



STAR TREK
REEMERGENCE

Hugo Calvin

Part III

STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

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Chapter 27

Counselor Jenovia stared down at the bruised terrorist, who went by the name of Jordan and had just revealed to her a shocking truth about their intentions at the hospital. “A vaccine? *For what?*” she demanded of him.

“I need it for my family. My wife has already been infected with a deadly unknown virus for which there is no cure.” He spoke with a nervous stutter, and Jenovia could feel the man’s pain as the words came out from his mouth. “She

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is in the late stages, and she desperately needs something to help her. But first I need the vaccine to protect my children.”

“What can you tell us about the infection?”

“I know very little...only that my wife is suffering greatly. We were informed that there were stockpiles of a completed vaccine being held in secret facilities across the continent, this hospital being one of them. But I am also told that the vaccine is in very limited supply. I sympathize with everyone in this hospital, and everyone on this planet, but it’s every man for himself. I must protect my family first. Thousands of our people are infected, and we need something soon.”

Thorn looked at the medical administrator, who only gave a look of bafflement. “I’m sorry, I don’t know what to tell you...there isn’t any such vaccine here,” he said. “I would know, I overlook everything that happens in this hospital.”

“What did your sources tell you about where it is?” Thorn asked Jordan.

“I was told that the stockpile was secretly being held in a laboratory in the basement of this hospital. It connects through this room via those stairs over there.”

“Tell your men to stop, and we will help you find your vaccine. The violence has to end now,” Thorn ordered.

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“But Jerad...if he takes us in, he will have us all put away for good, with no hope for our loved ones.”

“He doesn’t have to know.”

The man reluctantly nodded. He pulled out his communicator, and instructed the near hundred armed men to stand down. Though no one could see it through his metallic mask, Thorn stood a little more relieved.

“At least that’s one problem solved,” he told Jenovia.

“Our sources told us that the vaccine would be in the laboratory beyond that door,” Jordan told them. They tried to enter through the door, but it was locked from the inside.

“There is *nothing* there,” the administrator said pleadingly. “It’s just a...”

“*Quiet,*” Thorn ordered. He moved to the front, and studied the door intently. It was a fairly primitive locking mechanism reinforced by some heavy chains, but nothing that a little phaser fire couldn’t take care of. He fired at it with his hand-phaser, and the lock exploded. Then with a powerful kick, the door busted open. But nothing could prepare them for what they were about to see. For

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one thing, it was not a laboratory. It was just a large storage room, full of dusty boxes. There was no laboratory or any medications of any kind.

“Is this the right room?”

“According to our sources, yes.”

Jordan walked in complete disbelief, his jaw hanging open as his eyes slowly scanned the room from one end to the other. His heart sank as he realized that this meant that his hope for his own children had vanished. *“How...is this possible? Our sources were reliable!...Our sources were...”*

“They must have lied to us,” another one of the men said.

“Or Jerad intentionally fed us falsified information,” another suggested.

“All of our planning, all of our efforts...There is no vaccine.”

Thorn was getting thoroughly annoyed for being taken on a wild-goose chase. He stared down at Jordan once more, and firmly grabbed him by the collar. Although Jordan could not see his eyes, he could feel his intensity staring down at him. *“You need to tell me everything you know,”* Thorn said. He turned to the Counselor and to the administrator, *“I take it Jerad hasn’t exactly been completely forthcoming about the entire story. To any of us.”*

The young man sat against the wall, his clothes still raggedy and his face covered in dirt. It looked like he hadn't showered in days. He had minor bruises and cuts all over his body for everyday wear and tear, and looked even more beaten after Thorn had ruffled him earlier. He looked quite tired, and had a look of lost hope. "We are not terrorists. They only call us that, because they don't know what else to call us. We may blow up buildings, or rob stores, but we do it only to obtain what we need.

"I...I once worked for Jerad, for years. I was a bioengineer at one of his plants. I met with the cargo ships which had just picked up their shipments from Draloos V and helped them to unload it, and disintegrate the biomatter into energy and diverting the power."

"Diverted where?"

"To other manufacturing facilities. For food production, materials manufacturing, basic supplies. The facilities could replicate most of what we needed. The limiting factor was only the energy that was required to run all of the replicators, which turned out to be rather large because we have very few other means of generating our own. But at some point, Jerad started ordering bigger and

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bigger shipments from Draloos V. We must have been transporting four or five tons of biomatter a day. And yet, the output available to the public was not keeping up. *The excess shipment had to be going somewhere.*

“I started investigating further, showing people that the math just doesn’t add up. Before I knew it, I was fired by Jerad for asking too many questions,” he said. “Jerad is not who you think. He is actually quite a wealthy, and a very dangerous, man. He, and many other government officials, are intentionally keeping us at a certain level of poverty. By maintaining the guise of desperation, he invokes sympathy from the Federation, allowing our government to receive supplies on a continual basis.”

“And he is denying you the vaccine?” Jenovia asked.

“That’s right. We don’t know how he was able to develop it or how much he has made,” he said.

“*What does Jerad want?*” Thorn demanded to know.

“Draloos IV and Draloos V have been at war, for, I don’t know...over a year now. We don’t know who started it. But we do know that Jerad is part of the reason why we are still at war. At one point, Jerad was ordering the shipments to include the aliens. At first, it was an accident. The cargo ship transported a single

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organism, but when he found it and studied it he soon began to understand their dominant role on Draloos V.

“He saw them as a threat, because any intelligent being would understand and be offended by what we were doing: *he was stealing resources that belonged to the aliens*. He understood that the ecosystem was sufficient to sustain itself on its own even if we took as much as we did. The aliens were in the way of that.

“Jerad knew that if he transported the organisms under the guise of typical biomatter shipments, no one would be the wiser, because the matter is disintegrated almost the instant the cargo ship arrives back here on Draloos IV. We keep no records of what we take. He understood that on the planet the aliens were interconnected, and that by transporting away colonies of the organism, he was disrupting their network. And with each shipment, he was transporting more and more. By his calculation, he would eradicate the aliens in only six months.

“But his calculation assumed a constant growth rate. His method of eradicating them it wasn’t fast enough. The aliens were recovering almost as quickly as we were killing them. Even more, they became aware of what we were doing and we were angering them in the process. He knew he couldn’t go there and send a whole fleet there without arousing suspicion from the Federation. The Federation

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was providing us with necessary supplies, so we were being monitored very closely.

“Then the cargo ships started to come under attack. The aliens were retaliating. Instead of more resources, we were getting *less*. The aliens were adapting quickly to the situation. Cargo ships were getting destroyed one after the other. Jerad understood that this was a serious problem, and he began to panic. In desperation, he called the Federation for assistance.”

“But he didn’t want to,” explained another. “He was nervous that the Federation would find out what he was doing.”

“I think we need to get you people off the planet. We need to tell Captain Santiago that he needs to start executing his evacuation plan,” Jenovia told them. “You can’t stay here.”

“Jerad won’t let you evacuate the planet.”

Jenovia nearly gagged by what he was telling them. “He won’t *let* you leave? What do you mean by that?”

“He has never let anyone leave. Do you honestly think anyone here wants to stay here? ”

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“But there are so many of you. There are over one billion people on the planet. How does one man stop you?”

He shot a look at Thorn. “His security forces are more sophisticated than you think. He has weapons, and security forces that are loyal to him. Because he can pay people, he can exert more control. He can stop us from boarding any ship, or even from communicating with anyone on the outside. Sure, many people slip through the cracks, but overall he runs a tight ship.”

“I can’t believe what I’m hearing. Jerad *cannot* be one of the most powerful man on this planet. What about the political leaders?”

“They all work together,” another told her. “They essentially distribute the resources among themselves.”

“And plus, even if we leave, where can we go? We are not Federation citizens. We can’t just waltz in and say, ‘Hey, we need a place to live and eat,’” said another.

“Of course you can. You are human. The Federation will grant you *some* rights and protection through our borders,” she replied.

“*It might be difficult now that we know that your population is carrying a foreign virus,*” Thorn said.

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“Jenovia, I would love to discuss this with you further. But please tell me, is your ship nearby?” Jordan asked.

“Yes, it’s currently orbiting Draloos V,” she answered him.

“Do you have a Starfleet doctor on board?”

“Yes, we do.”

“I need one last thing from you. You must promise me to take my wife and my two daughters aboard. She’s very sick. If there’s any hope to save her, I would take it,” he pleaded. “Already my children are at risk. I sacrificed everything to get the vaccine, but now that hope is gone. I...I have nothing else.”

Thorn just shook his head. Jenovia gave Jordan a sympathetic look. “We can’t take everyone who has been infected...”

“*Please...*” he pleaded.

Jenovia turned back to Thorn. This was a bigger problem than either of them imagined when they first volunteered to assist them. “We need to get the captain.”

Chapter 29

Captain Seth sat nervously in his chair on the bridge of his ship, and just stared to the side of the bridge, deep in thought. It was not a great look for a captain. He should have at least stared at a PADD so it looked like he was doing something. But truthfully, he was shuffling things around in his head, trying to find solutions to the problems he was facing. He had just sent Captain Santiago back to the *Excelsior*, and he needed some time to think without him. He lost his train of thought when heard the comm system beeping.

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“Captain, we’re getting a recorded incoming message from Counselor Jenovia on Draloos IV,” said Ensign Ester.

Seth became even more nervous. “Put it on-screen,” Seth instructed.

“Captain Seth, I hope you receive this message. All of our normal methods of communication are being jammed. We’re using a secure signal to get to you. Lieutenant Commander Thorn and I have run into some trouble at the hospital. Some terrorists have attacked us in the building. We have the situation under control now, but we have a much bigger problem on our hands. The state of the whole Draloos IV population is much direr than Jerad had originally led us to believe. There has been some kind of a deadly virus that has been unleashed here on the planet, and everyone is at risk. We need you to pick us up from the Draloos IV as soon as you can. We have important information about Jerad that you might not like. Please tell the Doctor that we will be bringing aboard someone who is infected and needs medical attention right away, with your permission of course. You will want to immediately quarantine her. End transmission.”

“That’s all there is, captain,” Ester said.

Jenovia’s message certainly did not sit well with the captain. Seth wasn’t finished here on Draloos V yet, but Jenovia’s message was unnerving. He knew

full well that he would need to hear what the Counselor had to say about Jerad, particularly in light of Min and LeCroy's findings. Whether Seth could admit it or not, he was already beginning to trust Jenovia's instinct on things. What worried him more however was that if he left Santiago behind on Draloos V, he would do something foolish that would jeopardize the whole mission. But Seth just didn't have a choice in the matter. "Very well, then, Ensign. Captain Seth to the Doctor."

"Dr. Min here."

"We're going to start heading back to Draloos IV to pick up Thorn and Jenovia. We'll return here shortly. But get your sickbay ready; the Counselor says she's bringing in someone who is going to need your help, *right away*."

"Understood," he replied.

"Ensign, you know what to do. *Full impulse*."

Chapter 30

Counselor Jenovia breathed a sigh of relief having returned home to the *Dragonfly*. Although she would have stayed on Draloos IV longer to help the citizens in need, the situation with the deadly virus made her very uneasy, as it would anyone. And with the cargo ships no longer coming in and bringing shipments, the terrorist attacks would most likely escalate and working to help them would not likely be very efficient. Someone had to get to the root of their problems, or nothing could realistically be accomplished. She hoped that that someone would be Captain Darren Seth.

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She sat patiently in sickbay on one of the beds. Dr. Min was doing multiple scans on her from his medical tricorder. “Well, Counselor, you’ll be happy to know that you’re not showing any signs of infection. I don’t think you’ve contracted the virus. It doesn’t even look like it is compatible with your species.”

“That’s good to hear, Doctor.”

“The Villenes must be more resistant to viral infections in general. I’m detecting a relatively high level of functional killer T-cells in your blood for a humanoid. These levels would be alarmingly abnormal for a human.”

“We’ve had our fair share of major outbreaks on our world. Our species probably just adapted over the generations. How is the patient I brought aboard?”

“Stable for now. I’ve extracted her blood to analyze the chemistry of the virus. But it’s going to take the computer a little time to read out the whole genome of the virus and to understand its structure and mechanism.”

“What’s happened to her?”

“I can’t say yet. I have my suspicions, but I’m hesitant to say at the moment. There are small ‘sacs’ that are growing as lesions just below the surface of the skin on various parts of her body. *Jenovia, I need you to tell me everything*

that you know from your experiences on Draloos IV. I need to know everything about this virus.”

