

LEAVE

A Short Story

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LEAVE

It would be an hour before he received the Red Cross message that advised him of his mother's illness. However, despite the message and its authorization for him to be ordered immediately onto Emergency Leave, it wouldn't be for another fifty-two hours before he was finally given clearance to depart the ship on one of its Seahawk helicopters en route to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. In Gitmo, he would have to layover until however long it would take for him to catch the first available hop back to the States. And during such a hot operational environment the navy was currently in, no one could guess how long that layover would be. So, for now, Hull Maintenance Technician First Class John Lawless, ignorant of what was soon to come, sat contentedly right where he belonged: in his space, surrounded by his men, doing work that mattered.

The space was tight, as were most working spaces on the ship; but, as the division's leading petty officer, it was his space and it was a space of which he was proud. Every available inch of it was efficiently and economically utilized: Tools of the trade, reference books, firefighting and damage control equipment, and anything else that was required for him to manage his men and their work, had a specific place within his space where it was squarely stowed away and properly secured for sea. And his space was clean, very clean.

After morning muster had secured, he had gotten caught up in a heated discussion with several other petty officer first classes about the latest assault on their navy. It took some maneuvering before he could break himself free from the useless, though somewhat cathartic, debate. When he had finally entered his space, he had found his men in the middle of their own debate about it. Until this morning, all they – and all the rest of the crew, for that matter – ever talked about since getting underway was the likelihood of the invasion. But as of muster, that previously uncontainable excitement was superseded by the news that caused a new, uncontainable excitement; one which, in its own way, could also be viewed as an invasion of sort.

After entering the space, he had nodded curtly in response to his men's greetings as he sat down at his desk, which actually was nothing more than a section of a large work shelf that lined the three, aft-most bulkheads. Once he had settled himself in, he set to work.

One of his men, a young sailor named Fireman Recruit Blakely who had recently been assigned to his division, furthered the discussion of the present uncontainable excitement by quietly saying, "But I thought women were already allowed on ships."

"Not women – dikes," Petty Officer Third Class Henderson said as he sat sprawled out in his chair, staring up at the overhead.

"Or bitches," added Petty Officer Second Class Salihovic. "Till now, Flakey, the bitches were only allowed to be stationed on supply ships, or any of the other weak-ass ships like 'em. Not fighters like ours."

"Fuckin' Clinton," sighed Henderson. He sat up. "I *cannot* believe that by the end of today, four dike bitches are gonna be heloin' in and takin' over our ship." The three pondered this reality for a silent moment.

"Well, maybe there's another way we can look at it, Country," mused Salihovic. He turned his chair so that he directly faced the junior petty officer. "We'll be gettin' four new bitches, right?"

"That's what the chief said, anyways," Henderson answered in response to the rhetorical question.

"Well, then," continued Salihovic, "that would mean there is one new bitch for each duty section, right?"

"Yeah, so what?"

"Well, Einstein, what that means, then, is that each duty section will soon have its very own *Duty Bitch*."

Henderson had to think about that for a moment. His face lit up. "Hell yeah, now you're talkin', Sally," he said as he reached over for a high five. "And those Duty Bitches will sure be able to help pass the time on those long, lonely mid-watches, if you know what I mean."

"Of course I know what you mean, dumb ass. That's my whole point." Salihovic laugh. "Damn, Country, even for an HT you're a dumb mother fucker."

Henderson wanted to be respond but he couldn't think of anything good to say. Instead he side-stepped the insult and asked to Lawless, "Hey, boss. You ever work with women before?"

"Fuck no," said Lawless dismissively.

The two subordinate petty officers laughed and then turned their chairs around to begin working within their allocated section of the work shelf. The fireman recruit followed their example.

Except for the meditative sounds of their work – the cranking of a socket wrench; the filing of a metal plate; the scribbling of a pen; the turning of a page – the space went quiet. It wasn't too long, though, before Blakely looked up from the professional development manual he was studying and spun his chair around. He stared at the back of his Leading Petty Officer for some time before daring to break the silence.

"Um, excuse me. Petty Officer Lawless?"

Lawless continued his work without response.

The young fireman recruit continued, "I-I don't mean to interrupt but, well, the three of us, we've been talking about it a lot, and I was wondering...do *you* think we're really gonna invade?"

Salihovic and Henderson stopped what they were doing and turned around in their chairs.

