taken on the role of the Almighty.” She paused for a second before adding: “And just as an aside, Sir. How long did you spend as a Starship Captain before you were promoted?”

The Admiral’s face darkened to beetroot. “I am not the one on trial here, Garrett. Don’t start interrogating me!”

Rachel squinted a little as she once more reminded him: “Neither am I, Admiral. Would you like to hear the rest of my report, or may I suggest a short recess for your sake? I’m concerned you’re going to burst a blood vessel.”

If it was possible for the Admiral to become even more enraged, he managed it. All the same, he held his tongue as he scowled. He had to credit Garrett. She knew how to keep her cool. “Perhaps a recess *is* in order,” he said tightly. He checked the wall chronometer. It was thirteen hundred hours Starbase time. His stomach growled as he realised his body’s need for sustenance. “We will reconvene here at fourteen thirty hours. Dismissed.”

This time Rachel scowled. The Admiral had broken protocol. He should have said the meeting was adjourned. It was becoming even clearer to her just how little respect the man had for her. However, his dismissal had taken in the other members of the board. Garrett was certain they could not have failed to notice the Admiral’s disdain for their rank. Why all this pettiness? she asked herself. What is this man’s agenda, aside from the obvious lynching of one Rachel Garrett? Stranger and stranger.

She nonchalantly brushed aside her shoulder-length brunette hair and put it back in her headband. As she did so she caught a glimpse of Sonja Keiley, Captain of the *USS Portland*, a *Miranda*-class ship. While the two of them had rarely seen eye-to-eye, they had formed a grudging respect for one another and so it came as no surprise that Admiral Granger had touched a nerve in her as well.

What was her part in this farce? she wondered.

Garrett noticed Keiley did not even glance at her as she made her way out of the room, a respectful distance behind the Admiral. She was followed by Captain Skyler Grant, a man who was so far up the Admiral’s butt that Garrett paid him no mind at all. She was fully aware the weaselly little man would do whatever the Admiral wanted.

Finding herself alone in the room, Rachel stood and tapped her combadge. She

had little time for walking, so she took the short route. “Garrett to *Enterprise*. Beam me up.”

The Bridge was quiet as most of her officers were enjoying some shore leave while their vessel was docked at Starbase Three in orbit of Andor. Rachel strolled through it and straight into her office.

She had barely managed to brew a fresh cup of coffee – not the stale replicated kind – when Doctor Stern came through the door and said: “I hope you brewed one for me as well.”

Her Captain’s sixth sense had told her to expect her guest and so she had prepared. A short time later the two were reclined on opposite sides of her desk sipping Rachel’s favourite bitter brew.

“So, what does Admiral Pain-in-the-Ass want with you?” Jo asked, curious. Never the one for mincing words, Stern went straight for the jugular.

Rachel should have warned her against such insubordination, but their relationship went way beyond such niceties. The captain appreciated her friend’s bluntness and complete honesty. There was no playing it softly with her. She had no patience for bull and believed the Universe would be a much better place if everyone was like her. Say what you mean – always.

“He’s out for my head. What for, I have no idea.” It felt good to get it out.

Jo wrinkled her nose in disgust. “I have a few, but without more info it’s probably just guesswork.”

“Take a shot.”

Jo shrugged. “What the hell. I guess he wants to get rid of you as Captain of the Federation Flagship and put someone else in your place that he can use for his own ends.”

The notion wasn’t foreign to Garrett’s thoughts. “What might they be?”

“I don’t know. Turn her into a burger joint and sell to the Klingons?” She shrugged once more. Frustrated, she added: “You’ve got me.”

Garrett turned and looked out the portal and saw only the walls of the Starbase. It was disconcerting to think her magnificent ship was buried inside the orbiting station, effectively cut off from the skies she dominated. “We need more information.” She tapped her comm button. “Mister Bulast, report to my office.” She hoped he was aboard. The little Atrean could have been planetside on shore leave for all she knew.

Fortunately, he was in his quarters. “Aye, Captain,” he replied. Knowing the little being’s efficiency, he would be here in about thirty seconds.

“Dibs on him being here in thirty-five,” Jo wagered with a half-smile.

Rachel was reminded once more how well the Doctor knew her. “I’ve got thirty,” she said and flashed her friend a smile. She then called for her Tactical/Security Officer, Lt. Thule Glemoor.

Bulast arrived in thirty-two. “Yes, Captain?”

Rachel looked up at the gifted Communications Officer and said, in all

confidence: "Mister, I have a job for you. I want you to find out everything you can about Admiral Granger's past." She turned and engaged her Tactical Officer. "I want you to find what his interest is in this ship."

The two glanced at one another, sharing their uneasiness. Investigating a senior officer could be seen as worse than insubordination, it could be viewed as treasonous.

"Use whomever you need to help," Rachel continued, "but for God's sake, don't let anyone know what you're doing. The Admiral's up to something, and I need to know what it is before he roasts me on a spit."

Once more the duo shared a look, but this time one of confusion. Neither of their species had a parallel in their cultures to compare with her idiom.

Jo just shook her head in wonder. "The Admiral wants to remove Captain Garrett from this ship by whatever means necessary," she said drolly.

Thule wiggled his frills in appreciation. "Thank you, Doctor. I will file that particular saying away for the future. You humans have so many peculiar sayings I sometimes wonder how you manage to communicate anything without thoroughly confusing yourselves."

Rachel gave her officer a fond smile. "It makes life more colourful."

The Tactical Officer tilted his head to the side as he considered her words. "Perhaps I will add some colour to mine then." He turned to Bulast. "Come on, Darco. Let's light a fire and get this show on the trail."

Bulast looked up at him and, even though he could only guess what his fellow officer had meant, he followed him from the room.

Rachel's eyes wandered to Jo. "Let's hope they find something useful." She rubbed her temple as she could feel a headache coming on. Just behind her right eye. Great, this could turn into a full-blown migraine.

She turned and took a long look at the chronometer. "I've got enough time left for another cup of coffee." She thought of the trial she was about to rejoin. "I think I'm going to need it."

Hearing Reconvened

Once more unto the breach, Garrett thought as she took her seat. She glanced about the room and noticed, for the first time, Captain Keiley was looking right at her. Their eyes met for a moment and in that split second Rachel felt that the woman was going to give her a fair hearing, not just join in the Admiral's lynch mob.

Her attention was dragged back to the Admiral who was standing before her once more, glowering. He seemed to have spent the time pulling himself together and was again acting like a lion on the prowl. Garrett was clearly his quarry, but he was going to enjoy playing with his prey for a time.

It suited her. If the Admiral was stupid enough to attack, he would find the captain's teeth razor sharp.

The Mission Continues

“You’re a healer?!” Jared looked at Jo in open wonder. “We’ve prayed for a healer for so long! The Burn has killed so many of us that we were beginning to fear there would be no-one left!” He stepped forward, the joy shining out from him as if he had met his very idol. He took Jo by the hand and led her towards the door. “Come! There are many in need.”

The Doctor had to pick up the pace to keep up with the young man with the iron grip. Garrett followed her across the street, their feet kicking up a small cloud of dust. She found the situation mildly amusing as the older Doctor allowed herself to be towed to their destination.

Without surprise, Jared led them through the front door of the Apothecary, straight past the counter and down a hallway that led to a large room out the back that had not been visible from the street.

Both women were aghast at the number of people who sat in chairs or lay in beds. Jo stopped and stared. A quick count came to about eighty.

Most sat and stared into space. It was clear they were blind. Some reacted to the few people who nursed them, as if they could see a shadow passing and wondered what had cast it. Others lay in beds, clearly in pain and it took only a casual glance for Jo to conclude most were suffering from malignant melanomas.

Silently, she cursed Rachel. She knew she had only the best intentions, but now she knew about these people there was no way she was going to leave them like this. Prime Directive be damned. She was one woman who took the Hippocratic Oath seriously.

Yet she knew she was still limited by the demands of the Prime Directive, the philosophy that even actions with the best intentions could bring about catastrophic results on more primitive cultures that were simply not ready to deal with the change.

Jo gritted her teeth and singled out the woman who seemed to be running the show. “Hi,” she said by way of greeting. “I’m Jo Stern, healer. What are we looking at?”

As the relatively young, but clearly competent, woman began showing Jo around, Rachel singled out an elderly man sitting on his own and sat on the chair next to him. For a moment, she was silent, hoping the silver-haired elderly gent would break the ice.

It took thirty seconds. “What can I do for you, young lady?” he asked in a voice full of frustration yet still courteous.

Rachel was impressed. By the colour of his corneas, he was clearly blind, yet something had given her away. “I could have been anybody,” she said amiably.