“At the moment, only a small percentage of the people are infected. I first noticed that something was going on when I consistently saw people with slight fevers. They seem to develop flu-like symptoms in the beginning stages of the infection...but I haven’t been around long enough to see what happens in the later stages.”

“Well, it’s a good thing that the virus is not airborne. I’ll wait for the results of the computer, but my suspicion at the moment is that it is transmitted primarily through saliva and blood.”

“That’s good to know. Well, Doctor, I’ll leave you now to your patient,” Jenovia said.

“Thank you again, Counselor. If I have any more questions...”

“...You’ll know where to find me.”

Dr. Min nodded. He quickly looked over at the new patient that they were discussing. She looked extremely ill; her skin was pale, and overall looked extremely malnourished. Small ‘cracks’ appeared on the surface of her skin,

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where there appeared to be something growing underneath. He had her immediately quarantined as soon she was transported aboard.

He had his medical assistant, Dr. Crimson Zable, remove a sample from the growths that littered her body. He did it with surprising ease; Zable was always quite proficient at surgical and laboratory techniques.

“Computer,” Min said aloud, “analyze the sample that Dr. Zable is about to feed you and read out the genome. Then, based on the current database on what we’ve collect on the species of Draloos V, extrapolate a ‘best-guess’ profile of what the organism might become once fully developed. When finished, display it on screen.” Since the organisms on Draloos V still used DNA as the carrier of genetic information, the computer was still able to recognize several codons and what proteins could be made, assuming it was similar to that of Earth. From there, it could recognize which biochemical pathways were likely, and what the biomolecules were used for. The process was lengthy, and unfortunately, still far from being accurate.

“Analysis complete,” the computer announced. “Accuracy for extrapolation is 54.4 percent.”

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When the computer finally finished, it put the image onto the screen. But when Dr. Min and Dr. Zable turned to look at the image, they were stunned. It looked very much like one of the Annecta.

“From a visual standpoint, they look like small, undeveloped embryos developing near the surface of the skin. Masses of smaller cells. Each one of those could be an egg for the Annecta,” Dr. Min said aloud. “Someone’s using these people as hosts to carry and introduce the Annecta into the Draloos IV ecosystem.”

“But how are these people getting infected in the first place? Last I checked, they haven’t exactly mastered space travel yet,” Zable asked him.

“I don’t know,” Dr. Min said. He stared at the patient for a moment. “Computer, based on the extrapolation from the genetic sample, you assigned a 54.4 percent probability that it is indeed the Annecta. I’m going to give you a tissue sample from an actual species of Annecta. I want you to run a genetic read-out of both tissues and compare. Understood?”

“Affirmative,” the computer obediently replied.

Dr. Min pulled out a syringe that allowed it to transport a tiny amount of tissue to give to the computer. “Working...analysis complete. A genetic match is

confirmed. The genetic read-out is identical up to 99.7 percent,” answered the computer.

“*Wait, they’re off by over 0.3 percent?*” Dr. Zable asked. “That’s a lot of genes to be different between members of the same species. Especially for a species with a genome as dense as this one.”

“They’re essentially the same, but they’ve reengineered themselves to reproduce an entirely different way,” Dr. Min surmised, “*just* so that they can move some of its kind to Draloos IV. I can’t believe it.”

Dr. Zable had a bit of a nauseated look. He was still in medical training, but most of his experiences in medical school were standard human problems. Cuts and bruises, broken bones, and sore throats. Simple stuff.

“I’ve got to tell the captain.”

“Why would they go through so much trouble? This doesn’t make any sense.”

“It’s a weapon,” Dr. Min explained. “They’re retaliating against the people of Draloos IV and they’re doing it by deliberately infecting them with this virus. *And they want to replace them with themselves.*”

Chapter 31

Dr. Min once again waited in his sickbay for a meeting with Captain Seth. This was the third time that Dr. Min had to report some unsettling news to his captain, and there was a *lot* of unsettling news. It was not something that Min was planning on getting used to, but seeing how bumping into dangerous life forms was likely to be a commonplace occurrence aboard the *Dragonfly*, it might simply be an unavoidable fact of the job. Captain Seth made his appearance, and the solemn look on his face told Min that he was ready to take on almost any news.

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“Yes, what is it, Doctor,” Seth asked.

“Please, captain, come with me. There is something more that I need to show you about our patient.” Min led him to his office where he had a huge screen on the wall. He brought up the patient’s information onto the screen. “You see these chromosomes?”

“Yes...”

“These are the twenty-three chromosomes of the patient. Do you see the sections that are in blue?”

“Uh-huh...”

“Well those shouldn’t be in there,” Dr. Min said sternly, with his arms folded.

“What do you mean? How did they get there?”

“*Through the foreign virus.* By introducing it, their genome has now been tampered with,” Min explained. Seth didn’t like the sound of that. “And I can tell you this, Captain: these genes don’t code for anything *human.*”

To Seth, that sounded even worse. “What do you mean? What do they code for?”

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Dr. Min punched in the commands on the keyboard and brought up the images the computer had drawn up earlier. “Recognize them?”

“*The Annecta.*”

“Quite correct, Captain. It’s quite a substantial amount of genetic data. When someone is infected, the virus can replicate and re-write the genetic instructions to create conditions in the body that are favorable to development of the aliens.”

“You mean to tell me that the Annecta are *deliberately* infecting the people of Draloos IV with a virus that causes them to ‘make’ *more of them?*” The very idea sounded ludicrous, and nauseating.

“Put crudely, yes, captain. I asked the health minister of Draloos IV to run similar scans that I’ve run here in sickbay,” Min continued. “Most people are not infected, and transmission is slow. So there is still time. But if you’re asking me how it got there in the first place, I’m at a loss. Somehow it made its way to the planet, probably from one of the cargo ships. I suspect that some time ago one of the cargo ships was carrying the virus, and unwittingly released it into the environment when it returned to Draloos IV. Or possibly, one of the crewmen was infected and returned home and transmitted the disease. Initially, the host only exhibits mild flu-like symptoms, so it barely goes noticed. And from what I can

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tell, the birthing process *kills the host*. This means that if they manage to infect the entire population, *they will kill the population.*”

“In one swoop, they will colonize the planet and annihilate their enemies on it at the same time...”

“Quite right, captain,” Min quickly replied. “Ingenious, elegant, and *cruel*...”

Seth shook his head in disbelief. “...Can you reverse the procedures?”

“Not yet. I’ve already tried removing the mass, but I soon discovered that it wasn’t possible. The masses are integrated into the hosts’ nervous system. If I remove them, the patient could very well die. I am currently trying a genetic approach. I’ve taken the liberty of assigning most of our scientists on board to investigate ways to remove the extraneous gene sequences safely. In the meantime, I’m personally working on a vaccine that will prevent infection in the first place. That should be our top priority.”

“How is this virus being transmitted?”

Dr. Min swiped through the images on the computer screen with his hand. “Through the blood. That’s good news, because that is fairly manageable to control.”

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“Is there a chance that the virus could spontaneously become airborne?” Seth said.

“Not by itself, but...” He punched more buttons onto the computer screen, and the three-dimensional image of the DNA spun round and round as Min scrolled through the sequences with his hand. “You see these sequences? They code for the protein coat that gives the virus the ability to become transmissible by air. I recognized the protein sequence because it’s not too unlike the one we see in our flu virus on Earth. It gives the protein shell ‘spikes,’ if you will, that allow it to bind to cells along the respiratory tract.”

“But I thought you just said...”

“*They aren’t active yet,*” Min quickly told him.

“You mean, at some point, they could be?”

“Absolutely. There is a whole stretch of nucleotide sequences here that I’m not exactly familiar with, but I’m assuming that a large part of it serves as some sort of trigger factor that will cause the virus to instruct the host to make the airborne version of itself. Once that happens, captain, there will be a pandemic on Draloos IV. And unless I can find a cure, there’s very little I can do.”

“And I’m guessing that it is the aliens who have their finger on the trigger.”

“That’s where I’d put my bets.”

“And what is that trigger?” Seth asked him.

“I don’t know yet. It could be a chemical, a physical trigger like light, a polypeptide sequence, another virus...”

Santiago was right; this was a species that required extreme measures. Seth had underestimated their power and ruthlessness, and their ability to extend their vicious hand across planets. He felt that he was put in an extraordinarily difficult position, because now genocide of this species begins to feel almost *justifiable*. But he couldn’t let that option enter into his mind; after all, Jerad and the others certainly had a hand in this mess. *His main priority should be to put an end to the hostilities*. “Doctor, thank you. You’ve done great work here, but...”

“Yes, I know. You need the *vaccine*.”

“I don’t need to emphasize to you the importance of it. The outcome of these two worlds depends on it. It looks like we’re in the middle of a *war*.”

“I understand, captain.”

“In the meantime, I will try to buy you some more time,” Seth said. “And with Santiago doing things the way *he* wants to, that may not be easy.”

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“Sir, I’m deeply concerned that this may not be the end of it. What we are witnessing here requires massively sophisticated mechanisms and biological control, way beyond my own abilities as a medical scientist. I hesitate to think what would be in store for us should we ever make enemies of them.”

Seth stopped in his tracks to consider Min’s words. He didn’t want to imagine himself what that might be like. “One problem at a time, Doctor.”

Chapter 32

After days in the laboratory on little or no sleep, Dr. Min had managed to synthesize a number of potential vaccines that would hopefully allow the humans of Draloos IV to develop an immune response to the alien virus. But he had to run tests on all of them, and there was little time. For that, he had to move to one of the holodecks. “Computer,” he said aloud, “Run vaccine samples EM-782, EM-1402, EM-1863, and EM-2190 in a trial of appropriate sample size, run against a placebo group, 30 micrograms for each individual, delivered

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intravenously. Species: *human*. Split male and female even for now. All ages. Standard vaccine clinical trial setup.”

“Acknowledged,” the computer responded.

“Now accelerate time index by seven days. Record side effect profile for every individual over that time period and display the results on screen. Report any deaths.” All of the holographic patients blurred in super fast motion to reach the timeframe that Dr. Min had specified. When it finished, some of them looked perfectly normal but many more still looked very sick. Some of them just lay in their bed in the fetal position, some had collapsed to the ground, and some of the individuals looked like the vaccine had no effect. By inspection alone, the results looked very discouraging.

“Results for vaccine sample EM-782,” the computer casually announced, “low-grade fever (60 percent), high-grade fever (42 percent), mild allergic reaction (67 percent), severe hyper-allergic reaction (43 percent). Success rate of vaccine: 36 percent. Three thousand and twenty-four recorded deaths. Allergic reactions include: wheezing, hives, site reaction...”

“Computer, delete audio,” Dr. Min said.

“Results for vaccine sample EM-1402...”

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“Computer, delete audio for *all* samples.” Dr. Min carefully reviewed the results. “*Damn, I was worried about this.*”

“Problem?” came a voice. It was the Chief Engineer, Lieutenant Commander LeCroy.

Dr. Min let out a Vulcan curse, which was unusual for him and his usual cool. “I knew that developing a vaccine for this virus would be frustrating. The protein coat that encapsulates the virus incorporates amino acids that are foreign to the human body, and so it’s having a hard time developing an effective antibody against the surface antigen. I should have realized that this would be the outcome. I knew it was a long-shot, but I just had to try.”

“What made you try it in the first place?” LeCroy wondered.

“From my studies of the protein structure of the viral capsid, I found that it *mostly* uses the same amino acids that we use. I thought that, even with only a few oddities, the human body would be able to create an antibody against it,” Min answered. It sounded perfectly logical to LeCroy, whose medical background had become quite competent after taking up the BX-12 project.

“The vaccines you have aren’t any good?”

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“The success rates on all of these vaccines are pretty low. And many of these human subjects are suffering from severe anaphylactic reactions. And so far, these are my best candidates.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” LeCroy said.

“What are you doing here? I’m afraid that I don’t have time to work on BX-12 at the moment.”

“Well, actually, I just wanted the holodeck so that I could do some mountain climbing. I will check on the BX-12 a little later. But I noticed that you were here, so I decided to stop by.”

“*You climb mountains?*” Min asked amusingly. “Forgive me if I say that you just don’t look the type.”

“I rather enjoy the solitude of the activity, actually. It helps me think about things. But, after a major injury while in the Academy, I had to do it with the safety features on. Kinda takes the fun out of it, you know? What about you?”

“Uh, tennis.”

LeCroy almost snickered. “Probably not many injuries there.”

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“Just the way my mother liked it,” he said sarcastically. Min rolled his eyes as he said it.