Lawless was working on the following week's schedule, which required him to consider a multitude of work flow relationships, dependencies, and potential lag times as he prioritized and assigned tasks in such a way that each of his men would stay constructively engaged throughout the entire week. He carefully completed the entry he was working on before responding to the young fireman's question.

"Hard to say, Blakely," he said as he tucked his pen into his shirt pocket and turned to face his men. "But for what it's worth, this morning in the First Class Mess, I overheard Sigs saying that the captain had put down the order to fly the Battle Flag."

"I saw that son of a bitch once when the signalmen were airing out all their flags," Henderson said. "Boy, let me tell ya, that is one huge, kick ass mother fucker of a flag."

"I don't know how many times I gotta say it, but we ain't gonna invade shit," said Salihovic. "This is just one more of them cluster fuck drills where everyone gets all bonered up for nothin'. Besides," he concluded as he stretched out his legs and crossed them at the ankles, "them Haitian boys can't be that fuckin' stupid."

"Well, Sally, you and I both know that the bottom line is whatever happens, happens," Lawless said, asserting his authority. "And whatever does happen, you mother fuckers better be ready for it." He looked each of his men in the eye until each nodded their acknowledgement of the truth in what he had just said.

He started to turn back to his work when he heard a meek voice coming from outside the open hatch.

"Excuse me, petty officers."

He leaned back in his chair and looked toward the hatch. As soon as he got a look at the young sailor standing out in the passageway, shifting his weight from foot to foot, glancing nervously at the sheet of paper he held tightly between two hands, he knew exactly what was about to happen next. Turning back to his work, he took the pen out of his pocket, clicked it aggressively, and said over his shoulder, "Who wants him?"

Salihovic sprang from his chair and said, "He's mine."

"Fuck that," said Henderson as he, too, rose from his chair. "You had the last one."

"Snooze you lose, bitch," Salihovic quickly replied. Like a guided missile, his eyes locked onto the young sailor standing in the passageway, just outside of the space's open hatch. He then said, "Okay, Flakey, you fuckin' noob. Get your nose out of that bullshit manual and pay close attention if you wanna learn how to be a real Hull Tech."

In a serious manner, Blakely closed his manual and turned toward the hatch so that he could observe the lesson he was about to receive.

"How may I be of service to you?" Salihovic pleasantly asked the young sailor. Though the hatch was open, the two were separated by a custom-made, wooden half-door. Salihovic casually leaned on the door's small shelf.

"Well," the young sailor nervously began, "I was sent down here to get a, a..." He looked down at the paper he was holding tightly within his hands. "...a HT Punch?"

"Well, Fireman..." Salihovic looked at the name stenciled over the young sailor's shirt pocket. "Stevens—"

The young sailor interrupted the petty officer and said, "It's Seaman, not... I mean, well, my name is Seaman Apprentice Stevens. I'm not a fireman..." His weak voice trailed off into an even weaker insignificance.

"Even better," Salihovic said ominously. "Say, I don't think I've ever seen you before. New onboard, Stevens?"

"Yes, Petty Officer. Checked onboard just before we got underway."

Salihovic flashed a brief smile at Henderson and then said to the young sailor, "Well then, shipmate... Welcome aboard."

"Thank you, Petty Officer," Stevens said with pride.

Salihovic's face became serious. "You know, since you're new onboard and, I'm just guessin' here, that this is your first ship..." He paused just long enough to allow the young sailor's face to completely redden. "I think it only fair for me to warn you that an HT Punch is a pretty serious piece of equipment. You think you can handle it?"

"I...I don't know, Petty Officer. I think I'm supposed to just pick one up and bring it—"

"Tell you what," Salihovic said as he carefully tore the top sheet of paper off the pad that was setting on the shelf. "If you're really sure you want an HT Punch, how 'bout fillin' out this service request while I check to see if I have any in stock." He slid the paper in front of the young sailor, but instead of checking on his "stock," he continued leaning on the shelf.

Stevens looked down at the form. "HULL MAINTENANCE TECHNICIAN SERVICE REQUEST" was written at the top in bold letters. Below that there were lined, blank spaces for the date, for the requester's name, and for the division to which the requester was assigned. He found a pen next to the pad of paper and carefully filled in the blank spaces. The next section of the form was subtitled "Maintenance Service Request" and, within that section, there was nothing more than several rows of blank lines. The following section was subtitled "Equipment Checkout Request." Within it were three columns that listed the various types of metal-working equipment and tools available for checkout. There were grinders and scrapers and blow torches and many other strange-sounding items that the young sailor was unfamiliar with. However, nowhere within the section, or anywhere else on the form, could he find any reference to an "HT Punch."