Although his eyes were ruined, his ears were still fully capable. He turned to her and gave her a stunning smile. “It’s not every day a beautiful woman comes calling,” he said disarmingly.

For the first time in years Rachel blushed. It wasn’t often someone remarked

on her looks – it was unseemly to comment on one's commanding officer's appearance. Thoroughly charmed, Rachel patted his hand, which was still on his chair arm and said: "Even though I know you can't see me I appreciate the complement."

The gentleman's smile became rueful. "Never mind my eyes, young lady. I can hear the loveliness in your soul in your voice. I'm sure you've been told where true beauty lies," he finished enigmatically.

"How did you know I was a woman?" She had to ask.

"You don't smell like a man who's been in the field all day." He took a gentle sniff and grinned. "In fact, you smell quite lovely. You have a scent I can't quite identify."

Soap, Rachel thought. So many parallels. If these people weren't from Earth, there was a mighty big co-incidence going on here. Her sad gaze was drawn to his eyes where she could clearly see his corneas were practically opaque. "How long have you been blind?" she asked quietly, respectfully, compassionately.

The cheer went out of his face as his despair once more took hold. "Too long," he said. "I've been going slowly blind for years. The Burn finished it off."

Absently, Rachel nodded. He seemed to notice the shift in the light. He reached out and managed to find her hand and gave it a pat in return. "Don't worry yourself, young lady. I've had a lot of good years. Sired a lot of kids. Most of their mothers are even still alive. Good women, all of them."

The cultural bias against monogamy made her curious. There had been few cultures that embraced polygamy, the most notable being the Denobulans who each had three or four husbands and wives. She had wondered if the old saying about six degrees of separation applied to their marriage networks. "Did you love any of them?" she asked.

At first it seemed like he wasn't about to respond, and Rachel got the impression she may have offended him. He stared off into his memories for a few moments before a sad, but genuine smile spread across his lips. "Yes," he said, seemingly embarrassed at the admission. "I did. I knew she had to have other partners, but we spent as much time as we could together when we could." He turned towards her again. "Sometimes it was hard not to be jealous, but we all know that if we're going to survive, we need to mix things up, so we don't become inbred like certain breeds of dog." He sighed, a sad sound that came from the depths of a lonely soul. "Her name was Rachel, and she was a good woman."

The captain's surprise that they shared the same name almost overcame the revelation of the familiar animal. "My name's Rachel," she said absently before adding: "I haven't seen any dogs."

"How would you know what a dog looks like? I've only heard about them in folklore. They died out in the previous burn two hundred years ago." He grimaced. To Rachel, it was the look of a man who knew their time was running out. "My grandfather told me they couldn't keep them out of the sun, and they all went blind, just like the sheep and cattle." Even though he had segued, he kept his attention on

Rachel, expecting an answer.

“I’ve seen drawings of them,” she said – a half-truth she hoped would distract him.

The explanation seemed to assuage him. “Really? I suppose you had some better artisans in your community. The people in Pegasus couldn’t draw if their lives depended on it.”

Rachel chuckled. She would include herself in that category. Art was not her strong suit. His reference to sheep and cattle had firmed up one thing in her mind. There were too many parallels here to ignore. Regardless of their physical similarities, these people were, one way or the other, from Earth. But how to be sure without drawing attention to themselves? The problem was that, if they were wrong, the damage to this culture could be catastrophic.

The truth was, she realised, that they were probably doomed anyway. With little or no livestock and only grains, vegetables and fruit to exist on, there wasn’t much going for these people.

Their population was barely above sustainable from a genetic perspective.

Yet, somehow, they knew that.

Rachel angrily balled her hands into fists. There were still too many questions here and the answers were simply not forthcoming.

Before she could ask any further questions, she noticed Jo had moved over to a corner and was trying to get her attention. “Excuse me, sir,” she said and regretfully left him alone. She made her way past a number of beds and chairs and huddled in the darkened space with Jo. “What is it?”

“All of these people are showing the symptoms of being in ultra-violet light too long. I don’t know what’s going on with this planet, but the sun is killing them!”

In the pitch black of the underground level of the complex, Darya flicked her light back and forth, looking for something, anything. “I wish some of this place made sense,” she said cheerlessly. “What I can see of it, anyway.”

Beside her, Earhaht swung her tricorder back and forth. “Fortunately for me, Darya, what I can see isn’t important. I was born on an asteroid that originally had no light and no atmosphere. It was quite homely.”

Darya shivered. The image took her back to the fateful day she lost her beloved brother when the two of them were testing a revolutionary new power source and star drive. She had come too close to becoming one with the void that day and it was an experience she had no intention of repeating.

“Did I say something to upset you?” Earhaht asked, concerned. “The temperature in your torso just went up.”

Bat-Levi’s eyes became slits. She didn’t need this sliding cement mixer reminding her she was less than a whole person. Instead of answering she lumbered forward, driving her worn legs hard. She came to a door on her right that was closed, which was odd. Every other room they had examined had been open and very empty.

It was as if the entire complex had been scavenged.

Still angry, Darya raised her left fist and gave the door a hard thump. To her surprise, it refused to give. Even a little. The jarring thud hurt her still human shoulder and gave her pause. This was no ordinary door. She raised her tricorder and scanned it.

Nothing registered. She tapped the device with her artificial knuckles to see if that would help then scanned again. Still a null result.

Earhaht had silently joined her and noted her companion's frustration. She repeated the measure and got the same result. Nothing. "There's got to be a dampening field in operation here," she said in as professional a manner as possible.

Bat-Levi wasn't really listening. She simply stepped back, raised her phaser and shot the door.

It wasn't impressed. Aside from a small scorch, it remained untouched. As Darya dialled up the setting Earhaht said: "Don't do it, Commander. If you burn through it, you could damage whatever's on the other side. Let me try."

Earhaht took her human companion's lowering her weapon as an affirmative. She slid forward and raised herself up, so her underside made contact with the door.

Darya was immediately driven back the acrid smell of acid eating metal. She also noticed the temperature in the large hall was quickly rising. The air was filling with smoke, so she moved even further down the hall back the way they had come. As she waited, she shone her light back and forth as if looking for something she knew wasn't there, but an innate fear of the dark drove her to do so.

A chirp out of nowhere made her jump before she realised it was her combadge. One of her teams was checking in. She forced herself to calm down and answered the calls. To her annoyance all four teams reported nothing of value. She told them to keep looking and to check back with her in an hour.

By the time she was finished the rest of the door gave way like molten slag. Earhaht moved backwards, then up and over it, smoothing the remains out as she did so. As Darya moved towards her, she warned: "Give it a couple of minutes, Commander. It will need time to cool. I'll let you know if I find anything in the meantime."

That left Darya feeling frustrated. She was a woman of action, even when her insecurities were screaming "Run!" in the opposite direction. Going against the plan, she decided to see what was further down the corridor. After ten fruitless minutes of searching, she returned to find the metal was cool enough for her to step over without her sticking to the floor. She shone her light around the space and found it mostly devoid of furniture, which was a departure from the rest of the building where there had been nothing of value.

Darya was drawn to a short desk with what clearly looked like some kind of computer console. She frowned as she realised something was wrong.

As fast as her servos could propel her, she spun on her heel and visually scanned the room. Earhaht was nowhere to be seen.

“Now I know why I became a psychiatrist,” Yuriel said, wiping his brow again. For the fiftieth time that day he wished he was wearing a shirt with sleeves instead of an abbreviated singlet and shorts. “A hard day’s work for me is helping people find the hidden causes of their behaviour. Not helping someone plough and fertilise a field!”

Samir didn’t know what the Doctor was complaining about. Compared with the planet he grew up on, this place was a paradise. His homeworld was a cesspit of greed and corruption. The people on Persephone were friendly and seemed willing to share everything. It went a little against the grain for him, but only in the way a sinner finds himself standing in Heaven wondering how on Earth he had gotten there but still grateful he was.

He gave the Doctor a shake of the head. “Yuriel, the people here would have to put you to work in the fields because I don’t think any of them would have any need for your services!”

At that, the Doctor hmphed. “You’re probably right, at that. I suppose when you have to count on everyone else in the community just to survive there’s no room for pettiness.”

“You got it in one, Doc,” Samir said. As they were about a kilometre outside the town, he took a moment to scan the fields around him and, satisfied they were alone, he reached into his pocket and took out his communicator. A quick tap had him talking to their Naxeran Tactical Officer, Thule Glemoor.

“All quiet up here, Sir,” he replied. “Commanders Bat-Levi and Earhaht are exploring the ruins of the planet’s oldest city, along with four other teams.”

Samir’s eyebrows drew together. For Bat-Levi to leave her primary mission to check out the city, they had to have found something unusual. “Why?”