The Chief looked around at what he was doing with his unusual blue goggles. He saw each human hologram frozen in time in individual chambers, some coughing, some vomiting, others just standing there perfectly content, reading books. There were ten thousand patients, so the rows of chambers seemed to go on forever. “Why are you in a holodeck, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Well, I run all of my clinical trials here. I don’t technically need to, but I like seeing all of my subjects. The holographic simulations are close enough to real people now that they can reliably be used to gather physiological data in response to new drugs or vaccines. Starfleet still requires that clinical trials be run before we administer new therapeutics because our predictive power of chemistry to physiological response is still murky at best. But, thanks to holographic technology, we can greatly speed up the process. I can’t imagine how it must have been like to wait ten or twenty years before a patient could try a drug.”

“Better living through holography, I suppose...”

“Exactly.”

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“So what are you going to do then?” the Chief asked. “Now that your vaccines aren’t working.”

“I need to try some other strategies for counteracting this virus. Vaccines are really the best first-line-of-defense solution, and I always find it best to use the host’s *own* immune system to fight it off, so it just makes sense to try a vaccine first. In this case, a vaccine for a human just might not work at all. If it doesn’t, I’ll have to try some other antiviral strategy.”

“Won’t that take a while?”

“It really requires me to understand the mechanism of how the virus works,” Min explained. “But as you said, that will take time and I just don’t have it.”

The Chief looked at him curiously, but sympathetic to his cause. They looked over at one particular female hologram, one who had keeled over and vomited all over the floor of her cubicle. Her arms were wrapped around her stomach, and she curled into a fetal position, clearly in pain. The image was frozen in time, because Min had stopped the program, but that only made it that much more horrific to see. This was a very real reason Min used the holodeck to run his trials. He wanted to be able to see the pain that each of his patients went through. “And if I

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don't find something soon, the suffering on Draloos IV will be...*unimaginable*,"

Min said. "If you'll excuse me, Chief, I have to get back to wo—"

"Captain Seth to Dr. Min and Chief LeCroy," the comm system interrupted.

"Yes, what is it, captain?" Dr. Min said.

"I need both of you to come to Holodeck 5," Seth said. LeCroy and Min could have sworn that he heard him grunt over the comm system. "Captain Santiago has something that he wants to show us. He and his team are close to finishing their weapon."

Chapter 33

Santiago stood arrogantly in the *Dragonfly*'s fifth holodeck, with his arms folded, much to Seth's annoyance. Seth had not anticipated how quickly Santiago's team would come up with a weapon against the *Annecta*. Santiago rested his personal PADD that he brought aboard from the *Excelsior* on the computer display, and the computer immediately extracted the information. "This, is a holographic simulation of an experiment that I had my doctor run on an experimental new toxin."

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The room lit up with an image of the Annecta creatures on the *Excelsior*, also in a similar container as the one on the *Dragonfly*, but smaller.

“I didn’t know that you took samples of the aliens from the planet,” interrupted Dr. Min, clearly annoyed.

“With respect, Doctor, that’s not your concern. May I continue?”

Dr. Min raised a brow, like any Vulcan would, and made a sarcastic hand gesture to Santiago to continue. A holographic image of Dr. Centress stood by the computer. He punched in the commands for the computer to release a solution spray within the containment field. Everyone could see the connections between each of the organisms began to darken and shrivel up. Eventually, they reverted back to individuals, and started walking around again. But they looked rather clumsily while doing it.

“My doctor has identified a chemical that can impair their ability to interface with each other,” explained Santiago. “It’s actually a derivative of a marine toxin found on Earth, one that affects nerve impulses. The effect lasts for only four or five days, but my doctor says that they cannot operate effectively independently for much longer than thirty-six hours. He predicts that the hostile organisms on Draloos V will annihilate them even faster than that.”

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“Destroyed by their own creations,” Seth said.

“Their intelligence allowed them to dominate the planet in the first place, and manipulate their environment at will. Take that away from them, and they completely lose that advantage,” Dr. Min added.

“We will have to get low enough near the surface to deploy the weapon. The problem will be getting it to wide enough area as to seriously disrupt the neural net before it is able to launch a counter-attack,” Santiago explained. “We can see that the effect is nearly instantaneous.”

“But if it’s a chemical, then the effect is going to be localized. I estimate that the Annecta are spread across the whole world. How would you get it across the entire planet?” Dr. Min asked.

“We will need to deliver the chemical through some sort of carrier. Some encapsulation particle that can spread the chemical throughout the entire network. Dr. Centress and my engineering team aboard the *Excelsior* are working on it right now,” he explained. “A nanomolar concentration is all that is needed to kill them, but on a planetary scale, that’s still quite a bit. The added challenge is spreading it in a way that will affect the entire network.”

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“You will need to find some way to see that your encapsulation particles withstand the explosion, sir,” noted LeCroy. He then cocked his head towards Captain Santiago, “Not that I will have anything to do with helping you design it,” he sneered.

Jerad’s face brightened. It was the kind of thing that he wished he could have developed on his own, had he had the resources and equipment. “Captain, this would save all of us on Draloos IV. *This* is what we’ve been waiting for...”

Captain Seth folded his arms as he digested all of the new information. He looked at Dr. Min, who he could tell did not like this plan one bit. Dr. Min pulled him to the side. “Captain, we are talking about annihilating an entire species,” Dr. Min whispered. “That is unconscionable, whether the species is sentient or not, intelligent or not. No matter their intentions, however cruel, it does not give us that right.”

Both Captain Santiago and Jerad clearly had irritated looks on the faces having overheard them.

Dr. Min pushed further. “Captain Seth, we’ve already messed up First Contact. The Federation has a new enemy. Do we really want to drag the

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Federation into a war? It is, quite frankly...” Min started, but hesitated to fill in the last word.

“...What? *Illogical?*” Seth filled in.

“You know I never use the term...but *yes.*”

Santiago stepped into the conversation. “Darren, can I talk with you alone?”

Santiago interrupted. Seth reluctantly made a gesture with his head to instruct the others to move towards the door.

“We finally have something against the aliens. We are running low on options. You said so yourself, they are implementing a plan to attack the people of Draloos IV. The situation there is escalating and there is social unrest. We have to use the toxin.”

“I know, Alan, I understand that. But I want to exhaust all other options first.”

“What other options are you talking about?”

“Dr. Min and his team are working hard to create a vaccine to the virus. I’m confident that Min can come up with one, but just as importantly, we need to dissipate the tension between the two worlds. Obviously, the people provoked the

aliens first, which means that the aliens *react* to hostility. They might respond to calls of peace.”

Santiago sneered.

“I’m doing this by the book, Alan. In Dr. Min’s words, this is a First Contact scenario that has gone horribly wrong, *but I can fix it. I will only use the weapon as a last resort.*”

Santiago paused for a moment to consider his comments, which were sound, but simply didn’t sit well with him. From the beginning, he could sense that something was not at all right with the aliens, and that he and Seth desperately needed a viable defense against them. At the very least, a weapon would help increase their leverage against them, even if the weapon was never to be used. Yet, he acknowledged that a by-the-book approach and calls for peace should at least be attempted. He had to admit that Seth and Dr. Min were right in that this was a First Contact scenario gone very, very wrong.

“This is *my* mission, Alan,” Seth reminded him.

“Alright, Darren. We’ll do it your way for now,” he said. “Just get one thing straight. I’m going to finish my weapon anyway, with or without you.”

Chapter 34

In the Ten Forward lounge aboard the *Dragonfly*, Jerad was enjoying a Scotch on the rocks that he hadn't had in a long while. It was a refreshing change now that Starfleet had once again allowed alcohol to be served on starships, because he could certainly use a hard drink at that moment. Now that the *Dragonfly* was back to Draloos V, he looked out and gazed onto the planet. As deadly as the ecosystem was on the surface, the aliens certainly knew how to make it look beautiful from above.

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The situation had not greatly improved since he had called on the Federation for help. Perhaps it was a miscalculation on his part, but it was a large one at that. His only chance now was the weapon that Captain Santiago was working on, but that was all that he needed. *Somehow he had push for it.* If Santiago is able to at least develop the weapon, even if Captain Seth convinced him not to use it, perhaps he could steal it from them and use it on his own. Jerad sighed; now was not the time for such thoughts. There was no practical way to do what he was thinking, not with his limited resources.

As he finished the last of his drink, two junior security officers casually approached him. “Sir,” one officer began, “would you please come with me? Both Captain Seth and Santiago want to see you.”

Jerad swallowed. “What for?”

“They are waiting there for you now, sir,” the other officer said to him.

There was nowhere for him to run. At least, there was nowhere to run in his immediate vicinity. *It was time,* Jerad thought. He had overstayed his welcome on the Federation ship. “I’m not going anywhere with you,” he said forcefully. He tapped a hidden communicator on his forearm that initiated an automatic transport.

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As his molecules disassembled in a dazzling display of light, in a reflex, one of the officers punched his own communicator. “*Bridge,*” he said aloud.

“Yes, Lieutenant, do you have him?” the captain asked him.

“No, sir. He’s trying to escape.”

Captain Seth’s eyes narrowed. He suspected that Jerad might attempt an escape off of the *Dragonfly*. After learning the truth from his officers about his role in the war that Draloos IV was now facing, Seth knew that there was no way a clever man like Jerad would leave himself vulnerable on a Federation starship. Not a man as resourceful as him. Seth stood on the bridge, on his toes, and ready to catch his now desperate prey.

“Lieutenant Commander Thorn,” Seth said aloud. “Do you know where he is?”

“*Not yet, sir,*” he answered coolly. “*I very much doubt that he transported to the surface of Draloos V. I suspect that he made his way to a cloaked ship.*”

“Find him,” Set ordered.

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Thorn tapped at the console at his security station with ease and grace, and his focus and efficiency were unlike anything Seth had ever seen. *“Seems like even their cloaking devices are outdated. It looks to be of 23^d century Romulan design.”*

How the hell did you he get his hands on a Romulan cloaking device? Seth wondered. “You have him?”

“I’m using an antiproton beam to approximate the location of his ship, though quite frankly, I could have easily splashed yellow paint all around to locate him. It is a small ship forty meters below our right saucer section. They’re trying to move off.”

Suddenly, the *Dragonfly* shook, and the lights flickered on and off.

“They’re firing,” Thorn said.

“They’re trying to *attack* us?” Seth demanded. The vibrations were not serious, but they were surprising. For the first time since he left spacedock, he felt a certain pride about his ship, and took deep offense that someone was trying to injure it. *And what the hell made him think that he could take on a newly commissioned 25th century Federation ship?* Seth thought. He shot a look at his Security Chief.

Thorn understood with only a glance from the captain. *“Returning fire. Disabling their weapons and...”*

“Engines?”

“Inoperative. They’re not going anywhere.”

Seth saw on the massive viewscreen Jerad’s small ship moving in and out of phase as a result of its damaged cloaking device, and concomitantly spinning out of control because of Thorn’s surgically precise phaser fire. “Lock on a tractor beam...” Seth ordered, with a certain satisfaction, “...and drag him. Pull him by the hair if you have to; I want him in my conference room, *now*.”

A bruised and shackled Jerad, now aboard the *Dragonfly* once again, entered Seth’s conference room with trepidation, not least because a gigantic Breen figure had essentially torn him from his ship and pushed him around from one part of the ship to the other. Captain Seth and Santiago were standing there waiting, along with Counselor Jenovia, and Dr. Min.

“Jerad, please, have a seat,” Seth told him. Jerad obeyed, cautiously. “You must think Starfleet is made of fools,” Seth said coldly.

Jerad had a retreated expression, unsure of how to respond to such a remark.

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“Counselor Jenovia and Lieutenant Commander Thorn have informed me of a few things that I just want some clarification on.”

“Oh?” he replied.

“Let me spell it out for you: *you knew about the aliens on Draloos V,*” he started. “You have been intentionally transporting them off the surface in order to disrupt their network. You have intentionally been assaulting them. The only reason why you couldn’t wipe them out entirely was because you didn’t want to arouse Federation suspicion.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Captain,” Jerad sneered. He felt a blunt push from behind him, as a warning from Thorn.

“Allow me to clarify. Lieutenant Commander LeCroy and Dr. Min informed me that they found traces of genetic material from the Annecta on your cargo ships.” said Seth. He looked straight into his eyes. “And from what Counselor Jenovia tells me, you have been distorting the truth of your situation on Draloos IV.”

The bead of sweat ran down the side of Jerad’s face.

“You have been limiting food, water, and basic necessities to the general populous, and covertly diverting a disproportionate amount of energy to yourself

and a few select individuals,” Jenovia added. “You maintained the guise of desperation so you could continue to receive help from the Federation. That constitutes as fraud.”