"Um, excuse me Petty Officer, but I don't see an HT Punch listed anywhere on the form."

Salihovic spun the paper around, and, while reviewing it, dramatically said, "God damn it, Henderson. How many god damn times have I told you to add the god damn HT Punch to the god damn service request form?" He yanked a pen from his shirt pocket and, in the blank space between the equipment checkout section and the final, signature-block section, he hurriedly scrawled: "OTHER _____."

"There you go, shipmate," he said as he spun the paper back around. "Fill in what you need, then sign it."

Stevens did as he was told and then handed the form to the petty officer.

"Perfect," Salihovic said without looking at the paper. He reached down, opened the half-door, and indicated with a nod that the young sailor should enter.

After Stevens was standing in the space, Salihovic stepped out into the passageway, unlatched the hatch from the bulkhead, closed it, and then dogged it securely. He walked over to the young sailor and stood in front of him.

"So, you really do want an HT Punch," he said as he looked Stevens directly, intensely, in the eyes.

Stevens made no response. With the hatch secured, the space seemed as if it had become void of both sound and oxygen, making it hard for him to think or speak.

Without warning, Salihovic smashed the paper loudly between his hands, causing Stevens to jump and take a reflexive step back. After he had wadded the paper into a tight ball, he dropped it on the deck at the young sailor's feet. "Well, then, if it's an HT Punch that you want, it's an HT Punch that you shall get."

The confused, young sailor still did not respond. He only stood there shifting his weight from foot to foot as he tried to avoid making eye contact with the petty officer.

Lawless was just about finished with the work schedule and was already thinking about his own next task, when he looked impatiently over his shoulder and said, "All right, Sally. Conclude this."

"Roger that, boss," Salihovic answered evenly as he continued to stare hard at Stevens.

He walked over to the far bulkhead to where the safety gear was stowed. He brought down a welder's helmet and a pair of large, rubber electrician's gloves. He looked the gear over and smiled in appreciation of the effect he knew it would soon have upon the young sailor. He walked back to his victim. He still smiled, but now the smile no longer seemed to convey a feeling of admiration, as it had for the safety gear; instead, it now seemed to convey a feeling of amusement – fierce, intimidating amusement. This threatening smile lasted. It lasted through the time it took for him to adjust the helmet to the top of his head. It lasted through the time it took for him to don each of the arm-length, fire-resistant gloves. And it continued to last until it

finally disappeared behind the helmet's dark, protective face shield as he slowly lowered it into place. Even then it felt as if the smile lasted, as if it were burning through the dark shield like a fierce, intimidating blow torch.

Henderson, wearing a broad, shit-eating grin, leaned over toward Blakely, flicked his leg to get his attention, and then winked at him.

Salihovic grabbed Stevens by the elbow and, without any resistance, led him to a narrow, open section of the port bulkhead. He then carefully positioned him so that the right side of his body was placed firmly against one of the many iron frames, which served as a sort of endoskeleton for the ship, that could be felt just behind the bulkhead's surface.

"What did you say your rate is, Stevens?" Because of the heavy shield, Salihovic's voice sounded muffled and distant, but also, in a strange way, deep and amplified.

The young sailor looked quickly back and forth from Henderson to Blakely, opened his mouth, but said nothing.

"Answer me!" Salihovic ordered.

The young sailor jumped. "Intel... I-S, Petty Officer. I'm striking to be a—"

"Intelligence Specialist?" Salihovic's strange, booming voice spat out sarcastically. "What in the fuck makes you think your intelligence is so god damn special, Seaman Apprentice Stevens?"

The young sailor was visibly shaking now. "Nothing... I don't..."

"You fucking prima donna ops fags sit up there on your asses in front of your god damn *work stations* all day long staring at screens and pushin' buttons while us HTs are down here bustin' our asses, fixin' the shit assholes like you fuck up."