“Wheat, Commander,” Thule said succinctly. “The fields you are standing in are crops of Terran grain. The genetic analysis has confirmed. There are many terrestrial genuses on Persephone.”

al-Halak’s mind raced. There were many implications to the report given. Not the least that the people he had met were most likely some kind of human hybrid. He couldn’t help but wonder why the extra nostrils and such. Genetic experiments?

However, they were not his most immediate concern. Bat-Levi and Earhaht were off who-knows-where searching one of the old cities. He knew from the locals that they were believed to be uninhabited, and he put his mind to rest that the *Enterprise* crew had probably confirmed that. All the same, ruins could be dangerous.

He considered the pair he was worried about. Earhaht was nearly indestructible, and Bat-Levi was not only capable, but had repairable parts if the need arose. No setting bones in those legs, that was certain.

He looked at his companion and noted Yuriel’s scrutiny of the flora. The El-Aurian wouldn’t be familiar with Earth grains, he thought.

“Understood, *Enterprise*,” Samir said. “I’ll let the captain know. Keep me

informed of any updates from Bat-Levi's expedition. My combadges is on vibrate, so feel free to buzz me. Al-Halak out."

The Hearing Turns Nasty

“Is this the way you run a starship, Captain? Letting your people go off on dangerous, unauthorised missions?” Granger snorted. “I’m glad I’m not serving on your vessel.”

While Rachel kept her face serene, she couldn’t help the stray thought: *You wouldn’t last five minutes on the Enterprise, that’s for sure!* “It was hardly unauthorised, Admiral. I had ordered Commanders Bat-Levi and Earhaht to study the planet. Their discoveries led them to a different area to investigate. It was anything but a fruitless decision by my Second officer and Commander Earhaht, who I might remind you is a highly decorated member of my crew. I trust them and their decisions. If they needed handholding, they shouldn’t be in the fleet at all.”

As Granger sneered, Garrett spared a glance at the rest of the board. Grant was mirroring the Admiral, no surprise there. However, Keiley seemed speculative. She hoped she was beginning to see the complexity of the situation Rachel had been faced with.

The Admiral gestured to continue in a manner that was supposed to look magnanimous but instead came across as insulting. “Please, continue,” he said, the proverbial spider.

Garrett was beginning to understand how the fly felt. If the Admiral was going to hang her, he might do so with the next turn of the story.

The Mission Finds Holes, Then Fills Them

Pain. It was an old companion to Darya, but it was never welcome. Having regained consciousness, she rolled over to find herself lying on a concrete floor. She quickly came to the realisation that something was very wrong.

She looked down and found, to her dismay, that her left knee was bent in the wrong direction. Normally, this would have resulted in a blast of pain, however this was one of the times where Darya was grateful her legs were mechanical. The artificial skin that gave her legs an almost natural look transmitted only discomfort to her brain, which was an understatement, she mused. She wondered how she had gotten here and thought back. Her last memories were of finding an empty room and wondering what had happened to Earhaht.

She had stepped forward to explore the room and somehow lost her footing. It was as if she had stepped into empty space. She had fallen.... then nothing.

“Great going, Darya,” she said to herself bitterly. “You fell for the oldest trick in the book.”

“You’re not the only one.”

Darya turned to look in the direction of the voice which was coming from behind her. The sound was unmistakable – Earhaht’s voder. She drew in a breath as she found the Horta inverted on the floor, her smooth underside exposed. She looked like a stranded turtle without the flailing legs.

“Are you stuck?” Bat-Levi asked, feeling stupid for the obvious question.

“No, I just thought now would be a great time to practice my zero-gee manoeuvres!” Earhaht growled. “Of course, I’m stuck!”

Darya could only smile ruefully. She had deserved that. She glanced down at her leg then tried wriggling her toes. She could feel the movement in her boot, so perhaps all wasn’t lost. She then quickly ran a hand over the parts that were still hurting and found a bump on her head. No doubt from when she hit the floor.

Thinking of that, she looked up and saw the hole through which she had fallen. Fortunately, her torch had survived the fall and was on the floor nearby, illuminating the room nicely. She could see through the square hole to the light shining on the roof above and smiled to herself. Hopefully, the light would act as a beacon to whomever would come looking for them.

She tapped her combadge and got nothing. Not even a chirp. She glanced over at Earhaht. “Have you tried contacting the ship?”

Earhaht’s momentary silence was enough for her to realise the Horta had heard enough dumb questions for now. She mentally chided herself. No doubt she had tried to the moment she fell.

“The dampening field operating in the room above not only shielded our tricorders, but our comms as well. Never mind, when we fail to check in the others will search for and find us.”

Her confidence was rock solid, Darya mused, then mentally smacked herself

for the bad pun. "I'm going to leave the torch shining into the room above. The rescue party should see the light on the roof and wonder where it comes from."

"Good thinking," Earhaht said charitably. "Now, are you up to flipping me over?"

Darya sat up and tried moving her legs. The right one worked fine, but the left one was making all kinds of complaining noises. The knee refused to flex at all. "I'm not certain I can flip myself over," she said with a sigh. She slid herself along the floor and over to the Horta. She put her hands on her lower plates and tried rocking her. "You weren't kidding about how much you weigh!" she said with a grunt.

"A girl does what one can to stay in shape," she replied with her usual humour.

Darya strained her natural right arm and her mechanical left, but her very human shoulders were finding the going tough. No matter how hard she tried, as long as she was seated, she couldn't pull it off. Ignoring her distorted leg, she managed to get her good leg under her and, pushing up against a wall, stand on it. She found that, as long as she pushed her left leg back and didn't try to bend it, she could weight bear.

Now erect, she had a much better view of their surroundings. They seemed to be in a small, rectangular room that housed what looked like old style computer equipment. She looked upward and wondered to herself who would lay a trap into such a room? What was the purpose of it? Stranger and stranger.

There were two desks on opposite sides, well away from the centre of the room where the two of them had made their crash landing. A largish chair sat before each desk where a monitor stood. There was also something that resembled a keyboard input device, but on one side of it were a number of hexagonal slots that left Darya at a loss.

The wall she was leaning against, while propping her up in the middle of the room also revealed a distinct lack of anything that could be used as a lever.

"Dreck," Darya said, annoyed. "Sorry, Earhaht. I can't see anything I could use to turn you over."

Earhaht swivelled a little in place as she threw her weight to one side. "I've got an idea. Can you spin me over to the wall? Then, if you can push me as far as you can, I should be able to get enough contact with it to begin eating my way through it. Then I can burrow our way out of here."

Bat-Levi shrugged. What the hell, she thought. What's the worst that can happen? "Okay, then." She hopped forward and placed her hands on Earhaht's inverted topside near the edge, afraid that her underside might somehow burn her. She had heard stories of Hortas being able to eat through carbon neutronium and she didn't think her fingers would last two heartbeats exposed to that!

"Here goes!" Darya pushed to one side and almost immediately lost her balance. It was only her grip on Earhaht that kept her from falling.

"At least you moved me," Earhaht said with as positive an air as she could muster. "Do you think you could try again? Just be careful."

Darya scowled. She hated people saying that. Ever since her accident and

subsequent reconstruction, she had had to endure the doubts from well-meaning people who underestimated her. At first, she did her best to ignore them, but later they simply grated. She tossed her hair with the long, silver streak and said: "I will be, Commander."

Once more, she put her hands against Earhaht's side, did a better job of anchoring her good foot whilst keeping her useless, damaged leg out of the way and began rocking her as she turned her anti-clockwise. It was slow going, but she was beginning to make headway. The gap between Earhaht and the wall was gradually closing.

"That's enough," Earhaht suddenly said.

Darya was loathe to stop now she had a good rhythm. "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. Our people have excellent spacial relations. Now, push!"

Bat-Levi put her back into the task and pushed. As Earhaht's edge came closer to the wall she managed to curl it up and make contact.

"Darya, hold your breath and keep pushing!"

She didn't need to be told twice. She could only imagine just how destructive the acids the Horta released could be. As Earhaht began cutting, and devouring, the wall, Darya did her best to keep the pressure up while resisting the urge to breathe. It seemed like ages, but actually only seconds until she felt as if Earhaht was falling away from her and she dropped to the floor, doing her best to roll onto her side. She looked to where Earhaht had been and only saw a neat, circular hole where the wall and floor used to be. She noticed the edges were still glowing from heat, so she refrained from touching it. Instead, she quickly rolled to the far end of the room and hesitantly took in a lungful of precious air. It had only been a minute, but after all the exertion the air was sweet as honey.

Darya kept her head low and breathed the cleaner air nearer the floor, but she noted the smoke was quickly clearing. She glanced towards the new hole in the wall and detected a draft. Earhaht must have come out somewhere there was a bit of a breeze.