“You told me that people on your world were starving, that many were homeless...*And you diverted power so that you could replicate things for yourself, and called us to say that you didn't have enough?*” Seth demanded.

Jerad backed away. He looked embarrassed, but not ashamed, about what he had been doing. He felt perfectly justified. “I do it all for my own family. I am not at all ashamed for taking care of them first, Captain.”

“That’s not what we’re criticizing,” Jenovia argued.

“We’re human just like you. You would be doing the same thing if you were in our shoes. Take a look around, Captain. It’s *every* man for himself!”

“Maybe you’ve spent too much time outside Federation space. We have evolved beyond such things, Jerad,” Seth told him.

“Don’t look down on me, Captain,” Jerad snarled. “You didn’t ‘evolve.’ You only developed the technology that freed yourself from having to consider such things. We once had it, too. Make no mistake, if all of you Federation people were in our shoes, you would all be doing the exact same thing.”

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“That’s not true. But whatever you want to believe, Jerad, you won’t be receiving any more help from the Federation. I’ll make sure of that.”

Jerad stood up to retaliate. “*You have no right to do this!*” He looked to Santiago, who only stood there with his arms folded. Though Santiago and Seth have been having their disagreements, Jerad would get no sympathy from him.

“We have every right. If you lie to the Federation while receiving help, then you can expect us to put a stop to it once we find out.”

Jerad thought that he was calling a bluff. “The mighty Federation would just let an entire human colony perish? I very much doubt that, Captain.”

“*Sickbay to Dr. Min! Medical emergency!!*” the comm system blasted.

“It must be the patient I had brought aboard,” Jenovia said. “She was in the late stages of the infection.”

Dr. Min immediately hit his combadge. “*I’m on my way.*”

Jenovia grabbed the captain, and tugged at him. “Captain, I think this is something you should see for yourself. There was a reason why I brought her aboard.”

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Everyone stood outside of the surgical bay and peered in through the glass to see what was going on. Dr. Min had already rushed in to treat the patient. Her skin had peeled back as the pressure inside the lesions had grown. She was convulsing, and crying in pain.

“Vital signs are fluctuating. Blood pressure is one-eighty over one-twenty. She’s going into shock.” Dr. Min scanned her and the medical tricorder immediately sounded off a deafening alarm.

“*Oh my God,*” Dr. Min cried. “The pressure under her skin has reached critical levels. The aliens are tearing her apart. I need to relieve the pressure,” Dr. Min said. The woman was screaming and screaming. “*Give her an anesthetic while I operate!*” He took a laser scalpel and tried to operate. But as he did it, millions of tiny Annecta “spider-lings” began pouring out of her wounds. They crawled all over her body and surgical table. Everyone immediately backed away in terror. “*Everyone, out! NOW!*”

In a panic, the medical staff ran out of the room. “*Computer, activate a containment field around the surgical bay!*” In an instant, an invisible barrier was erected and the spider-lings scratched it to try and get out. The patient lied on the table, bloodied from the injury, and lifeless.

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“*Please, HELP HER!*” Jordan pleaded.

“I’m sorry, there’s nothing I can do. She was in too late a stage in her infection.”

“Have you had no luck with a vaccine, Doctor?” Seth asked him.

“No, sir. The results of my late vaccines have been poor. It may not even be possible to synthesize a vaccine with this virus.”

Jordan immediately glared at Jerad, who had only stood there, quiet as a mouse. “*You allowed us to go on a wild goose chase, devoting precious resources to look for a vaccine that didn’t exist! All the while THIS happened to my wife!*” Jerad took a cautious step back. “*When I tell everyone what you have done, I’m going to make sure that...*”

Captain Seth shot a look at Thorn, in case a dangerous situation arose. “I sympathize with your situation, Jordan, but let’s try to keep everything under control...” Seth then shot a look at Jerad. “I consider *you* responsible for this,” he said, referring to the victim in the surgical bay. “I *know* that you’ve been provoking the aliens on Draloos V, transporting them away against their will. You have been killing them by disrupting their network, piece by piece. *You didn’t expect retaliation?*”

“They were holding us back, captain...I needed to feed everybody...I...”

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“The Federation could give essentially everything you needed for you and your family. There was no reason to resort to this.”

“Just having my needs taken care of is not enough.”

“How is that not enough?”

Jerad thought for a moment. He did not know the exact answer to his question, he only knew it instinctively. He just *had* to do it. It was an instinct for *control*. There was no explaining it.

“Jerad, as the captain of this vessel and on behalf of the Federation, I am placing you under arrest on charges of falsifying information to the Federation while receiving benefit aid, and assault on an intelligent species with the intent of genocide,” Seth said. He looked at Jordan. “Do you have enough evidence to support your claims, Jordan? Evidence that will hold up in a Federation Court of Law?”

“Yes, captain, we all do.”

“Lieutenant Thorn, get him out of here. Throw him in the brig until we get back to Federation space. When we head back to Draloos IV we will arrest any other leaders involved.”

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“Understood.” Thorn was more than happy to oblige.

Seth just stared through the window of the surgical bay, with the little spiderlings scrambling all over. “Doctor, we have a real problem here.”

“I’m working on several other anti-viral strategies at the same time, captain. I’m confident I can get one to work, but it will take me more time.”

“Then you’d better hurry. If every person on Draloos IV suffers this fate...” he started. Seth couldn’t even come up with the words to finish his sentence.

“I know, captain.”

Captain Santiago, on the other hand, looked more confident rather than concerned. “I think I’ve seen all I needed to see.”

Chapter 35

Santiago charged out of sickbay but Seth was determined to follow him. Seth knew that the patient death was all the impetus that Santiago needed to convince himself that it was time to deploy the weapon. But he wasn't going to just let him go. Seth needed more time before they just wiped them off the face of the planet, no matter how dangerous.

“What are you going to do, Alan?” Seth said aloud. Santiago ignored him and just kept walking. “I said, *‘What are you going to do?’*” he said more emphatically.

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“I’m not under any obligation to tell you, Darren,” he replied coldly.

“Alan, please, I need more time.”

“The situation has become critical. You saw it for yourself, this alien species is extremely dangerous. We can’t sit idly by.”

“We’re not. Dr. Min is doing everything he can to neutralize the virus and—”

“Well, you’re not doing enough,” he quickly retorted. “Your doctor is taking too long.”

“This isn’t some fly on the wall that we’re swatting. We are talking about *genocide*,” Seth reminded him.

“No, we are talking about *self-defense!* Under these kinds of circumstances, it is always acceptable!”

“No, Alan, it isn’t. There *has* to be a way to end this without the violence.”

Santiago turned to him in disgust. “Did you not see what the aliens are capable of? Or did what just happened in sickbay just go over your head? *How can you in good conscience let that pass?*”

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“I didn’t miss anything. I know what I saw.” Seth had to make sure that he didn’t come off as unsympathetic to the people, because he wasn’t. “You want to help the human colony? Tell your medical team to help my doctor come up with a countermeasure to the virus. With our combined efforts we might be able to come up with an effective solution sooner.”

Santiago acted like Seth was talking nonsense.

“And what if your weapon doesn’t work?” Seth continued. “What then? Not only will they unleash their vengeance on Draloos IV but the Federation now has a new enemy. Are you willing to risk war for this? The very *least* you could do besides helping with a vaccine is to try a diplomatic solution. Instead, your big mouth like back in the cargo bay is only going to provoke them in *attacking us further!*”

Again, Santaigo said nothing.

“At least, give me the time for Dr. Min to come up with a vaccine. I know he can do it.”

“We don’t have a choice. We are up against a wall. Over a billion people are about to suffer the fate of that poor woman in your sickbay, and we can’t evacuate them in time. You are putting that population at risk every second you

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wait. Forget the books and Starfleet regulation; this is *real* life that we are dealing with.”

Seth grunted loudly. “Don’t make it sound like you know all about command just because you’ve been captain for one more month than I have.”

“Don’t make me relieve you of your command,” Santiago said forcefully. “Even if I don’t out-rank you, Admiral Kim has given me authority over the mission. And even if that wasn’t the case, under the circumstances, I think Admiral Kim would agree with me.”

“You can’t speak for him. And I can’t believe you would do that.”

“You’re damn right I would. I won’t look bad in front of Admiral Kim and have my career jeopardized just because *you* made a mess of the mission!”

That caught Seth’s attention. “So is that what this is about, Alan? You’re afraid that I’ll completely mess up the mission and Admiral Kim will think less of you? You feel like I’m just dragging you down?” Seth probed. It had to be it.

“*You have ALWAYS dragged me down,*” Santiago admitted.

And there it was on the table. “Like the time in the Academy, right? The time that we failed the pilot exam?”

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It became evident to Seth now that Santiago had resented him for that. Santiago didn't want to say anything aloud, but he knew that he got his point across.

“This has never been about doing what's right. This has always been about you taking control of *my* mission,” Seth said to him.

“I think you're the one who's mistaken over which one is letting their bitterness get the better of him,” Santiago retorted.

“Go back to the *Excelsior*, Alan. *You're not welcome here anymore.*”

Santiago knew that this was far from over. He proceeded to walk out of the room, and turned around for one final word. “Do what you will, Darren. I am authorized by Admiral Kim to do as I see fit to save everyone on Draloos IV according to my judgment of the best way to do that. Knowing the alien's intent, I am well within my right to deploy the weapon. I don't need you.”

Chapter 36

“...I want you to do your own studies on these organisms, as well as any others from this environment that you need. Transport them to our medical facilities and quarantine them, like the Dragonfly did. I want us to do our own investigations and for us to draw our own conclusions. Take as many as you need...We need to develop a way to neutralize them...”

“...You mean a weapon?...”

“...Yes, that’s exactly what I mean. Can you do it, Doctor?...”

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“...Possibly, but that would require that I experiment on them. They’re intelligent. They might not appreciate that. And I’m not entirely sure that I want to be on the receiving end of their wrath, should they decide to retaliate....”

“...Take whatever safety precautions are necessary, Doctor. I’m giving you permission to learn everything you can about penetrating the barrier and developing a weapon that could neutralize their whole network. We need to gain a hand over them...”

“...From the moment we evolved into beings that empowered us to make the technology to better hunt and feed ourselves. We have the right do whatever we feel is responsible and right for our survival, because we can...”

...OUR SUSPICIONS HAVE BEEN CONFIRMED...THE HUMANS ARE
DANGEROUS...

...ESTABLISHED THREAT TO OUR KIND: CAPTAIN ALAN SANTIAGO,
U.S.S. EXCELSIOR...

...POTENTIAL THREAT: CAPTAIN DARREN SETH, *U.S.S.*
DRAGONFLY...

...WE MUST ACT NOW TO PROTECT OURSELVES FROM THE
HUMANS...THERE CAN BE NO DELAY...

STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

...OUR PLAN TO OVERTAKE THE FEDERATION STARSHIP, *U.S.S. EXCELSIOR* IS UNDERWAY...

...THE SECOND ANNECTA COLONY IS ESTABLISHED ON THE *U.S.S. EXCELSIOR*...

...THE FIRST ANNECTA COLONY ON THE *U.S.S. DRAGONFLY* IS MAINTAINED...

...LONG-RANGE COMMUNICATION BETWEEN COLONIES IS INTACT...

...DECODING AND ANALYSIS OF HUMAN GENOME FROM BLOOD SAMPLES OF SEVEN SUBJECTS: *COMPLETE*.

...DATA COLLECTED FROM:

...SIX SUBJECTS FROM THE CARGO SHIPS OF DRALOOS IV;

...THREE SUBJECTS FROM FEDERATION STARSHIP, *U.S.S. ION*.

...MASS REPLICATION OF HUMAN DNA AND SYNTHESIS OF HUMANOID SUBJECTS (SIX) IS UNDERWAY...

STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

...ALL SUBJECTS ARE BEING GROWN IN INCUBATION CHAMBERS
WITHIN OUR SOIL...

...DESIRED ATTRIBUTES:

...ADDED STRENGTH AND AGGRESSION THROUGH
OVEREXPRESSION OF *IGFR-1* PROTEIN AND UPREGULATION OF
HUMAN GROWTH HORMONE AND TESTOSTERONE;

...SKELETAL STRUCTURE: *REINFORCED*;

...VISION: *ENHANCED*;

...PULMONARY SYSTEM: *ENHANCED*;

...VOCAL CORDS, MOUTH, DIGESTIVE TRACT;
REPRODUCTIVE ORGANS: *UNNECESSARY*;

...PAIN RECEPTORS: *MUTED*;

...CHEST CAVITY AND VULNERABLE AREAS WILL BE
PROTECTED BY EXOSKELETON AGAINST ENEMY ENERGY
DISCHARGES;

STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

...SINGLE ANNECTA ORGANISM FOR CEREBRAL
FUNCTION: *COMPATIBLE*;

...HIGHER CEREBRAL FUNCTIONING AND
REASONING: *LIMITED*;

...MEMORY OF INSTRUCTION: *INTACT*;

...ADDED ABILITIES: *TRANSPORTION*;

...EXPECTED LIFE EXPECTANCY: *FOURTEEN DAYS*;

...ESTIMATED TIME TO COMPLETION: *FOUR HOURS
REMAINING*.