Stevens's shoulders slumped forward and his head sagged toward the deck. Salihovic grabbed him and yanked him up until he was once again standing straight. With his left hand, he took hold of his young victim at the left elbow and pressed him tightly against the bulkhead. With his right hand, he, almost tenderly, smoothed away the creases from the upper sleeve above the elbow. And then, at last, he let out a low, guttural growl and transformed the caressing right hand into a clenched fist that, in one flash of a motion, cocked back and fired out as a violent punch that exploded directly upon the sailor's thin arm.

"God damn!" Henderson hollered as he shot out from his chair. He looked down at Blakely and enthusiastically nodded toward the young sailor lying crumpled upon the deck. "Flakey, now that boy there was just given one, hellfire of an HT Punch." He rushed over to Salihovic and shoved him playfully. "Damn, boy! That's the first time I ever saw one drop like that."

Salihovic raised the face shield; his smile had spread broadly across his face. "Shit, Petty Officer Lawless used to drop 'em like that every time. Didn't ya, boss?"

He rolled his chair back, stood up, and, while stretching, began issuing out orders. "Okay Sally, get that piece of shit out of here. Henderson, get your ass back up to the O-3 level and turn to on that corroded fitting." He looked down at Blakely, who, before anything could be said, quickly spun his chair around and flapped the professional development manual back open.

The phone rang and he reached for it.

"HT Shop. Lawless."

He began to lean on the work shelf as he listened to the caller, but then quickly stood back up and said, "Roger that, Chief. On my way."

He returned the receiver to its mount and grabbed his notebook. As he walked toward the hatch, he said to his men, "Gotta run up to the Chief's Mess. Sally's got the con."



As a thirteen-year sailor assigned to such an intensive sea-going rate as Hull Maintenance Technician, John Lawless had seen so many spectacular, God-affirming sunrises while underway that he no longer considered them as anything more than just another facet of his daily routine, just as were his requirement to attend morning musters or his desire to eat his three squares a day. Each morning, without ever needing the slightest prompting from an alarm clock, he would wake long before reveille, quietly ready himself for the day, and then head topside to whichever weather deck offered the best viewing for the beginning of another solar revolution. But never, until this cruise, had he ever seen the sun rise over a country that his ship was preparing to attack.

With dark-clouded conflicted thoughts blowing through his mind, he leaned against the lifeline as the sun peeked over the small mountain range in the far off distance. Its warm, September rays quickly fanned out across the island and soon reached the outskirts of Port-Au-Prince.

Actually, he had no idea where the outskirts of the city started; in fact, from where his ship was patrolling – somewhere just outside the zone of Haiti's internationally recognized waters – he could only assume it was the city because, unlike all the other densely populated skylines he had seen in his time, only a few scattered lights were lit. However, a string of bonfires burned along the island's shadowed gulf coast. The fires glowed with an entrancing tribal intensity and incensed the soft morning breeze with a smoky, seductive third world aroma of wood, food, and refuse. He took in a deep breath of the sanctified air and was immediately filled with an overwhelming primordial urge to conquer.

He felt at his pocket. Folded inside it was an urgent message from the Red Cross, the one that his chief solemnly handed to him yesterday morning in the Chief's Mess. The message said it was his mother, his beautiful mother. It was her heart, it said, her lonely and broken heart. It was a heart, he knew, that was first broken long ago by the misery of an abandoned love; and now, as he understood the message to say, it was a heart further broken, irreparably broken, finally broken by the misery of an abandoned concern for her own wellbeing. Still touching the message through the outside of his pocket, he imagined her lying alone in a lonely hospital, uncertain both of her miserable fate and if she would ever again get to see her only child, her son, the only man in her life whose love stayed true to her. He had to get to her, to his beautiful, lonely, loving mother, before it was too late.

He looked around the weather deck and found that he was no longer alone. Others had joined him on the lifeline. They, too, leaned silently, motionlessly, and stared out across the water, seemingly transfixed by the beckoning dance of the flaming fires.

The chief was terribly sorry, he said as he handed him the message. But, because of the imminent invasion, it was not known when he would be able to get space on one of their Seahawks. Their focus, said the chief, was completely on the ship's ASW mission.

This made him laugh now as he thought about it. He could just imagine their helos out there stalking the waters, fully armed and impatiently ready, intently searching for all of Haiti's lethal, nonexistent submarines. What a typically pointless joke of a mission. But, his chief said, while they waited for a flight to Gitmo to open up for him, he would make arrangements with the radio shack for him to be able to talk to his mother ASAP on the INMARSAT hook up.