"Cool," she said to herself. God in His great wisdom created some amazing creatures. She rolled over to the chair nearest her and dragged herself onto its base, taking a seat. She tucked her right leg under her but found her left leg's odd angle was making it hard to get comfortable. She curled a lip in annoyance and turned her attention to the computer. It was covered in only a fine layer of dust, and she mused the door above must have been airtight. There was a big, round button on the left top of the monitor, and she shrugged. "What's the worst that can happen?" she asked herself.

"You could press that button and blow us all into orbit, I suppose."

Darya turned her head and found her granite-coloured companion had returned. "Remind me to keep you around if I'm ever locked up in jail," she said drolly. She glanced around for her tricorder and couldn't find it. She turned her head to the ceiling and grimaced. "I guess I left it upstairs."

“Don’t worry,” Earhaht said cheerfully. “I managed to get past the dampening field and asked for a med team to come and help you out.”

For a moment, Darya considered refusing the help. Fiercely independent, she was inclined to order them back to the *Enterprise*. However, the fact remained she wasn’t going anywhere under her own steam for a while. “Okay, Commander. You win. However, while we’re waiting, we can see what we can get out of this thing.”

Earhaht doubted the wisdom of the notion but relented. “I’ll see you in orbit,” she said quietly.

Darya rolled her eyes and hit the button anyway. Nothing. It was worth a try. She looked behind it and found no wiring, but that didn’t mean the system wasn’t run wirelessly. She pursed her lips and considered. “Can the tricorder determine what kind of power it uses?”

If a Horta could roll her eyes, she would have. “No, it can’t. It could be DC, AC, plasma or powered by little green pixies. Have you forgotten the dampening field?” she said trying to be light-hearted but sounding a little cruel.

At times like these Darya wondered what the best response should be. She hadn’t been second officer of the *Enterprise* for all that long, and to all intents and purposes, Earhaht outranked her due to her greater experience. However, she couldn’t let the comment pass. “What is your problem?” she asked, acidly.

Once upon a time, a long time ago, Earhaht would have backed away from a fight. Not anymore. “I could say the same to you, Lieutenant Commander Bat-Levi. It seems every time I make any kind of comment at all you bite my head off.”

Darya completely missed the non-sequitur and fired up. “What do you mean by that?”

Earhaht inched forward and Bat-Levi took an involuntary step backward. She had temporarily forgotten how formidable her companion was. “I make a comment about your temperature, and you get annoyed. In fact, if I make any kind of personal observation, no matter how well intended, you get angry! You’re as hard to get close to as a lava flow! You seem friendly for a moment, but if you get close enough – BAM! You’re toast!”

Their conversation in the hall came back to Darya’s thoughts and she realised Earhaht was right. She had been lashing out. “I just can’t stand being reminded that I’m not just flesh and blood anymore! With all this plastic and metal, I feel like less of a person. Do you understand that?” There was less heat in her words, but still enough to keep Earhaht from cooling.

“Commander Bat-Levi, you are complaining that your artificial components make you less of a person. If that’s so, what does that make me? My people are made of all kinds of inorganic materials and metals. Does that make me less of a person because I’m made of the stuff you so revile?”

The thought made Darya’s eyes go wide but she was not ready to give up yet. “It doesn’t matter what my arm and legs are made out of, they’re just not me.” She looked down and slapped her broken leg for emphasis. “I mean, look at this! I should

be screaming in pain but no, I'm simply considering seeing the engineer when we get back to the ship to have it fixed." Her chest ached and right now she really wished she didn't have to talk about this. She never did like opening up about it. Frustrated, she rapped her knuckles on her leg and a soft, metallic sound was heard. "Not natural."

Earhaht retreated a little and sat quietly for a moment, mulling over Darya's words. Finally, she said: "Look. I can't begin to understand how you feel because there's no way I ever can. For my people, a severe injury usually ends in death. There is little middle ground.

"It's a marvellous thing to me that your species is so adaptable. You lose a limb, no problem! We can make one that does almost as good a job. Your life can go on. From my perspective your people are blessed to be the way you are. The blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk again with the aid of science. Miracles are happening all the time for people like you. Would you have preferred to have died in the accident that took your arm and legs?"

Bat-Levi didn't know how much Earhaht knew about what happened and right now, it didn't matter all that much. The answer to her question had been, and still was, yes. But not for the reasons of her disability. Because she had lost her beloved brother that day and she wished there was some way she could have died in his place.

All the same, it was not a truth she was going to admit to Earhaht, so she lied. "No," she said. She didn't believe it, and she was certain the Horta wasn't buying it either.

"I've lost friends, family along the way," Earhaht said quietly, her electronic voice mirroring the fact she was unconvinced by Darya's answer. "You may look at me and wonder: How could she know? But you forget. I'm a lot older than you. We all have our burdens to bear, it's true. How we deal with them is also our choice.

"What is not fair, though, is taking our feelings out on our shipmates and friends. We all deserve better, and if we're going to get along as a Starfleet family should, we must give each other the best of ourselves instead of the worst. I have always endeavoured to do that for you and the crew, I would appreciate the same in return."

Darya sat on the chair, not knowing what to say and realising she didn't have to. Earhaht had poured out her soul and she should respect what had been said and think about it. While she knew that she had some very valid points, it wasn't so easy to simply turn over a new leaf. Change – real change – often took time. She looked down at Earhaht and said: "Thank you, Earhaht. I will try harder to treat you as you deserve. As my elder," she said with a slight smile, "I owe you that much."

Earhaht rumbled for a moment in a way that made Darya wonder until she realised it was the Horta's version of laughter.

The moment was broken by a voice from above. Darya spotted a light shining in the room above. "Careful up there!" she called. "There's a hole in the floor in front of you. It's covered by a hologram!"

As the security and medical team set up above her, Darya went back to trying

to prepare the computer for travel.

Whilst Rachel was aware of Darya's fall and injury, neither she nor Earhaht had elaborated on their conversation. Their report merely mentioned their discovery of the ancient computer. Naturally, this was all that she related to the Admiral.

She suspected the rest from their behaviour once they were all back on board. Both of them were acting differently towards one another. She noted a greater affection and familiarity with each referring to the other by their given names rather than rank.

"So, Captain, did you people learn anything interesting from the computer?" the Admiral charged. From his body language it was clear to Rachel he put very little stock in their discovery. The mere age of the device made the possibility of its functioning unlikely.

Granger didn't know how determined her crew could be. Her chief engineer, Anjad Kodell and Bat-Levi, worked together on the device – once he'd fixed her leg.

"Actually, my people made a startling discovery," she said with a cherubic grin. She noted the Admiral falter momentarily and both the captains lean forward a little. It was clear they were fascinated.

The desk in the *Enterprise*'s engineering section had all manner of testing equipment on it, all of which had produced less than useful results.

"I can't believe we can't figure out what powers this thing," Darya said, giving the table a thump with her left hand for good measure.

Kodell glanced over at the surface wondering whether she had dented it. This was his department, and he didn't want Darya messing it up, no matter how fond of her he had become. "I'm certain we'll figure it out," he said doing his best to project confidence but not quite pulling it off.

Darya put it down to him trying to be other than the usual haunted self he appeared to be. She suspected that there was something in the Trill engineer's past that was intruding on his present, much like Joshua's death did her. A little voice told her it was time she started putting it behind her but the dominant part of her told it to shut up – that it didn't know what it was talking about.

A figure appeared in the door brandishing a small box. "You won't get anywhere without this," Thule Glemoor said with a pleased look on his face. The nodules on his face next to his nose – his "whiskers" in Darya's eyes – were fairly vibrating. With his ebony skin and almost feline appearance he wore an expression the Cheshire Cat would have been proud of. The Naxeran had demonstrated once again just what a good investigator he was.

Kodell stepped over and took it from him with both hands. It was surprisingly light. "What is it?"

"It's a transducer," Glemoor said. "I had a good look around and found the

mechanism for the dampening field. Curiously, it had no power source. So, I looked around and found this in the corridor. It's linked to an ancient, subterranean power source buried very deep that harnesses geothermal energy, then relays the power through a grid of transducers. They're all shielded, but once I knew what I was looking for I was able to calibrate the tricorder properly and then: Ringo! I found it!"

Darya chuckled and Kodell realised the Tactical Officer had made one of his cultural mix-ups, even though he was unfamiliar with this one as well.

"Bingo!" she said trying to explain it in a nutshell. "You cry Bingo! when you win the game." At their perplexed faces she gave up. "Never mind. Ringo it is!"

Kodell put the grey box, about forty centimetres to a side, on the table once Darya had pushed some of their tools aside. He gave her a look that said simply: Be more careful next time, which she replied to with an affable shrug.