...UPON COMPLETION, TWO SUBJECTS WILL TRANSPORT TO THE
U.S.S DRAGONFLY AND RETRIEVE JERAD...

...THE REMAINING SUBJECTS WILL TRANSPORT TO THE *U.S.S
EXCELSIOR*, AND INITIATE PLAN TO DISABLE AND DESTROY THE
VESSEL...

...OUR PLAN TO INITIATE SECOND PHASE OF COLONIZATION OF
DRALOOS IV IS UNDERWAY...

STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

...OUR OVERALL ASSESSMENT OF THE HUMAN SPECIES: *VOLATILE, UNPREDICTABLE, AND DANGEROUS...*

...SELF-PROTECTION AND THE PRESERVATION OF OUR KIND IS OF PARAMOUNT IMPORTANCE...

...*VENGEANCE...IS IMMINENT.*

Chapter 37

Seth still boiled with anger as he marched onto the bridge. *This was not the way my first mission was supposed to turn out*, Seth thought in private. Each planet had a warhead directed against each other, each ready to blow the other away. If that were to happen, Seth's career in Starfleet would be over. No captain goes into a mission starting with two civilizations, and *end up with none*.

But the fact that Santiago was also put on the mission together with Seth was a complicating factor. Now Seth would have to contend with Santiago's irrational

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decisions. And for Admiral Kim to have Santiago's orders supersede Seth's made it virtually impossible to carry out the mission properly. If Santiago made his final decision, however irrational, to deploy the bio-weapon against the aliens of Draloos V then how was Seth to stop him? Harsh language?

The time had come to inform Admiral Kim of the situation, and possibly get his professional opinion on the matter. The mission has become much more complicated than simply restoring the cargo shipments, or evacuating the population. And Seth knew that he couldn't properly carry out the mission with his hands tied behind his back. By calling on Federation assistance, Jerad was essentially dragging the Federation into an interplanetary war. Had the population of Draloos IV *not* been human, the Prime Directive would have forbid them to interfere completely. In a perverse way, that would have made things easier.

"Ensign Ester, get me through to Starfleet Command," Captain Seth ordered. "I need to talk to Admiral Kim."

"We're just out of range of communication, sir," Ensign explained.

"Then we need to get into range. This can't wait," the captain replied tersely.

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A familiar voice came from another part of the bridge. “Captain Seth, if you have a moment, I’d like to have a word with you.” It was Commander Ariele from the *Excelsior*, who Seth had not noticed was standing on the side of the bridge.

“Commander Ariele, yes, of course,” he replied. “In my Ready Room.”

As they entered the room, Seth proceeded to sit in his usual chair. Commander Ariele looked nervous, and unsure if what she was about to say was proper. “Captain, I’d like permission to speak freely.”

“Granted.”

“I also ask that what I’m about to say, you don’t repeat to Captain Santiago.”

“Of course.”

“First, I’m here to tell you that if you leave the system, Captain Santiago won’t hesitate to use the toxin as soon as he’s ready to. He won’t wait for you.”

Seth gave a most frustrated sigh. “I had a feeling you were going to tell me that.”

“I wanted to let you know that most of the crew believes in Santiago’s plan and they are going to follow his orders to the letter. But there are a few of us, including myself, who don’t agree with him. I told him that he needs to find a way

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to help you find a cure to the disease, not extinguish the enemy species. Dr. Centress' expertise and medical knowledge is being wasted on developing something that is *destructive*. I don't mean to betray my own captain, but..." she said, almost regretfully.

"You're not," he said reassuringly. "Damn it, why can't he see that committing genocide is not a viable option? How can that be considered acceptable by a Starfleet officer? *Any* Starfleet officer?"

"It's *not*. I have tried hard to convince him of that," she said. "But...the reality that you have to face is that this virus could..."

"I know. We can't risk the lives of the human population on Draloos IV. I know that their survival takes precedence; I would never jeopardize their lives. But that doesn't make what Alan wants to do the right thing."

"But consider this: if the aliens manage to be the victor, then Santiago looks like the good guy because he is defending *human lives*."

"And I look like the villain..." Seth muttered. "I look like some sort of...alien *sympathetic*."

"You become responsible for all of those lives that fall prey to the Annecta."

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Seth stopped to consider that inescapable truth. “It’s almost like you’re asking me to go with Santiago’s plan.”

“I cannot tell you to use the weapon or not. I’m only asking you that you consider that *Santiago will finish his weapon before you can finish your vaccine*. And in all likelihood, he will finish it faster than the Annecta can launch their attack. And if that really is the case, you may not have a choice but to use the weapon.”

Seth sighed once more. “I wanted desperately to wait for Dr. Min’s vaccine. I thought that if we could just show Alan that the threat to Draloos IV can be neutralized, we could convince him that there is no need to attack the aliens. I wanted desperately to end the hostilities.”

“Like any good captain would.”

“Alan always said that we were a selfish species. I suppose he was right about that, too,” Seth remarked.

“It is perhaps humanity’s greatest ugliness, one from which we cannot escape,” she replied. “But survival is survival.”

“You know, when I was first officer aboard the *Chicago*, whenever I disagreed with the captain, I would always voice my opinion. Sometimes heatedly so. But at

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the end of the day, the decision was ultimately *his*. I didn't realize how much harder it would be on the other side."

Ariele smiled. "That's a luxury I fortunately still have. But not you, nor Captain Santiago."

"I know," Seth replied to her. "*Damn...that means he was right. Alan was right all along, like he always is.*"

Ariele said nothing. *Santiago wasn't right, she thought, only that he had a solution that would address the situation faster than Seth's solution could.* "You and Santiago share a history that only you two know about. I can't comment on how that might affect your decisions. *Both of you.*"

"I wanted so desperately this mission to be *my* mission. Not Santiago's."

"You hate the fact that Admiral Kim put him in charge to overlook the mission," she noted.

"He had no right to do that. I could have handled this myself."

"I know, sir. But it is what it is."

Seth nodded, if reluctantly. "Thank you, Commander. You've given me a lot to think about."

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Ariele proceeded towards the door, and turned to ask him one more question. “What will you do now?”

“I have one more chance to end all of this,” he said. “*I need to talk to the Annecta.*”

Chapter 38

With the help of Lieutenant Commander LeCroy, Seth had re-connected the android BX-12 to the *Annecta* in the *Dragonfly's* cargo bay so that he could communicate with them one-on-one. It didn't seem to involve much; once the aliens realized that the two had brought the android, they released a small alien that transported *through* the containment field and crawled up the android to attach to the android's skull. Politely, Seth then made a gesture to LeCroy to leave, so that he could talk to the aliens alone. LeCroy respectfully bowed and backed away towards the door. The android awoke, and its eyes fixated on the captain.

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“CAPTAIN DARREN SETH...” the android echoed. “YOU ARE BOLD TO APPROACH US ONCE MORE.”

A cold chill went through Seth’s spine as he realized in that brief sentence that the alien’s ability to converse in the English language had noticeably improved. “I want to end the hostilities between you and the people of Draloos IV.”

“YOU ARE IN NO POSITION TO NEGOTIATE WITH US.”

“We know about the virus on Draloos IV,” Seth said. “We know that you intend on converting the virus into an airborne one, and that you intend on eradicating the people on that world.”

“YES, YOU HAVE A SKILLED DOCTOR.”

“We can’t allow you to do that,” Seth said forcefully. “They are *human*. We in the Federation have a sworn duty to protect them.”

“THE PLAN HAS ALREADY BEEN SET IN MOTION. THE HUMANS ON DRALOOS IV ARE DISRUPTIVE, HOSTILE, AND AGGRESSIVE. *THEY MUST BE PUNISHED.*”

Seth stepped forward, with both of his hands raised in a posture of surrender. “I understand how they have wronged you. You have my assurances as captain that

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they will be punished under the fullest extent under Federation law. But I cannot allow any harm come to the greater populous...”

“YOU ARE HOLDING A MAN BY THE NAME OF *JERAD*...” the aliens noted.

Seth swallowed. “Yes, he is the one who was responsible for the murdering of your kind. He, and several others on Draloos IV, has been arrested. I promise you, they will be brought to justice.”

“NO, YOU WILL DELIVER HIM TO US...OR WE WILL TAKE HIM BY FORCE.”

Seth didn’t know how to immediately react.

“WE WANT HIM IN OUR CUSTODY, SO THAT HE CAN BE PUNISHED APPROPRIATELY. HE WILL BE JUDGED BY US, AND US ALONE.”

“Judged...how?” Seth demanded.

The android gave him a blank stare.

“...I’m sorry, but we can’t give him to you. I told you, he will be punished to the fullest extent under Federation law, but I cannot place him in your custody. He is ours to deal with. We now only want to establish *peace*.”

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The android looked deep in thought, as if digesting a new concept. “PEACE...” it said. “A MOST WORTHY GOAL, CAPTAIN SETH. WE WOULD BE OPEN TO NEGOTIATIONS WITH YOU AND THE FEDERATION IN THE FUTURE. BUT NOTHING YOU SAY NOW WILL ABSOLVE THE HUMANS OF DRALOOS IV. *FOR THEM, IT IS TOO LATE.*”

Seth was getting increasingly frustrated. “We do not respond kindly to threats. I am trying to find a solution to our problems that is fair and equita –“

“*DO NOT TRY TO TELL US WHAT IS FAIR AND EQUITABLE!*” it countered. “YOU ARE A SPECIES OF ARROGANCE AND SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS. NEARLY A BILLION OF OUR LIVES HAS BEEN LOST, INCLUDING SPECIES FROM OUR ECOSYSTEM...MAJOR DISRUPTIONS IN OUR NETWORK HAVE RESULTED...IF YOU WISH TO DISCUSS WHAT IS FAIR AND EQUITABLE...THEN ONE HUMAN LIFE FOR EVERY ONE OF *OUR* LIVES...”

An eye for an eye, Seth thought. Though humanity had moved away from such ideology, it was difficult to argue with that cold and calculated logic.

“YOU TAKE WHAT YOU PLEASE AT THE EXPENSE OF OTHERS. YOU CLAIM THAT YOU NEED IT FOR SURVIVAL, YET YOU

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CONTINUE TO EXPAND...” it said. “IF WE ALLOWED THE HUMANS TO CONTINUE...WHAT WOULD HAVE BEEN THE OUTCOME? CONSUMING MORE AND MORE OF OUR SPECIES TO SATISFY THEIR GROWING ENERGY NEEDS? HUMAN COLONIZATION ON OUR PLANET, AT OUR EXPENSE? *THEY WOULD NOT HAVE STOPPED...*”

Seth had little to argue with; he was not himself responsible for what the people of Draloos IV were doing. “I can’t speak for them...I can only assure you that we in the Federation did not know what they were doing to you. Had we known, we *never* would have...”

“WE DOUBT YOUR CLAIMS, CAPTAIN SETH. WE HAVE STUDIED YOUR GENOME AND THE BEHAVIORAL OUTCOMES THAT RESULT FROM IT. YOU ARE A SPECIES THAT IS DOOMED TO REVERT TO YOUR BASER INSTINCTS. DESPITE YOUR CLAIM TO BE AN EVOLVED SPECIES, CAPTAIN...YOU HAVE PROGRESSED LITTLE.”

“Now wait just a minute...”

“BE CAREFUL, CAPTAIN SETH,” the android warned. “IF YOU INTERFERE WITH US...*YOU WILL BE PUNISHED AS WELL.*”

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Seth stared blankly as he slowly came to the realization that negotiation might not be possible with these aliens. They had a thirst for vengeance like no other. How could he blame them? Jerad and the others clearly violated them. But there was nothing more that Seth could do here. He proceeded towards the cargo bay doors in defeat. But just before he was about to exit the room, the android spoke its final words. *“WE KNOW ABOUT THE WEAPON THAT IS BEING DEVELOPED TO DESTROY US. WE ALSO WANT THE MAN RESPONSIBLE FOR CREATING IT.”*

Seth knew what they wanted, before they even uttered another word.

“WE WANT SANTIAGO.”