The chief said all this to him yesterday morning and he still had not yet spoken to his mother. The reason he was given for the delay was, because the invasion could go down at any time, of course, all communication paths were to remain open and, until further notice, any non-mission related transmissions had to first be approved by the Operations Officer. His call would definitely be authorized, his chief said, but no one knew exactly when.

Like many acronyms, ASAP, especially, tends to be given more weight and import than it deserves. In reality, the words that it stands for provide nothing more than the promise of a future possibility. However, invasion or not, the four female sailors sure did arrive ASAP. Fucking bitches were promptly helo'd in yesterday afternoon, as promised, just in time for the big event. And here he was stuck in limbo, wondering which big event he was going to have to miss – the invasion of Haiti because of the looming death of his mother; or the death of his mother because of the looming invasion of Haiti.

The sun's rays had completely covered the island and were now spreading fast across the water. He stood up, took one more deep breath of the thick, potent air, and then released it as a slow, reluctant sigh as he headed back inside the skin of the ship for morning chow.



It was the next day and he sat alone in his space. His full sea bag stood taut and at the ready next to him as he waited for flight operations to be called. Once called, he would report to the hangar bay where he would continue to wait until he was given the go ahead to board one of the Seahawks. Earlier in the day, as he sat at his desk with a print out of a random project schedule lying before him, offering the illusion of work, his chief called and advised him that he had been authorized a space on the next flight out to Guantanamo Bay. He was to report directly to personnel to pick up the emergency leave orders that had already been cut for him.

That was several hours ago, and now he sat alone in his space and waited. He was alone because his men were out working. Henderson was back up on the O-3 level, closing out the work on that corroded fitting. Salihovic and Blakely were in the Supply berthing compartment, responding to an emergency call to fix a leaking sewage pipe. Salihovic had intended to respond to the call alone, but Lawless told him to bring the fireman along with him, to give him a little on the job training. Salihovic loved the idea and told the fireman that sometimes HTs got stuck with some real shitty jobs. Salihovic and Henderson got a good laugh out of that. Henderson prodded the young fireman even more with a warning, saying that by the time he was a qualified HT, the bulk of his work would probably be devoted to clearing sewage pipes that had been clogged up by all the rags and nasty shit those dike bitches were going to be constantly flushing down the toilets. The two petty officers laughed even harder.

As they finished gathering their gear, his men said their goodbyes to him just in case he was gone before they returned. Blakely told him that his mother would be in his prayers while he was gone. The two petty officers quickly added that they also would be praying for her. He thanked them for that. As they were leaving, he asked them to secure the hatch, and they did.

The space was now silent and still and he, himself silent and still, sat alone within it, waiting and thinking.

Just as Salihovic had predicted, the invasion was called off. In the end, again just as Salihovic had predicted, them Haitian boys, the generals and the police commanders, were not that fucking stupid after all. They tried to be, but Clinton wouldn't let them. Fucking Clinton.

First, he lets fags in the navy, then he lets women serve on combatants, and now he goes ahead and lets Jimmy fucking Carter and General fucking Powell and some other mother fucker ruin his invasion by sending them out to talk some sense in them stupid, fucking Haitian boys.

Fuck Clinton. Fuck him, fuck fags, fuck women, fuck Haitians. Fuck them all.

He stood up and began pacing within the space. He couldn't think like that, not now, not when his mother was in the condition that she was in. His poor mother. His poor beautiful, loving, lonely, dying mother. He had to get to her before it was too late. When were they going to put the call down for the fucking flight ops? Clinton may have ruined his invasion, but at least he now had a chance to see her before it was too late. He could not believe how weak and desperate and lonely her voice sounded.

Last night, even before the invasion had been called off, the Operations Officer finally authorized him to place a satellite phone call to her. When he got word of the go ahead, he darted out from his space as if General Quarters had been sounded, sprinted dangerously through narrow passageways, and climbed the near-vertical ladders like a man possessed, winding his way up from the deepest depths of the ship to its tallest heights.

By the time he had reached the radio shack and one of the radiomen on duty had signed him in and he had sat down at the desk where the phone was located and placed the handset to his ear, the INMARSAT operator had already made the connection to his mother's room in the hospital and was in the middle of explaining to her nurse the proper procedures for speaking on a military communication system and how critical it was that absolutely no reference was made to any ship movements or schedules. The nurse said she understood and he could hear her as she softly explained it all to his mother. She softly told his mother to go ahead and say something. And then, he finally heard her voice.