Gleemoor's golden eyes were fixed on watching them scan the device, fascinated. While defending the ship was his speciality, science still captured his interest. He loved to learn.

"So, that's what it is," Darya said after a moment's contemplation.

As if responding to an unspoken thought, Kodell simply replied: "Yes."

"Then we should be able to get it going by..."

Again, Kodell responded cryptically with nothing more than a nod.

Darya's eyes twinkled. "Let's get on it, then."

From his place in the doorway, Gleemoor was the picture of confusion. Just when he thought he was getting a handle on the way humans, and Trill for that matter, behaved they could throw him a thoroughly bizarre display. "What?"

Kodell looked at him with something akin to pity. The Neraxan was only a Tactician, he had to remind himself. Not an engineer, the greatest calling. It was a simple matter to blow something up. It took genius to create. He handed him his tricorder and said: "It's all here. You'll figure it out." He then joined Darya and stepped out. They had to prepare.

Dusk was falling in Pegasus and the landing party was faced with a conundrum. With the reports reaching Rachel's ears seeming to confirm her notion that these people were some kind of unwitting colonists from Earth they had still yet to prove the hypothesis.

"I need a DNA sample," Stern said as they walked along the middle of the street.

As surreptitiously as they could, they watched to make sure their conversation was private and fell into silence when someone came near.

"How are we going to get one without someone asking?" Samir asked. "It would be a little weird to ask someone for a blood sample."

Rachel brightened. "What about hair?"

Jo gritted her teeth. "Unreliable. I'd need one with a still living follicle."

Tyvan looked off into the distance and considered the graveyard. "What about

from a corpse?"

The thought gave the Doctor pause and she stopped, considering. In the end, she discounted it. "I'd still need a fairly fresh sample. Even buried, a corpse here would deteriorate fast. It doesn't take long for DNA to start breaking down." She shook her head. "No. I need a complete sample. I need a living specimen. Preferably in my sickbay where I can do a complete work up."

The Captain baulked at that one. "Not a chance. Even if these people are some kind of human hybrid, the fact is they are a living, breathing culture that deserves to make its own destiny. Taking one of the locals up to the *Enterprise* could destroy everything."

Yuriel felt like a ghoul suggesting it, but he felt they should explore every option. "How about we snatch one of the recently deceased from their "hospital"?"

The notion left a bad taste in everyone's mouth. Stern defeated the notion quickly. "There's nobody in there who's going to die within the next forty-eight hours. Some of them are riddled with cancer, but they're hardy people. They're not ready to meet their maker yet."

Rachel noted her friend out the corner of her eye and wondered at the Doctor's unspoken message. "Not if I have anything to do about it." Would she have to keep an eye on Jo to keep her from interfering with these people?

She noticed Samir was looking over her shoulder with a vague smile on his face. She knew that look. He was up to something. "What is it?"

His smile became a broad grin as Rachel turned and saw what he was looking at. "Oh. Who's the best candidate for this mission?"

The others shared a look and turned their gaze back on her.

The captain had already known the answer to her question but had hoped to find a volunteer. She scowled at them good naturedly and said: "Cowards. Next time, it's your turn."

While Kodell and Bat-Levi worked to restore the alien computer's functions, the landing party was enjoying a hearty meal of vegetable soup, courtesy of their benefactor, Jared. A few of the other locals had gathered around to share stories.

The room was lit by candlelight and the fireplace burning in the centre of the room, which did double duty of warming them against the bitterly cold night air.

Once the meals were eaten and the bowls taken away out came the ale, which was flowing fairly freely. It was clear they liked their beer.

Rachel smiled as she listened to one of the older women tell of how one of her children had saved her from drowning. The way she put it, it was as if the boy had heard her telepathically and had somehow flown to her rescue. It was a tall story, but one fit for a campfire. Tales told by fire light were meant to be exaggerated, otherwise they lost their mystery.

She noted that most of the patrons had made their way home, leaving a small group of about ten including her party. It was a good time to start their plan. She gave

Samir a slight nod.

“Don’t you have anything stronger than this?” he asked, gazing into his tankard. “Where I come from, we wean our children off milk that’s got more sting than this.”

The challenge was made and accepted. A middle-aged woman smiled and said: “You’re right about that. My breasts have produced better hangovers than this stuff.” She gave Samir a sly look. “You’re welcome to try it later, if you like.”

Rachel wondered for a moment whether Samir would take her up on her offer. He was, after all, unattached. However, it hadn’t been that long since he had lost Ani Batra, a woman he had loved dearly. Scuttlebutt had it he was planning on proposing.

It came as no surprise when Samir simply gave the woman a polite smile then turned back to Jared. “Well, son?”

Their host was not about to back down. He gave Samir a nod and said in all seriousness: “I have got some older spirits that my family’s had stored for many years.” He looked skyward for a moment, as if silently asking his ancestor’s permission. He turned back to Samir and said: “What better time to open a bottle than the arrival of newcomers?!” He got up and disappeared through the back door with a flourish.

Samir looked back at Rachel. Phase One was complete. Now for Phase Two.

Jared reappeared within moments and the locals who were gathered took in a breath of expectation. It was clear that there was something special about the contents of the two bottles he was carrying.

He placed them on the table then retrieved twenty shot glasses. Jo looked at them with open amazement. Were they all going to share?

“Who is your champion?” Jared asked.

As one, Samir, Yuriel and Jo turned and regarded Garrett expectantly. “Me,” she said. With more confidence than she felt she added: “I can drink anyone under the table.”

The locals shared a sly smile that demonstrated their differing opinion. It was clear their money was on Jared.

The glasses were then evenly divided between Rachel and Jared. A young man in his mid-twenties, Marcus, who seemed to have adopted the role of judge, reverently poured the glasses. Yuriel got a whiff of the concoction and wondered whether he had accidentally grabbed some bottles of paint stripper. He glanced at the captain, concerned that she was about to annihilate a good number of brain cells.

Marcus turned his attention to Garrett and said with complete solemnity as if he was officiating a wedding: “As you are the challenger, you go first.”

Rachel picked up the glass and first took a sip. It scorched her throat like drain cleaner and she considered whether Jared was manufacturing the stuff primarily as window cleaner. The taste of it took her back to her youth and for a moment she was sitting on the lap of her beloved paternal grandfather, an amazing man who was more a father to her than her own had been. Papa hid the shame of his son’s abandonment

and did his best to fill the void.

His one vice was brewing his own moonshine. She had grown up on a colony world where the rules were fairly lax, so nobody minded he ran his own still. The truth be told, she had once seen the local constable stop by to share a glass.

She had once stamped her foot defiantly and insisted that, at the ripe old age of six, she was mature enough to try his moonshine. He had just smiled sagely at her like all grandfathers do and poured a few drops into a glass and passed it to her.

Rachel had gagged and thrown up after she tipped the contents straight down her throat as she had seen Papa do. Her mother, Jenny, had chewed Papa out for what he had done, but she had seen her smile. It had been a good lesson and she had decided then and there she wasn't as grown up as she thought.

When he had passed, she recalled his humour that, when his time would come, he would probably not require embalming as he had spent a lifetime pickling himself. He hadn't been far from the truth.

She still missed her Papa, but the lessons she had learned from him had kept her in good stead for a lifetime.

This stuff reminded her of Papa's liquor, but it wasn't quite as strong. Remembering him, she tipped the shot glass back and let it warm her throat and fire her gut. She then victoriously inverted the glass and plonked it down on the table.

Jared, without preamble, answered by simply tipping his head back and downing the contents of the next glass. It took all of about two seconds.

Jo's eyes widened at the notion that the young man might best her friend due to the plain fact he had done this before, and often. She decided things needed to be slowed down a little to give the alcohol a chance to do its work on Jared otherwise Rachel didn't stand a chance.

"Jared," she said with a grin. "Did you hear the one about the horse that went into the bar for a drink? The bartender said: Why the long face?"

The joke brought a gratifying laugh. Jo wasn't the best at telling jokes, but at least there was a good chance these people didn't know all the ones she did. She glanced at Samir, and he got the message. Keep them coming.

Halak came back with a gag about a blind farmer trying to milk a bull and Jo decided that her job here was done. She got up as Rachel picked up her next glass and tossed it back. With her eyes skyward she caught Jo's as she rose. The question was clear in her eyes.

"Excuse me," she said amiably. "I'm off to check on my patients."

Nobody would challenge a healer and keep her from her charges. They all gave her a friendly smile and bade her farewell.

As she stepped out of the door, she heard Rachel slap down her glass as Samir began a new joke. It was a good thing they were distracted. She wasn't sure her friend would appreciate what she was about to do.