Damn.

Chapter 39

“Captain’s Log, Stardate 63849.1. It is my deepest regret that my attempts at negotiations with the Annecta have failed. My hope was that a truce between the two worlds could be established, but the Annecta are angry and unforgiving. After considerable contemplation and deliberation, and perhaps against my better judgement, I have made the decision to support Captain Santiago in his plan to deploy his chemical weapon against the Annecta. As much as I place the full responsibility of this situation on Jerad and the other irresponsible leaders of Draloos IV, I simply cannot allow any harm to come to the general populous. My

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major challenge now is a personal one...admitting to a man like Santiago that he was right for developing a weapon in the first place.”

Seth nervously approached Santiago’s Ready Room shortly after boarding the *Excelsior*. He was surprised by the nostalgic feel that he would experience as he walked across the archaic bridge. The design was older than even the *Steamrunner*-class starship that he had served on most of his life. Seth then felt a certain silliness for having felt *nostalgia* at such an age; any other captain or Admiral would laugh at him. Seth pressed the door chime.

“Come in,” Santiago said aloud in his Ready Room.

Santiago looked up from his desk, allowing only a grimace to creep up on his face. “What is it you want, Darren? You didn’t want me aboard your ship; I don’t want you on mine.”

“Alan...” Seth started, “Look, I wanted to tell you that I’ve decided to support you in your plan to use the toxin against the Annecta.”

Santiago looked suspicious, but still managed to turn his grimace into a half-smile. “What made you change your mind?”

Seth didn’t want to tell him. It was certainly a number of factors. But truthfully, it had mostly to do with the conversation that he had earlier with

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Santiago's first officer, Commander Ariele – who Seth found could be very persuasive. “Dr. Min has so far been unable to synthesize an effective vaccine,” Seth admitted. “You are right. I am putting the entire human population at risk by waiting.”

Santiago stood up from his desk. “Well...if it means anything, I won't say, ‘I told you so.’ Look, Darren, I'm not an idiot. I know that deploying a weapon that could destroy a newly discovered species is hardly an ideal choice. Admiral Kim is certainly going to have my head for this...but, weigh that against a *billion* human lives, and the choice becomes clear.”

“This wasn't how I imagined my first mission would go. I certainly didn't want you here with me.”

Santiago took some offense to his comment. “And what if I had not been here with you? Would you have developed the weapon on your own?”

“Of course not.”

“Then, had you reached this point without me, you would have been completely out of options.”

“You can't say that. We don't know what would have happened had we approached this mission differently.”

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Santiago paused. “Darren, I have something that I need to admit to you. It has never been about trying to control your mission. I *wanted* to work together on this mission, like we did in the Academy days. Remember? You and I were...*unstoppable*.”

“I remember,” Seth replied.

“I still remember our rugby team winning the Federation championships against a team of *Klingons*...and you the one to lead us to that victory...with a sprained ankle, I might add. You were in the infirmary for a week after that game.”

“And it was the Klingons who called it a child’s game,” Seth said, unable to avoid laughing at the memory. “They certainly weren’t happy after that game.”

“There is something else,” Santiago said, pausing carefully before letting another word come from his mouth. “Look, I wasn’t going to tell you this, but...the *Dragonfly*...you didn’t just get her by chance. I *convinced* Admiral Roth that you deserved to command her.”

Seth was stunned.

“I laid out for him your extraordinary service record to date. Admiral Roth was swayed, but not convinced, in part because you were so young. But I told him that

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I was exactly the same age as you, and reminded him of my own performance as captain of the *Excelsior*, and eventually he agreed with me.

“He reminded me that there was a severe shortage of good captains nowadays, especially since enrollment into Starfleet had dwindled as a result of the Dominion War. I made sure that he understood that you were the right man to lead us into the new century. I put my name on the line so that you could have the *Dragonfly*.”

Seth didn't know what to say. If there was one thing *Red Squad*-ers were not good at, it was admitting that they were wrong. And admitting something to a man like Santiago made it all the worse. “I'm sorry...I didn't know. I regret some of things I said to you earlier.”

“Look, let's just put this behind us. I don't want to talk about this anymore.”

“No, really...I feel like a fool now.”

“I said, don't worry about it. I'm going to the laboratory to check on how Dr. Centress is doing on the weapon. Do you want to come?”

“No, that's alright. I'm going return to my ship to talk with Dr. Min,” Seth said to him. “Alan...there's one more thing that you should know.”

“Yes, what is it?”

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“When I talked to the Annecta earlier they indicated to me that they *knew* about your weapon,” Seth warned.

Santiago swallowed. “...And?”

“*They want your head.*”

“And that didn’t deter you from deciding to help me? They might come after you now.”

“Look, just be careful. We know how vicious the Annecta can be.”

“Don’t worry, I will,” Santiago said. “And hey, Darren.”

Seth turned. “Yes, what is it?”

“It’s good to have you back.”

“*Good luck.*”

Chapter 40

On the *Excelsior*, Captain Santiago walked with newfound confidence in the mission as he headed down towards the laboratory. In all candor, he could not have at all expected Seth to change his stance on the weapon, particularly after giving him such a heated speech about doing this mission ‘by-the-book.’ This mission clearly called for extreme, and perhaps dangerous, measures; there was just no other way around the situation that the captains were faced with. Santiago wondered if learning to throw away such ‘by-the-book’ approaches was something

every good captain had to go through, and that perhaps it was simply time for Seth to learn it as well.

Santiago bolted through the doors of the laboratory where his Chief Medical Officer was busy at work. “Dr. Centress, how is the weapon coming? Will it be ready soon? We are beginning to run out of time.”

Dr. Centress tidied himself up and responded squarely to his captain. “Yes, sir, we’re close. What we’ve done is to have heavy concentrated solutions of the toxin in several small devices that continually ‘package’ individual molecules into nanoparticles. The nanoparticles are then capable of spreading, much more quickly than normal diffusion would allow. They can even cross the Annecta interconnections, so they should be able to spread across the entire network. We will be testing it on this batch of Annecta here.” It was another containment field of thousands of interconnected Annecta aliens. Dr. Centress had allowed several colonies to grow so that he could test the weapon several times.

“That’s good to hear.”

“For the first phase of the attack, we’ll need to develop an explosive warhead that will be powerful enough to penetrate the barrier that protects alien colonies. The second phase of the attack should be to fire these devices into the

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exposed areas. But the trick is that the concoction we've made needs to stay intact even after they've landed. The nanoparticles are very sensitive. Following their release into the environment the toxin should easily spread across the network. Our Chief Engineer is working on designing the warhead right now."

"Very good, Doctor. When can I expect the finished product?"

"It should be ready in less than twelve hours. We're going to want to run a couple of tests once we've finished constructing it. Just to make sure everything goes smoothly."

"I'm holding you to that. You won't be allowed any more time. The aliens on Draloos V may release their airborne virus at any moment," Santiago said.

"Understood, captain. We'll do the best we can. We might even have the weapon for you a little earlier."

"Good. Report to me as soon as you are ready."

Dr. Centress nodded. Despite the tough language from Santiago, Centress embraced the challenge that was given to him by his captain. He had little problem with developing a weapon designed to destroy the aliens, given their cruel nature and hideous 'spider'-like appearance. And Dr. Centress found them to be especially grotesque. He turned around cautiously to try the toxin again on

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them. But when he faced the containment field, he saw that the containment field was empty.

“Hey,” he said aloud. “*Where the hell did they go?*”

Chapter 41

Dr. Centress' heart started to race. The Annecta were no longer in the containment field that he had placed them in. He walked carefully around the lab to see if they were hidden from view, but they weren't. In fact, they didn't seem to be anywhere in the lab. He rushed back to the other cargo bay where he had stored the other Annecta. They were gone, too. *Where could they have gone? And how were they able to get out?* And it wasn't just the Annecta that were missing. *All of the species that they had collected from Draloos V were missing.* One thing was for sure: Captain Santiago was not going to be happy about this.

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“Computer,” he said, “Locate any Annecta biosignatures on the *Excelsior*.”

“Affirmative,” the computer responded. “There is a large mass of Annecta biosignatures in Cargo Bay Four.”

He rushed over without skipping a beat. As he stumbled through the corridors in a panic, he began to recall an initial report by Dr. Min about some Draloos V species that carried a gene that allowed them to *transport*. Centress did not see any evidence of this ability in the Annecta themselves, even when he used the toxin on them, but it seemed so obvious now that they should carry that gene. Could they have been hiding their ability until now? *It doesn't matter*. They, along with all of the other species that they had captured, were loose on the *Excelsior*. *How could I have been so careless*, he thought.

The doors of Cargo Bay Four opened, and already a pungent smell hit Dr. Centress. In the corner of the cargo bay was a large cluster of the Annecta, huddled together tightly. But there was more tissue surrounding the cluster that branched off in all directions. It was reddish in color. *How could they have developed in such a sophisticated way? Especially so quickly?* He carefully scanned the tissue with his tricorder, keeping his distance from the cluster of the Annecta. As the readings became clear, his heart sank. It was muscle tissue. *Thick, human-like, skeletal muscle tissue.*

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A branch of the tissue quickly reached out and grabbed him by the torso like a giant hand, nailing him to the wall and restraining him. He twisted and turned, but with no avail. He couldn't even pull his arm to hit his combadge and call for help. In fact, he only felt the grip tighten further. There was almost *anger* in that grip.

His breathing became heavy and erratic as he began to panic. He couldn't budge. He then began to notice thinner branches along the wall of the cargo bay that had pairs of leaves along them, almost like vines. They were green, in sharp contrast to the red muscle tissue that took up most of the cargo space. He concentrated to try and get a closer look. It looked similar to one of the organisms on Draloos V. And then it hit him.

He cried and cried for help. The leaves began to flap.

Chapter 42

The attack on the *Excelsior* didn't stop in the cargo bay. In engineering, four most unusual-looking humanoids materialized right in front of the engineering team. They were *hideous*. Their bodies were long and muscular, but what was immediately noticeable was that they looked like they were skinless, and their red muscles were clearly visible. Furthermore, certain portions of their chest, arms, and face appeared to be protected by an exoskeleton. From the back of their skull, it looked like a single Annecta organism served as its center for cerebral function. No mouth on their face was visible, and their eyes were grey and lifeless.

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But lifeless, they weren't. They marched towards the engineers, who stood helpless and scared. The strength and physical prowess of the alien humanoids were incredible. One grabbed an engineer by the chest and threw him twenty feet away. Another violently smashed the head of another engineer against the computer console. Engineers were not trained to handle this kind of situation.

The Chief of Engineering immediately tapped his combadge. "We need a security team down in engineering, *NOW!*" The engineers that remained drew their phasers and fired at them where they could. But the phaser fire had little effect against their protective exoskeleton.

One of them threw something against the wall. They could only be described as small, sticky organic beads that began to swell and expand. After growing to their limits, they vibrated violently as if they were about to blow.

"Organic explosives..." The Chief thought to himself, without even having to check his tricorder. *Oh my God.* "That's near a power grid. *Everyone, back away!*"

But it was too late. The explosives blew the wall asunder, and the lights all around Engineering flickered on and off. The Chief flew back several feet, hit his head against a computer console and collapsed to the ground. His vision blurred as

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he fought to maintain consciousness. But he could still make out where the humanoids were walking.

They were headed towards the warp core.

Aboard the *Dragonfly*, Lieutenant Commander Thorn stood near the front of the bridge with near perfect posture and his synthetic arms folded behind his back. At his post at the top of the bridge, he was used to standing up nearly his entire shift, so he didn't feel the need to sit in the captain's chair. Besides, it gave him the chance to look over the shoulders of the helm and science officers to make sure they were on the up and up. For better or for worse, if Thorn were captain, he would run an extraordinarily tight ship.

"Sir," Ensign Ester started, "I'm detecting power fluctuations on the *Excelsior*."

"*What's going on over there?*" Thorn demanded.

"I'm not sure..." she said. "But something weird is happening on Deck Seven and in Engineering of their ship. There's phaser fire going on there."

"*Hail them.*"

"Sir, they are hailing *us*."

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“Put it on-screen,” he ordered. It was Captain Santiago, looking quite distressed.

“Where is your captain?” he demanded, without so much as a courtesy to greet the Lieutenant.

“He’s in sickbay with Dr. Min. What do you want?”

“Tell him if he needs further evidence that we need to defend ourselves against the Annecta, tell him that twelve of my crewmen are dead. We’re under attack.”