"Hello?" his mother timidly began.

He hesitated to answer and then he could hear her nurse whispering in the background, reminding her to say "over" whenever she finished her turn speaking.

After a pause, his mother said, "Over."

"Hello, mom. It's me. Johnny. How are you, mom? Over."

"Johnny? Is it really you?"

He waited.

"Over."

He was not prepared for just how horribly weak, and tired, and old his mother sounded. She spoke slowly, and with a sad waver in her voice that made it hard for him to understand what she was saying. He wasn't sure if the choppiness of her voice was caused by her condition or by the condition of the satellite signal.

"Yeah, mom. It's me, your son. Are they taking good care of you? Over."

She began to cry.

"It's okay, mom. Don't cry. I'm on my way to see you and I'll be there before you know it. Okay? Over."

She said something, but the only thing he could understand was, "Over."

He told her that she shouldn't worry, that she was going to be all right, that he was coming for her, that from now on he was going to take care of her, that he loved her more than anything else.

But it wasn't his mother he was pleading to, it was her nurse. He could hear the embarrassment in her voice as she explained to him that it all had become too much for his mother and that she needed to rest. He said he understood and thanked her for her help. After she had hung up, he thanked the INMARSAT operator, who had remained on the line throughout the call to ensure operational security was maintained. The operator replied with a, "Roger that," then terminated the call.

He continued pacing back and forth within the space while waiting and thinking about his poor mother and all the many misgivings he had for the way he had neglected her for so long. Just like all the other men in her life, he, too, ended up abandoning her. He should have been there for her. How could he let his mother, his own broken-hearted, lonely and loving mother, live alone like she had for so long? She, the essence of love and womanhood, didn't deserve such a

hard, miserable life, just as he didn't deserve such a beautiful, loving mother. He collapsed in his chair and covered his face with his worn, calloused hands.

What made it even worse was that, while his scared mother suffered alone so far away from him, four fucking so-called women were now onboard his ship. He could see them right now strutting around the passageways, each knowing that they were a new and powerful precedent that could not be ignored, or contained. Their mere presence on the ship signaled the beginning of an assault that he knew would quickly overwhelm and dispose of honored traditions and ancient rites that had served, since the first sail was set, to mold weak, malleable landsmen, wogs, into tempered warriors of the sea. The fucking bitches. He could almost smell them.

He didn't notice at first, but there was a hesitant knocking at the hatch. He was going to ignore it, but then he thought that it might be someone, perhaps the Messenger of the Watch, coming down to tell him something about the flight ops; or, maybe it was someone with news about his mother. He stood up, walked to the hatch, quickly undogged it, and slowly pushed it open.

He couldn't believe his eyes. He almost fell over. It was her. It was his mother. She was standing there in the passageway right before him. He tried to steady himself by grabbing hold of the opened, wooden half-door, but the weight of his hand on the shelf caused the door to swing toward the bulkhead. He became even more unbalanced. Could it really be her?

No. Unlike the image standing before him, she wasn't young anymore. But the image looked just like her; or, at least it looked just like her in all those old pictures she always showed him when he was a child, and even when he wasn't – cracked, faded, black-and-white pictures of when she was young and still full of life and hope and happiness. Unlike the image the pictures, she was old and dying. Maybe she had died and it was her ghost. Or maybe it was her returning as an angel.

It wasn't his mother, he realized. It wasn't her, or her ghost, or an angel. The young woman standing before him was completely alive and was wearing the drab, sexless dungaree uniform that sailors wore when underway. But she could have been his mother, she was that beautiful. He stared at her, not knowing what to say. She stared back at him with large, frightened eyes and, through them he could see the large, frightened eyes of his mother as she lay helpless and alone in some unknown hospital.

He was entranced, entrapped, helplessly immobilized by some mysterious power, until he noticed her nervously shifting her weight from foot to foot and her eyes, the large, frightened eyes of a confused, unknowing young woman, of a confused, unknowing young sailor, glancing down at the sheet of paper that she held tightly within her hands. He stepped back and looked at her, all of her. It was then that he understood why she was there, standing in the passageway,

just outside of his space's open hatch. No, she certainly wasn't his mother. He took a deep breath of the stale, metallic air, and then sighed as he slowly closed the wooden half-door and leaned upon its shelf. He knew exactly what was about to happen next.

THE END