Trying not to look conspicuous, she did her best to cross the street and remain in the shadows. She passed the Apothecary by, slipped out back and took out her

communicator before ordering up some medical supplies from the ship.

Once the required medicines had materialised, Jo padded quietly across the dusty floorboards of the hospital and took a moment in the dark to cool herself. It wasn't that the night air was overly warm, but that her prosthetics were causing her chest to sweat. She pulled out her tank top and fanned her chest and felt a little give on one of her prosthetics. She would have to return to the *Enterprise* soon to fix it.

The door only gave the slightest creak as Jo moved into the hospital wardroom. Working from an almost eidetic memory, she began ministering to her patients in the dim candlelight. Around her everyone slept, their breathing sounds quiet in the dark. She noted that none were snoring and attributed it to their enhanced nasal passages.

Quickly, moving from patient to patient, Jo adjusted her medications and quietly injected them with her hypospray, praying the sensation would be missed by all.

He luck held out and, within an hour, her job was done. Jo looked back at her patients with a slight smile before letting herself out, an angel of mercy who sought no thanks. Prime Directive be damned. Nothing would come between her and her oath. The trick was remembering not to break the eleventh commandment. Thou shalt not get caught.

When Jo returned to the table things weren't going so well for team *Enterprise*. Rachel's slack face and bleary eyes told her all she needed to know. The captain was not only inebriated, but barely conscious.

She looked at Samir who gave her a slight shrug. There was nothing he could do to help her he hadn't already done. Both he and Yurie had scraped the bottom of the barrel of jokes long ago, having done their best to make the gags they knew about the Cardassian and the chicken relevant to the natives.

Jo sniffed. There may have been nothing they could do for Rachel, but that wasn't the case for her.

The place to Jared's right was vacant and the unassuming young man thought nothing of Jo taking the space. All eyes were on Rachel as she practically walked her fingers to the next shot glass to take it. It was as if the tiny spark of indomitability that defined the best Starship Captains kept pushing her, refusing to accept defeat.

Jo folded her hands in her lap under the table and palmed her hypospray, waiting for the right moment.

Amazingly, Garrett managed to pick up the glass and, defiantly, downed its contents with a gulp.

How she managed to maintain her balance was beyond Jo as Rachel smacked the empty down on the tabletop. One of fifteen, she counted.

The Doctor watched as Jared casually picked up the next glass and downed its contents, placing the empty next to the rest of his own. Marcus gave a yelp of excitement as Jared kept going like a train and, during the noise of cheering Jo struck and injected the mild sedative into the young man's leg.

Fortunately, although he was outwardly coping, the young man was practically numb. He didn't feel a thing.

Both Samir and Yuriel recognised the slight sound and shot her a knowing look, however, Marcus, who was the only other local remaining given the late hour, missed it.

Rachel was past seeing or hearing anything but the next glass, which she stubbornly grasped and downed, feeling like she was floating in space and mildly curious why she wasn't wearing a space suit. She managed to return the glass as the drug took effect.

Jared's eyes glazed over, and he slumped forward face first onto the table. Stunned, Marcus tapped his friend on the shoulder, trying to rouse him, but he realised after a moment he was down for the count. Reluctantly, he declared Rachel the winner.

"Congratulations," he said half-heartedly, instinctively knowing foul play had taken place but completely in the dark as to how it might have been performed. He was far too polite to make an accusation without any evidence and the fact remained it was clearly four to one.

He looked down at his fallen hero and then up at Samir sheepishly. "Can you give me a hand to get him up to bed?"

The newcomer gave him a polite nod and they each took an armpit. Marcus would have asked Yuriel, but he was uncertain whether he could shoulder the weight.

It took them only a moment to navigate to the stairs and, once the men were out of sight, Jo injected Rachel with a compound that would negate the alcohol's effects. The captain would be sober sooner due to her ministrations, but she could not help but add: "I never took you for a two-pot screamer, Rach."

Garrett gave her a bleary-eyed glare, and, with the Doctor's help, they followed the men upstairs.

They reached the door in time to see them unceremoniously dump Jared into his bunk and throw a blanket over him. Jo thought for a moment their behaviour seemed uncaring, but she had to remind herself they were men and not given to outward displays of affection. Jo noticed a leg was still protruding from their blanket so she couldn't help but step forward, adjust the young man's body and tuck him in. She brushed a lock of hair out of his face and, with her back turned, silently mouthed "sorry".

They left Jared and stepped out into the hall. Marcus bade them all good night as he knew they were to stay there the night and he made his way downstairs. Once they heard the front door close, they returned to Jared's room.

"I can't believe you cheated," Rachel said, quietly scolding her friend. "I had him on the ropes."

While it was unseemly for the men to tell their captain she was delusional, Jo did for them. "I don't know where you were drinking tonight, Rachel, but Jared had you dead to rights. If I hadn't injected the boy, you would be the one being carried, and he would be toasting his success with another beer."

Garrett gave her a shrug. "Maybe."

Samir chuckled, but quickly shut up when Garrett glared at him. He defused the situation by taking out his combadge and tapping it. "al-Halak to *Enterprise*," he said. "Five to beam up – directly to sickbay."

Within moments Jared was tucked nicely into Stern's diagnostic couch, her scanners working fast to analyse every inch of their visitor. She was in such a hurry she didn't bother to change, much to the rest of her staff's amusement. The sight of their scantily clad crewmates was going to be fodder for discussion for some time to come.

As Garrett had no intention of returning to the planet she turned to leave, but Stern waved her to stay. "Don't be in such a hurry to get rid of those," she said, prodding her in one of her fake breasts. "If we're not there in the morning we will be missed. The mystery could cause problems, especially as I'm not finished with my patients."

Rachel gave her a curious look as she wondered what the Doctor had been up to. However, she had absolute faith in her friend and decided to let it go. "All right, Doctor," she said, her language becoming more formal now they were back on the *Enterprise*. "Have you found anything?"

As she spoke, a display unravelled on the wall screen, a familiar double helix that unwound as she watched.

"Computer, overlay a base line of human DNA for comparison and highlight any differences." Stern was in her element and delighted with what she was seeing.

"Working."

As the computer did her bidding, Jo began reading. She took Rachel by the arm and pointed at the corner. "You see, Rach," she said, excited. "They've got the same base pairs as us."

"So do a lot of humanoid species," the captain replied. However, her tone showed she was catching the bug.

Jo elbowed her friend in the ribs good naturedly. "And most of those have been demonstrated to have been transplanted there from Earth some time in the past."

Rachel sighed. She wasn't sure about the theory that a mythical race known as the "Preservers" had seeded not only humanity but Terrestrial flora and fauna throughout the galaxy in an effort to save them. Even when the dinosaur planet had been found she still harboured doubts.

The screen stopped and highlighted a section of deviant DNA. However, instead of being dismayed the Doctor was the opposite. She practically started jumping on the spot. "Look at that!" she said gleefully. "Those are the markers of spliced DNA!" She looked back at Jared. "That young man's ancestors were human. I'm sure of it!"

She turned back to the screen and her eyes narrowed when she saw something she had previously missed. She tapped the panel, thoughts turning over in her mind.

“These aren’t going to last,” she said finally.

Rachel looked up at the screen, needing Jo’s guidance. “What do you mean?”

Jo looked her in the eye. “The DNA that’s been added isn’t going to last. It’s beginning to fail, like a donated organ in an incompatible host. Eventually, it gets rejected.” She turned back to the screen and ran her finger over a section of helix. “The original DNA is still here and will reassert itself in a generation or two.” Her tone softened as she realised: “If it hasn’t already.”

Garrett needed to be certain before she continued on her course. “Are you certain these people were transplanted from Earth?” she asked, using her official, Captain’s tone. She was seeking a report she could rely upon.

Jo nodded in all certainty. “I’d be willing to bet the house on it.”

Rachel nodded. “That’s good enough for me.” She took a step back and took a deep breath. What to do next? she wondered. “How did these people get here and who did this to them?” she asked aloud, not expecting an answer.

“I can answer that,” came a familiar voice from the door.

The four of them turned and saw Darya leaning against the frame looking at them with a cheeky smile on her face. She looked Jo up and down and said – without looking at the captain - “Where do I get a pair of those?” After a beat she added: “Nah, I’d better not. I already draw enough attention for the wrong reasons.” She pushed off from the doorway and passed a record chip to Garrett. “Captain, all you need to know is on that. It’ll blow your mind.”

Judgement

“What did Bat-Levi discover, Captain?” Granger asked impatiently. They had listened to her version of events for hours as she related in great detail what her crew had reported to her. However, the Admiral’s patience was wearing thin. “Do you think you could give us the abridged version?”

Rachel dropped her hand into her pocket and took out a copy of Darya’s find. “Why don’t you watch for yourself, Admiral?” she suggested.