Chapter 43

The situation on the *Excelsior* continued to escalate. Captain Santiago had sent his security team and a medical assistant down to engineering where the alien humanoids were ready to destroy the warp core. Captain Santiago was losing patience, and his crew beginning to feel very nervous. This was probably the first time as captain that he felt like he had lost control of his ship.

The Chief of Security and his team emerged from the turbolift and rushed to engineering. Most of everyone in the room lay unconscious or seriously

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injured. A thick fog of smoke filled the room that made the team almost gag. The Chief of Security stared at the odd-looking humanoids that surrounded the warp core of the *Excelsior*. They scanned it up and down, looking as if they were trying to determine how to best destroy it. *We need to draw them away from the warp core*, the Chief thought. The team raised their weapons, which consisted of Type III phaser rifles. The Chief nodded, giving them the order to fire.

But the phaser fire had little effect. The medical assistant who stood by quickly used his medical tricorder to scan them, but he did not want to get too close. “They have a hard exoskeleton that’s able to absorb the nadiion particles from our phasers and dissipate it as heat without injuring themselves. But they do have vulnerable areas in their necks and joints. I’m also detecting a relatively low concentration of nociceptive nerve fibers in their tissues.”

The Chief just stared blankly at him.

“They don’t feel a lot of pain,” he explained.

“I want everybody to aim carefully. Increase your settings to kill. *Make every shot count.*” The team raised their rifles once more and managed to disable one of them by firing at its lower back, and it stumbled forward and onto the ground. That got the attention of the other three, who fixated their lifeless eyes on

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the security team. Two of them marched towards to security team that scared them to their core.

The medical assistant spoke once more, hands trembling as he read his medical tricorder. “There’s one more thing. I’m detecting an abnormally high concentration of adrenaline and testosterone in their blood. Their strength and aggression...they must be...”

“Just spit it out already. What does that mean?” the Chief demanded.

“Don’t piss them off.”

Seth had just walked into sickbay, when he suddenly stopped in his tracks and stood paralyzed by what he had just learned from his Chief of Security over his communicator. Lieutenant Commander Thorn had just informed Captain Seth of the dire situation aboard the *Excelsior*. *The attack has begun*, Seth thought to himself. *Damn...it’s too soon, IT’S TOO SOON!*

Dr. Min came out from his office to see the captain, but could tell from his expression that something was very wrong.

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“Doctor,” Seth started, “We’ve just run out of time. Do we have it?” he asked, referring to the vaccine for the virus that is infecting the people of Draloos IV.

Dr. Min only looked to the ground, and quietly shook his head. “I’m...sorry, captain.”

Seth sighed. “I see. Then this is it. We have to use the toxin against the Annecta.”

“I have one antiviral candidate left. It’s not a vaccine, but based on what I understand about its mechanism, the antiviral should be effective at preventing the dangerous outcomes of the infection. The problem is that I still need time to test it thoroughly before I distribute it to a large population; a dangerous side effect could spring up unexpectedly. And I know, time...we don’t have.”

“You know that I have no choice now.”

“I know. I’m sorry that I couldn’t get the countermeasure for you in time.”

“Get that last candidate to work. Even after all of this is over, the population of Draloos IV is still going to need to deal with the disease.”

“Understood, captain.” Dr. Min made no hesitation to give orders to his medical assistants and team of scientists over what to do next.

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Alan, you idiot, Seth thought to himself as he walked out of sickbay. The Annecta warned that they would retaliate against them and that they would go after Alan. As much as Seth denounced the aliens' methods for dealing with their enemies, he understood that the instinct for survival was primal and present in all life, from the Alpha Quadrant to the Delta Quadrant. The Annecta would be no different. It was now a power struggle between them, and the equation was simple: whoever was cleverer and more powerful would be the victor.

All Seth could think about now was how his friend was in trouble, and that he needed his help. All of the previous arguments he had with Santiago, regardless of who was right and who was wrong, seemed more distant and less relevant now. It was time to put all of that aside. Seth also had to be concerned that an attack would proceed on the *Dragonfly* as well.

"*Captain Seth*," Seth heard from his communicator, "*This is Lieutenant Commander Thorn reporting from the brig.*"

Speak of the devil, Seth thought. "Yes, what is it, Lieutenant?"

"*It's about Jerad.*"

"What about him?" Seth realized that he didn't even really need to ask; he already knew.

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“...He’s dead.”

Chapter 44

Don't piss them off? Too late for that, the Chief of Security thought. The alien humanoids marched quickly towards the team. The team instinctively fired their phaser rifles, but did so carelessly now, because they were scared and they had trouble aiming while the aliens were walking so quickly.

"Fall back! FALL BACK!" the Chief yelled.

The team quickly learned that the humanoids had yet another trick: *they could transport away quickly from the line of fire.* The two weaved left to right and left

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again, completely confusing the Starfleet team. Within seconds, one of the humanoids was within arm's length of one of the security officers and grabbed his rifle from him. *The humanoid squeezed his grip on the rifle and proceeded to crush it with his bare hand.* The officer looked at him in complete fear, and felt himself being thrown fiercely against the wall by the alien's impossible force.

The Chief thought quickly. He saw another vulnerable area around its knees and fired his rifle at close range. The humanoid collapsed onto the injured knee, and if he had a mouth and a vocal cord, would have screamed from the pain. The Chief immediately seized the opportunity when it was momentarily stunned, and swung his phaser rifle like a baseball bat squarely on the back of its head. The humanoid fully collapsed to the ground and the Chief immediately fired at the Annecta organism that occupied its skull. It vaporized in an instant.

The other humanoid had already rendered the other security officer completely unconscious, and was making his way towards the helpless medical assistant. The Chief carefully aimed his rifle and fired at its vulnerable areas around its throat until it fell back onto the floor. Before it could stand back up, the Chief raced up to him and firmly put one foot on his chest and fired a straight high-intensity beam across its neck until its head was fully severed. The medical assistant sighed in relief, but the Chief knew that this was far from over.

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The last alien humanoid that stood near the warp core coiled its right arm, ready to launch something onto it.

He was going to throw the organic explosives.

Almost reflexively, and with superb accuracy, the Chief of Security fired a shot at a vulnerable area near the humanoid's right shoulder, causing him to twist and throw the explosives away from the warp core. *Lucky shot*, he thought. Fortunately for everyone on the *Excelsior*, the alien humanoid missed the core, but the explosives ended up sticking onto all different areas around engineering. The Chief may have prevented a breach, but the situation was hardly ideal.

The Chief had no choice. *Move*. The beads swelled to their limits in size and began to vibrate violently. Even if the explosives weren't on the warp core directly, the core could still suffer from serious collateral damage and endanger the ship. *If any of the antimatter came into contact with normal matter...* he thought to himself.

"Computer, activate a force field around the warp core!" the Chief yelled.

The beads exploded all at once and the explosions shattered most of engineering, and almost took the warp core with it. The Chief felt the intense heat

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of the explosion as he covered for cover, and a large, unavoidable piece of debris smashed the side of his head. He fell to floor in an instant. All he could see from the ground was the debris that littered the floor, and the fire that enveloped the entire engineering section. The acrid smoke that filled the air burned his eyes, and sounds of the alarm came loudly from all directions. There must have been something wrong with the computer, because under normal circumstances the computer would have detected the fire and taken measures to contain it.

In the Chief's last moment of consciousness, all he could think was how there was no one left alive in engineering to fix it.

Chapter 45

Captain Santiago stood on the bridge of his now vulnerable ship. He himself now felt very vulnerable. His first officer Commander Ariele stood by him, and though the captain maintained his cool, Ariele could easily tell that he was extremely agitated and nervous. *People around me are dying*, he thought to himself, *my Chief Medical Officer, my Chief of Engineering, and now my Chief of Security...are all dead*. As captain, he was responsible for each and every one of those lives – and potentially many more. *I need to get back control of my ship*, he thought.

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The captain turned to the lieutenant that replaced the Chief of Security and stood at his station. “What’s our status, Lieutenant?”

“We’ve got added security and medical teams heading to engineering to secure the area. The force field around the warp core is holding, and the core is stable, for now. Most of the computer controls in engineering are in ruin...computer functions must be manually input from the bridge.”

The officer that sat at the engineering station turned. “Warp drive is out...Impulse engines and maneuvering thrusters only.”

“It doesn’t look like there is any more activity down there. But if any more of those *things* transport over here...”

“*Maintain your cool, Lieutenant...*” Commander Ariele told him.

The captain rubbed his brow in frustration, hiding his distress as news about his ship continued to get worse.

“...We’re getting medical emergencies from all over the ship...” the lieutenant added.

“Get everyone in need of medical attention to sickbay and secure the area. We don’t want any more of our physicians and nurses in vulnerable areas,” Ariele said.

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The bridge doors from behind opened and someone barely made it through. It was Dr. Centress' medical assistant, who stood with his skin blackened from the explosions. He was the only one who had survived the incursion in engineering. "Captain..." he weakly cried.

"Doctor...are you alright? What happened down there?" the captain asked.

"I don't know...these humanoids...*like none I've ever seen before,*" he said. He gasped for air as he spoke. "...*They almost took out the whole ship...*"

"Try to keep calm, Doctor," the captain said. "We all need to work together to take down this enemy. I need suggestions." He looked around the bridge.

"There is still that large Annecta colony in Cargo Bay Four," the lieutenant said. "I think it is serving as a kind of central control for all of the other species that are running amok on the ship."

"*I want it taken out,*" Santiago ordered.

"Dr. Centress was working on a smaller version of the warhead that we were going to use against the main colony on the planet. It operates similarly and can disperse the toxin throughout the alien network. He was going to use it as a test before we employed the primary weapon on the planet surface."

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Santiago made a move towards the turbolift doors. “Where is this weapon?”

Without warning, Commander Ariele stepped in front of him; she even held out an arm to stop him from getting inside the turbolift. “Your place is on the bridge, Captain. *I’m going,*” she said.

Santiago shot a look at her, as if she was crazy.

“You don’t have a choice,” she said promptly. “You’re running out of officers. We can’t lose you, too.”

Santiago nodded, reluctantly. It soon occurred to him that she was the last senior officer, other than himself, who was still alive on his ship. *If he had lost her...*

“I’m taking three more junior security officers with me,” she said. She also looked straight at the medical assistant, who gave a look like he didn’t want to go anywhere. He had been through enough in engineering. “I’m sorry, Doctor, but I need you, too.” He nodded feebly.

“Commander,” Santiago said aloud.

“Yes, Captain?” she asked, prepping her phaser rifle as she moved towards the turbolift doors.

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“Come back in one piece. I mean it.”

She exhaled. “*Let’s go.*”

Chapter 46

Commander Ariele and her team cautiously entered the doors of Cargo Bay Four, where it felt hot and humid, much like the planet surface. That only compounded the fact that they were incredibly scared, and made it almost unavoidable to sweat profusely. The medical assistant moved towards the area where his superior, Dr. Centress, was last seen. He looked in horror when he realized that there was no actual body to be found, only remnants and his blood that were literally scattered throughout the cargo bay, coarsing deeply through the veins of the green vines.

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“Dr. Centress is dead,” said the medical assistant, noting the nearby blood-soaked leaves that covered a huge portion of the cargo bay wall. Some of the leaves still flapped. “He’s been...*absorbed*.”

Ariele understood just by looking at him. “Be careful. Get your weapon ready. Something tells me we won’t have a lot of time.” She hadn’t realized it, but she was whispering as she was giving them instructions. It was impossible to tell if the aliens could hear or understand them, but this was no time to take chances. “*Everyone be very quiet.*”

“The colony of Annecta appears to be enveloped by some kind of biological armor, similar to the exoskeleton that we saw that protected the alien humanoids,” the medical assistant whispered. “Our phasers may not work against them.”

“The first attack should pack quite a punch,” one of the security officers said. “The tip of the warhead is equipped with a device that isolates a very tiny amount of antimatter; when the warhead hits, the antimatter is exposed and reacts with the surrounding matter. Needless to say, it has an extremely high explosive yield, high enough to penetrate even our tritanium hull. It should be effective against them, too. After an opening has been exposed, the second part of the attack will follow, which is the *toxin*.”

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The Commander tapped her combadge. “Captain, we are getting ready to deploy the weapon in the cargo bay.”

“Understood,” Santiago replied. “You may use it when ready. We’ll be watching closely from the bridge.”

Without warning, six giant ‘arms’ from the center of the alien mass reached out to grab the officers like they had grabbed Dr. Centress, but the security officers responded quickly and began firing repeatedly at them. They couldn’t kill them by phasers alone, but the alien arms seem to squirm wildly from them, and retreated from the team when hit. Their phaser rifles were at a very high setting, and had the effect of causing seemingly painful cramping in the arms.