It seemed taking the chip from Garrett was beneath the Admiral. He glared at Keiley and made it clear to her that she should serve him.

Garrett’s opinion of the woman went up a notch as she remained poker-faced. Surely the situation had to have aggravated her however she refused to let on. She simply rose from her chair and, having received the chip from Garrett’s hand, dropped it into the desk slot. The recording began to play immediately on the wall view screen. The lights dimmed appropriately.

Time to make another entry in his log, but Cixot wondered to himself if it was worth it. He was a stickler for the rules, a character flaw, he thought. It seemed to get him into more trouble than if he lied like so many of his contemporaries. He had a solid belief that only in truth could life be lived in a way where discoveries could be made and truly enjoyed. It was like cheating in a game of Hah-Tukit. If you had to cheat to win where was the challenge? The reward was undeserved and not as sweet.

“Computer, begin recording,” he said.

“Already recording,” it replied.

Cixot frowned. Had he forgotten? Never mind.

“The test results on the latest batch of humans from Earth have proven fruitful. The cell builder transplants have been successful, giving them increased resistance from the sun’s harmful rays and have made them more aesthetically pleasing. Two nostrils and breasts were....” he shivered reflexively, “repulsive. That has been corrected and the newcomers are better settling into their new homes.”

“While they initially resisted resettlement here, when it was made clear they would be able to enjoy the same rights and privileges as ourselves – once they were altered – they relented. Oddly, some of the human males seemed to like the notion the females were going to grow two more breasts. How odd.”

He shrugged – a human affectation he had picked up from them. It wasn’t the only thing, he knew. His tone shifted as the melancholy he felt showed through.

“Unfortunately, peculiar behaviours are not the only thing the humans brought with them. If only we had decided to face the evils our failing sun was dooming us with without involving them. It wasn’t their fault, but their presence here has done nothing but complicate matters.”

He sighed. The sadness he felt threatened to overwhelm him, but he refused to give in. They were going to solve the problems of their world. As long as someone

fought there was always a chance.

Cixot rubbed his nose, which had been running for a while and tickling his upper lip. He looked at his yellowish skin and wondered at the pallor. He seemed to have lost a bit of colour. Damn the “Common Cold” he thought. Why had they not been more careful with which humans they chose?

“I only wish we were as advanced in virology as we are in other areas. Our world has been overly generous to us by providing relatively few diseases for us to battle. We have managed to get by without having to eradicate them. A pity.

“Our people have gone to the stars and, instead of colonising other habitable worlds we’ve been arrogant enough to think we should fix all our own problems – as if we could. The sun’s increased radiation cycle has been making it intolerable for us on the surface. The modified humans can take it, but not us. We don’t mind messing with their make-up, but we won’t touch our own. We have signed our own death warrants with our hubris.”

Cixot took a moment to blow his nose on a kerchief and put it back in the pocket of his shorts. Like the humans, his people found the temperatures hard to manage. He chuffed to himself. At least the briefer clothing reduced the need for fabrics. A resource saver, if he ever saw one.

He suddenly remembered he had been rambling. He was supposed to be giving a progress report on his work modifying the humans.

“I don’t see the need for any further modification to the human builder code. As it stands their species is capable for mating with ours, even though they seem reluctant to. I have instructed them on the need to diversify their codes by not limiting themselves to one mate as they were culturally inclined to do on their homeworld. I’ve tried to impress upon them the need to help that along by interbreeding with us, but, as I said, they seem reluctant to. Our people will not force ourselves on them, and they seem to be similarly inclined.”

He sighed once more. It was a sound that came from the soles of his large, webbed feet. He considered the futility of it all. Their people were dying. It was that simple.

His eyes took on an immense sadness as he recognised the inevitable. “We don’t have much time left. It was hoped the humans could help our culture continue by injecting new data into our worn-out builder code, but that seems to have failed. The sun is killing us slowly with cancers, and now we have this outbreak of what the humans call “the flu” - the influenza virus is decimating our numbers. We had hoped to contain it to the city of Set-Helat, but it’s appeared in a number of other places.” His voice took on a note of irony. “The humans seem to be able to weather its effects, but our people are falling like meteorites. They die within hours of contracting it. Our lungs fill up with fluid and we quite simply drown.”

Cixot coughed then, the sound surprising him. He felt odd and he was sweating. Strange. The complex’s air-conditioning was usually reliable. He ran his six-fingered hand over his forehead, and it came away damp. He was running a

temperature.

It wasn't just a cold he had. He knew it instinctively. With the knowledge that the end was near he said: "We brought this on ourselves. The people will die. I just hope the humans survive. They didn't ask to be left alone here to fend for themselves, but they have proven to be very adaptable. Perhaps they will yet prevail. I can only hope that those who were quarantined on the ship make it off planet before they're infected. Maybe they'll be able to continue our culture elsewhere. Who knows?"

Cixot paused then added: "Time to die. Computer, cease recording."

Garrett had seen the video before and was ready for the profound sense sadness that was shared by most her fellows. She noticed Keiley was affected, and even Sparky Skyler seemed to have felt something at the passing of a species. She noted that the Admiral was completely disaffected by the recording. It seemed, to him, to be nothing more than a weather report on Pluto. Cold. That was what fairly radiated from the man. Complete indifference.

"Even given the evidence presented, I am anything but persuaded at your decision following this revelation, Captain."

Garrett noted he used the word like an insult.

"Your actions have changed the course of life for the people of Persephone," he charged. "They are a violation of the Prime Directive."

Rachel's patience was wearing thin, but she managed a wan smile. "Admiral. We have just witnessed the final testament of a species that died out centuries ago due to bad choices and an indifferent sun."

"Irrelevant," the Admiral stated.

To Garrett's surprise, Keiley spoke up. "Are there any "bad choices" you've discovered that you haven't mentioned yet?"

The Admiral glowered at the board member but kept his silence. She was well within her rights to ask the question.

Garrett turned and addressed her directly. "Further investigations led us to the discovery of an intact ship remaining in an underground hangar. While their FTL technology was advanced, it was their launch engines which proved their downfall. Their energy source was Triolic. Every time they lifted off the surface, they were doing massive damage to their ozone layer. By the time we made orbit there was precious little left. While their sun had increased its output of ultra-violet light, the real culprit was their lack of protection. They had killed themselves by introducing a virus they had no defence against and destroying their ozone layer."

Keiley simply nodded as she assimilated the information. When it became clear she wasn't going to ask any further questions Garrett turned back to Granger.

He didn't waste any time and went on the attack. "Your report states that you reseeded the ozone layer of Persephone. Didn't you realise that it would have a direct effect on the lifestyles of the inhabitants of that planet?"

At that Garrett gave a light chuckle. She freely admitted that. She also noticed

Granger was avoiding an obvious fact. “Yes, Admiral, my actions did result in the chance for the humans living on Persephone to live a normal, productive life. For life to be able to flourish on that world once more.”

Granger stooped over and pointed his finger in Rachel’s face. The challenge was clear. “You interfered with the natural course of their evolution!”

“Evolution!” Rachel had had enough. “If Evolution is the god that we worship in the Federation, then we’re in deep trouble because all it is is change. Cultures change, yes. People change, yes. Do humans learn to overcome the harmful effects of massive doses of ultra-violet light in a generation? No!”

The Admiral shrugged dismissively. “Perhaps it’s simply their time.”

She took a quick breath and continued. “The problem with that thinking is that Evolution has no soul. It has no heart. It’s mindless and directionless. Too many people worry about whether a race should grow or not. Whether they will have a positive role to play. They have a role to play – their own. Do they have a right to play it? Who are we to say no?”

She turned and addressed the rest of the panel. “What we’re asked to do in situations like these is to sit back and hope random chance will work in the favour of those we are observing.”

Keiley put up a finger. “Are you advocating abandonment of the Prime Directive, Captain?”

Rachel shook her head. “Absolutely not. But using it as an excuse for acts of moral cowardice is wrong. If we can save a race from extinction – like the people of Persephone – shouldn’t we at least try? Naturally, do it in such a way as to not interfere with their social structure and beliefs, but if a comet is going to hit a planet of three billion people living in the Middle Ages should we allow it to hit just because they haven’t invented warp drive yet?”

Granger came and rudely stood between them, forcing Garrett to address him directly once more. “You digress, Captain. You reseeded the planet’s ozone layer and changed the conditions under which they live. You never gave them a chance to overcome it and grow from the experience.”

Garrett looked up at him coolly and said: “Do you know how long they’ve been going through these cycles, Admiral? Six hundred years. They breed like rabbits to repopulate after each cycle, but it’s a war they’re losing. Each time there are less and less of them. They spend so much time and effort rebuilding after each blast from the sun that they don’t progress at all. If anything, they’re going backwards.”

“Rot.”

Garrett shook her head in wonder at his narrow vision. “You weren’t there, Admiral. The people of Persephone are good people. Creative, generous, helpful, friendly, even imaginative. However, they’ve forgotten how to make glass. It was lost recently when the last glassmaker died without leaving an apprentice. Without him, they can’t create sunglasses to save their eyes – the principal cause of death on Persephone.”

At the Skyler scoffed, much to the Admiral's amusement. "How can blindness kill a man?" he asked with his nasal pinch.

She had an answer for that one. "They go to the hospital at first, but when it becomes clear someone can no longer help themselves, they walk out into the desert to die. They don't want to be a burden to anyone." She turned to Keiley once more. "The hospital we saw was more a waiting room for the dying than a place to find healing. They go there for a time and, when hope is lost, they go on their final walk."

She turned back to the Admiral. "Their chemist doesn't know how to make lotions to protect them from the sun and their brief clothes they wore just to keep cool just made things worse."

Once more Granger shrugged. "You still should have left it to them to find a way clear."

Rachel looked at the Admiral in wonderment. "There were no other options. They were dying. Another cycle and there wouldn't have been enough people left to support a viable genome. Entropy was winning on Persephone. Are you suggesting we just sit back and watch them die?"

The Admiral drew himself up, the picture of righteousness. "That's exactly what you should have done, Garrett. If it's their time, it's their time."

"Really? Says who? You know, I've heard it said many times and I don't subscribe to that kind of thinking. We look both ways to cross the street, don't we? We do what we can to avoid death. So, why can't we help others out that way? Do you see the blind man struggling to cross and not act to keep him from being run over? Of course not!"

"In the case of the people of Persephone, we found a group of kidnapped humans struggling to survive in a hostile environment. Blood called out that we help them and that I did. We gave them a home that wasn't out to kill them. That's all. The rest they will have to do on their own."

Granger was like a dog with a bone and refused to let it go. "You still changed the conditions that they lived under. Didn't the video message mention that the aliens altered their DNA so they could survive in their new environment? And with all their alterations, why do you keep insisting they're humans?"

At that, Rachel actually smiled. The racism on display was appalling. "What difference does it make, Admiral? If they were human or Denebian Slime Devils, I would help them. However, you do bring up a good point. I call them human because Doctor Stern was right. The alien DNA that had been grafted in was being rejected and replaced with good, old-fashioned human DNA. While we were there, Doctor Stern helped deliver a baby that was born with only two nostrils and mammary glands. The new generations are reverting to their original genome."

Keiley saw the connection. "So, instead of becoming more resistant to ultra-violet light..."

"They were becoming more susceptible, yes." She turned to Granger and made one last appeal, but it wasn't him she was hoping would hear. "The people of

Persephone needed a big sister to come and help them out, to give them a quiet helping hand to keep them going. Someone to show them some charity, not indifference that would have let them die. We did that and left them with hope for a future. I'm proud of that and I hope, one day, I'll be able to return there and find a thriving culture ready to rejoin the human race."

Granger stood there, a man on a mission. He glared at Garrett, a man who believed he had all the cards to win against a person he clearly couldn't stand. What she had done to offend him, she couldn't fathom.

"You freely admit you interfered. You broke the Prime Directive," he charged.

Rachel looked up at him and said: "Yes. I interfered and saved a people from certain destruction. I gave the Prime Directive a chance to work in their lives. I did not break it."

"That's not the way I see it."

Garrett gave him a dark chuckle. "That was always clear, Admiral."

Granger stepped back and addressed the rest of the board. "In this matter I find that Captain Rachel Garrett is guilty of breaking the Prime Directive in regard to the people of Persephone. I recommend she be sent to trial."

He looked down at Skyler Grant and said: "What say you, Captain Grant?"

To his credit, he seemed reluctant to agree. As the Admiral glowered over him, he relented and said: "Agreed."

He turned to Keiley. He needed unanimity in cases such as this due to the severity of the crime. "What say you, Captain Keiley?"

Keiley was clearly troubled. Her eyes seemed trained on a corner of the room away from the Admiral so she wouldn't have to look right at him. "I recall some ancient wisdom, Admiral. To whom much is given much is expected. With great power comes great responsibility. When is the legal thing not the moral thing to do?" She glanced at Garrett and then looked directly at the Admiral. "As a Captain in Starfleet I am duty bound to respond when I receive a distress call to answer it and do all within my power to help.

"But what if those in need can't ask? Should I keep going by and do nothing? Did the Good Samaritan stop and ask permission of the broken man on the side of the road if he could save his life? No, he did not. He acted out of a heart of charity and made a difference that we still hold up as an example today."

The Admiral glowered at her as he could see where she was going. "The story invented by Jesus Christ and told second-hand by his disciples is hardly admissible."

Keiley's eyes widened as her eyes were opened to just how miserable the Admiral had become as a human being. "Regardless of the origins of the story, Admiral, do we ignore the truth just because we don't like the messenger?" She made her decision then, and to hang with the consequences. "In this matter of the people of Persephone, I find Captain Garrett's actions warranted and in no way a breach of the Prime Directive."

For a moment, Rachel thought the man was about to have a stroke. His face

was purple as he was apoplectic. However, he didn't say a word. He knew he didn't have to. Sonja Keiley's days of being a Captain were numbered.

Garrett stood and addressed Granger. "Admiral, as the vote is not unanimous, I cannot be formally charged. Now, if you don't mind, I have a Starship that needs its captain. We're already overdue for our next stop at Andor and we need to get under way."

Again, the Admiral just scowled. Garrett was not intimidated by him and, in actual fact, felt sorry for the man. It was clear he had issues. She just hoped he would deal with them before he burned someone else. Finally, he said: "Dismissed."

Both Garrett and Keiley took this as their cue to leave. Once in the hall, they moved away from the door at a brisk pace. Around a far corner, Garrett pulled up short and said: "Thanks for that, Captain Keiley. I owe you one."

Sonja's face softened and some of her youthful beauty showed through. Even though she was only Rachel's age, the burden of command had prematurely aged her. "Call me Sonja." She reached out and shook Garrett's hand. "You deserved the benefit of the doubt in there. Someone had to give it to you."

Garrett smiled in return. "Rachel. I don't know what I've done to cheese the man off, but he's gunning for me."

"Agreed. Both of us, now, I think." Sonja gave her a wan smile. "Watch your back."

Rachel clapped her shoulder. "You, too. Give me a call when you're next in my sector and I'll buy you a drink."

Her new friend's smile widened. "You're on." She turned to go and gave her a nod. "Take care."

Rachel watched her go then tapped her combadge. "Garrett to *Enterprise*. One to beam up."

Hope Rains

In the usually dusty town of Pegasus, Jared opened the doors of his bar and stood on the porch, gazing across the street. It was raining hard for the first time in he had no idea how long. The road was awash, and water was running down long disused gutters towards the lake.

It was a beautiful sight. He had no idea how it happened, but he was grateful for it.

“We seem to be on the receiving end of a lot of miracles of late.”

Jared turned and gave his old regular a good morning wave. “A glorious day to you, sir.”

The silver-haired gent turned his clear, blue eyes to Jared and grinned. “Every day is glorious when you can see it, son.” He inclined his head towards the horizon and remembered the lovely young woman, whose name was Rachel, and her friends. Since they came, many miracles had taken place. He had his sight back, as did many of his friends. Those with the cancer spots were healed and had gone home.

To top it off, the sun had stopped burning them. He had no idea how, but he was certain Rachel had done it. He had wondered if she was an angel, sent by God to save them. Maybe. If she wasn’t, she could certainly qualify as one.

After several days with them they had announced they were moving on. Where to, he had no idea, but it was not their way to try to dissuade them.

He had watched them walk off into the distance and then, as now, a single tear had tracked down his cheek. They would be missed.

John stood up and stepped out into the rain, delighting in every drop that touched his skin. He laughed and put out his palms to catch some and tasted the lovely, pure water. After years of bore water, it was ambrosia.

At the top of his voice, he declared with all the joy in his heart: “Yes, Jared, it’s a wonderful day!”

As Captain Rachel Garrett finished filling out the communique to a civilian contractor she knew for a shipment of cattle, sheep, and a few dogs, she sipped her mug of coffee and considered once more the briefing Glemoor had given her. It had illuminated one mystery in this affair. Admiral Granger was her late first officer, Nigel Holmes’, godfather.

She pursed her lips in annoyance. If the universe wasn’t dangerous enough without her having to worry about enemies from within. Rather than worrying about who might be stalking her she kept her sights ahead. “Steady as she goes, mister.”