All of a sudden, the security officers that were firing the phasers *screamed*. They began to gasp desperately, and within seconds collapsed to the floor. For a few moments they were convulsing, but then laid disturbingly still. The others began to grow scared, even Commander Ariele. “*What...?*” she said.

The standing medical assistant who stood by immediately scanned the fallen officers. “The two have been poisoned...with some sort of paralytic agent. Whatever it was...*it paralyzed their lungs...*”

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He turned one of them over to quickly look for sites of skin penetration, and immediately noticed two puncture marks on his neck. When he turned the other officer over, he noticed the same thing on her, too. It was as if an invisible vampire had come and...

And then the medical assistant remembered one of the species that Dr. Centress had been studying in the laboratory. *“Computer, adjust lights to emit UV radiation only. Switch back to normal light after ten seconds.”*

“That action is not recommen—“

“JUST DO IT!!” The room turned a very dark purple, and he immediately adjusted the settings on his tricorder. He pointed it to the other officers, and through the screen of the tricorder could see the culprit behind the attacks.

It was the invisible spiders. They were all over their uniforms. And each one was larger than the size of their hand.

The medical assistant dropped the tricorder in horror, trembling as he did so. As the lights returned to normal, he began flapping his hands all across his body, trying to knock the invisible spiders off of his body. The other security

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guards and Commander Ariele looked at him in confusion. “What is it? What’s wrong?” they asked him.

“Get them off...*get them OFF!!*” he said, panicked.

In an instant, he fell to the ground, and the security guards could see two puncture wounds on the back of his hand. The guards began to realize what was going on and started swatting their own bodies as well. Occasionally, they could feel the spiders being swatted off by their hands, which only reinforced their suspicions that ‘something’ was crawling on them, and elevated their level of panic.

Ariele thought quickly. She knew that they would not have much more time before they all became victims of the spiders. “Lieutenant! I need you to help me prop this thing!”

“...*I can't...th..they're all over me...I can feel them...*”

“*Lieutenant!*” Ariele yelled. “*GET A HOLD OF YOURSELF!!*”

The security officer shook it off, and quickly helped her to prop the weapon. “Th...the attack is two-pronged...” he said, still terrified that he might become the next victim of the spiders. “But you only have to hit the button once...the delay is only a half-a-second, and it is automatic...”

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Distracted, the officers didn't notice that the massive 'arms' that radiated from the Annecta core were still after them. One swooped in and grabbed the other security officer by the leg, and pulled him up high and dangled him by the vines. He screamed and screamed as a massive cloud of green butterflies, now 'detached' from the vines, began to swarm him. The pain he was feeling became unbearably intense as the butterflies released their digestive enzymes onto his skin.

The lieutenant that helped Ariele stood by paralyzed as ever as he watched his teammate get devoured.

Ariele wasted no time in targeting the Annecta core. She felt the powerful pushback from the recoil of the warhead leaving her weapon. When the first blast hit a blast ensued that blinded them, and threw the team ten feet back and onto the ground. The blast was sufficient enough to crack its outer shell and expose the now naked Annecta to the chemical toxin that hit them only a moment later. They squirmed and they fell to the ground, hundreds at a time. *There were tens of thousands of them.*

"Report, Commander," Santiago yelled from the bridge. "*What's going on there? Is the situation under control?*"

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Santiago waited eagerly for an answer, but received only a long pause.

“Commander? Are you all right?” Santiago asked. *“COMMANDER!!”*

All he could hear was silence.

Chapter 47

Santiago slouched in his chair, stunned and now utterly depressed by what had just transpired on his ship in just a matter of hours. He had just lost contact with Commander Ariele and her team, he had lost most of the rest of his senior staff, engineering was in ruins, and he and Seth had yet to get any closer to solving the problem on Draloos IV. He could only assume now that Annecta on the *Excelsior* were dead, since he had largely regained control of his ship. But Santiago's mood had improved little. The attack on his ship only strengthened his conviction to use the toxin against the main Annecta colony on the planet. *New species be*

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damned...he thought to himself. I don't care if it's wrong anymore, nobody touches my crew like these creatures have. I want them dead.

The reasons might have been personal now, but it didn't matter. The Annecta still need to be stopped before they wipe out Draloos IV. At least, that was an easy way to justify it. *Hardly befitting of a Starfleet captain*, he thought. Even if he made it out of this ordeal alive, he imagined how Admiral Kim would start throwing PADDs at him and demote him back down to ensign. His lips ever so slightly parted, and considered the possibility that these would be his last orders he would ever give out. "Lieutenant," he said, "Ready the warhead. Prepare the *Excelsior* for atmospheric entry."

"Sir?" he asked.

"You heard me, Lieutenant. We're going down there."

Chapter 48

Captain Seth walked to the brig on the *Dragonfly*, and there he looked at Jerad's broken body. With the force field still in place, Jerad laid there in the corner, his neck twisted in contorted angles. *The Annecta wanted Jerad, they got him*, Seth thought, *despite being protected by a force field*. If there's one thing Seth had to give the Annecta credit for, it was their ability to keep their word. Thorn stood there with his arms folded, and Dr. Min was examining the body.

"Report, Lieutenant Commander," Seth said to Thorn.

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“Several minutes ago, our sensors detected intruders running towards the brig. By the time I got down here to investigate, Jerad was already dead.” He handed Seth a small PADD. *“The surveillance systems were able to record what happened, if you care to see.”*

Dr. Min stood up, and sounded distressed. “He was gone in an instant. All seven of his cervical vertebrae were shattered.”

Seth looked closely at the playback. Two hideous humanoids marched into the room and effortlessly knocked down the security guard with one blow. They moved closer and closer to the entrance while Jerad backed away into the corner, frightened. The two casually tested the force field with their hands, and saw they could not get through. And what happened next surprised the hell out of Seth.

The two looked as though they had jumped *through* the force field, immediately appearing on the other side. One quickly grabbed the frightened Jerad by the neck and forcefully snapped it with only his hand, and threw him to the ground. Then the two vanished.

“Transportation. WITHOUT a transporter,” Thorn explained. *“They lack the same kind of energy signature that a normal transporter has, so they are more difficult to track.”*

“I had no idea that there were humanoids that could do that.”

“The gene that allows for transportation among Draloos V species showed up in a surprising number of them,” Dr. Min explained. “I took the liberty of silencing those genes in almost every one. It wasn’t a permanent solution, but none of the organisms aboard the *Dragonfly* should have been able to transport in the last several hours.”

Gene silencing, Seth thought. Smart thinking.

“Whatever those *things* were, they must have come from the planet,” Min continued.

Thorn stared at his captain, shining the bright green beam of light that radiated from his helmet straight at him.

“Where are these humanoids now?” Seth asked him.

“Unknown. They’ve haven’t appeared on our internal sensor logs since this attack, and so far they haven’t harmed anyone else. I have security teams standing guard at all stations and surveillance systems covering all grounds. If they appear again, we will find them.”

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“Good. Do everything in your power to ensure that the *Dragonfly* is secure. Something tells me this won’t be the last we see them. What is the status of the *Excelsior*?”

“They are still suffering from power fluctuations throughout the ship, and the engineering section appears to be severely damaged, but intact. At the moment, they appear stable. We have not heard from them since the initial attack.”

Seth then looked even more concerned. He knew his friend all too well to know that he was far from alright. Santiago’s silence usually meant that he was about to do something that didn’t necessarily meet with your approval. “That means that something is very wrong.”

Chapter 49

The Administrator from the main hospital on Draloos IV was feeling ill. Not from the virus that seemed to be infecting more and more people around the globe, but from the growing number of sleepless nights he'd been accumulating ever since the alien virus had become known to them. The situation was quickly reaching critical, even after appropriate quarantines around the globe were put in place. And the Administrator sensed that things were going to get worse very, very quickly.

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The Administrator tried hard to put his medical training to good use. But he was very tired. *I can't risk compromising my immune system now*, he thought, *I have a duty to my patients*. He already wore a full biohazard suit for added protection, but he knew it was only a matter of time before he and the rest of his staff would be infected as well.

Worse, he had made little headway with helping his patients, other than easing their pain. Their laboratories and hospitals were not sophisticated enough to handle this kind of threat, let alone develop a half-way decent countermeasure to the infection. The only thing they could do was limit the spread of the virus, and the aliens for that matter. Whenever an infected patient was about to complete the 'birthing' process of the Annecta aliens, the medical staff were instructed to quarantine them, and compassionately euthanize them. If the aliens happened to break free of their bodies unexpectedly, then the staff was to immediately vaporize them. The Draloos IV civilization could not afford to allow an Annecta intelligence to grow – especially now seeing what they were capable of. Humanity on that planet would not survive against them, and letting only a handful of Annecta aliens escape would already be too late.

A laboratory assistant came running into the room, sweating and panting heavily through a thick biohazard suit. His helmet became cloudy because of his

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heavy breathing. “*It’s here,*” he said. He had tried to elaborate, but he just couldn’t catch his breath.

“What? *What’s here?*” the Administrator demanded.

The assistant handed him a PADD for him to see; it was just easier to show him. The Administrator stared down at the results that literally turned his blood cold. They were undeniable. The Administrator prayed that it was a mistake.

“The results are in...they’ve been confirmed in multiple laboratory centers across the planet. We’ve isolated the new strain of the virus in our first patient this morning,” the assistant said. “The virus is *airborne.*”

Chapter 50

Captain Seth walked through the glassy bridge doors of the *Dragonfly*, now fully abreast of the emergency situation on Draloos IV. His worst nightmare was now coming true: the Annecta aliens were inching closer and closer towards realizing their plan of eliminating the human population, and there was no practical way for him to negotiate a truce or deal with the threat. And from the looks of things aboard the *Excelsior*, both ships could be in serious danger as well. Counselor Jenovia stood up quietly from her chair as a gesture of concern, having quickly determined from his subtle expressions how distressed her captain

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really was. But it didn't take someone of her observational skill or human intuition to notice it.

"Draloos IV..." Jenovia started. "The situation has worsened."

Seth looked up at her, with a look of quiet regret and sorrow. "The Administrator that you spoke with on Draloos IV informed me that they have isolated a strain of the airborne virus. They've managed to quarantine the infected individuals and isolate them from the others, but whatever mechanism has been put in place to convert the virus to an airborne one is already in motion. He says it's only a matter of time before the new strain takes over."

"Then they no longer have months or weeks to get out of this mess...*they have days,*" Jenovia responded.

The moment of truth has come, Seth thought. *This is my first mission...and already I have to put my entire crew at risk of losing their lives? Can I really ask that of them?* A silent pause hung on the bridge. Seth decided that maybe it was best not to let a pause pass for too long. "Lieutenant Commander Thorn, have there been any more disruptions on the *Excelsior*?"

"No, sir. *They appear stable, at least for now. But they've got wounded over there.*"

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“Alright, let’s quickly get a medical team together,” Seth ordered. “Dr. Min is busy working on the antiviral agent for the Draloos IV population, so we’ll need to assemble all of the available nurses and medical assistants aboard the ship. I want all transporter rooms to stand-by to pick up any injured officers and transport them directly to our sickbay. The *Excelsior* needs our help now, so I want—“

“*SIR, all of her engines have FAILED!*” Ensign Ester cried, seemingly from nowhere. The crew stood on alert, fixing their eyes on the viewscreen. “No...wait,” she corrected. “They’ve *shut down* impulse engines and thrusters. They’re...*they’re a drift...*”

What? What the hell were they doing, Seth wondered. Everyone just stared at the ship, spinning very slowly, yet clearly out-of-control. But despite this, one could start to see the overall direction of the ship. The science officer from the back of the bridge stood up. “Sir, the planet’s gravitational pull is drawing her in,” he said.

“She’s...*falling,*” noted Ensign Ester.

In fact, one could notice the *Excelsior* picking up speed as she spun faster towards the planet surface. “*She’s starting to burn up,*” Lieutenant Commander Thorn said. “*Hull stress and temperature have jumped by fifteen percent...*”

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“I didn’t think the *Excelsior*-class was designed for atmospheric entry,” Jenovia noted.

“She’s not,” replied Ester. “And neither are we, I might add.”

“Hail them,” Seth quickly ordered.

“*No response*,” Thorn said.

Alan’s going down there to deploy the weapon, Seth thought. *That idiot...the least he could do was to wait for him*. Seth felt his mouth turn dry as he endeavored to give out his next order, but took a moment to come to grips with the fact that he was about to go ahead with a plan to lay waste to a newly discovered species. *So much for a shining career in Starfleet*, he thought. “Ensign Ester,” he said. “*Follow him in*.”