



STAR TREK
REEMERGENCE

Hugo Calvin

Part II

STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

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Chapter 12

“Captain’s Log, Stardate 63844.9: Under new orders from Admiral Kim, the *Dragonfly* is now en route to the Dralos system near the edge of the Federation border. Together with the crew of the *Excelsior*, Captain Alan Santiago and I are on a humanitarian relief mission, of sorts, to assist a large human colony on Draloos IV. But accounts of missing cargo ships and deaths of Starfleet officers on its neighboring planet, Draloos V, suggest that there is more going on than initial reports would suggest. This is the *Dragonfly’s* first mission, and having now met all of the members of my senior staff, I have no doubt that they will perform

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admirably. However, knowing Alan Santiago personally and what kind of officer he is, I am a little apprehensive going into this mission as a single team. For the most part, I have decided not to share our history with my crew.”

All of the senior officers met up in the conference room in the *Dragonfly*, including Captain Santiago and his first officer Commander Ariele from the *Excelsior*. They all sat down with nervous anticipation, anxiously awaiting Captain Seth’s orders. They all looked to him at the head of the table. “Alright people, we have our first mission ahead of us,” Seth announced loudly. “I hope you’re all prepared. We need to head to the Dralos system, specifically to planets known as Draloos IV and Draloos V. As you are all familiar by now, to my right is the crew of the *Excelsior*, who will all be joining us on this mission. This is her captain, a man that needs no introduction: Captain Alan Santiago, who will head up the mission alongside me. I trust that everyone here will treat him and his crew with the same respect as you would me, and each other.”

Santiago nodded to Seth’s crew. “I hope by now everyone has read the report from the *U.S.S. Ion*,” he said. Everyone nodded in agreement, but overall had a cautious reaction to him. “Then we all know that this will be a dangerous mission.”

Seth punched in the commands on the conference table to bring up the mission priorities. The images of the Dralos system and her planets sprung onto the

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table. “Good, now let’s get to the mission. According to the report by the *U.S.S. Ion*, the populous on Draloos IV consists of refugees from the once-thriving Testra system, primarily human. They were forced to Dralos nearly thirty years ago when the Dominion occupied and then destroyed their homeworld. For one reason or another, they’ve chosen to remain on Draloos IV and make it their homeworld. But it’s outside Federation space. So even though they are human, the Federation can’t give them the same care and protection of ordinary Federation citizens.”

“The Federation has been offering supplies and aid, but has fallen short of offering them Federation citizenship and letting them through our borders,” Santiago added.

“You mean, even though they’re human they aren’t Federation citizens?” Commander Ariele asked.

“Both their previous homeworld and their current homeworld have always been outside Federation space. They prefer to be self-sufficient,” Santiago explained.

“So what’s the problem?”

“Draloos IV is a Class K planet. It has an atmosphere that can support humanoid life, but it’s barren, a lot of deserts and rock. From what we know, it has

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no indigenous life. There was no previous plant, insect, or animal life. There are only basic bacteria and fungus life there, but those were brought in by the humans who moved there.”

“Why couldn’t they terraform the planet?” asked Ensign Ester.

“For some reason, it just didn’t take. They were able to make some bodies of water, and introduce some simple plant life, but not a major ecosystem that can support a billion people. They have minimal sunlight, little wind, or much else that can be harnessed into useful energy, despite our technology. They can’t farm, grow vegetables, raise cattle, or any of the basic means of producing the necessities efficiently for a society of that size to survive. Quite frankly, I have no idea why they choose to stay. It would take forever, but I say evacuate them now,” said Santiago.

“What about food replicators? Why don’t we just send them a whole bunch of them?” asked Ensign Ester. It seemed like an obvious solution.

“We already have, thirty years ago, including industrials-sized replicators,” the captain answered. “And we’ve been sending more ever since.”

“Make no mistake: replicators are no free lunch,” the Chief interrupted in his deep accent, “They require an enormous amount of energy to assemble even the

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simplest things, like proteins, atom by atom. You can't just make whatever the hell you want all of the time."

"Right now, the energy consumption that is needed to feed so many people is larger than what the planet and our replicators can generate. And Starfleet says that they can't spare any more resources here," Santiago added.

"So what the population decided to do was to use the resources of its neighboring planet, Draloos V," Seth explained. The projection on the conference table zoomed in on the new planet. "The planet was first designated as Class M, since, when it came to the planetary conditions, it was similar to Earth. The planet has all of the resources that the population of Draloos IV needs, and, since there is no sentient life on Draloos V, people thought that there would be no objection. Importantly, from what we understand, practically everything on Draloos V is toxic or lethal. By itself, the biomass is not useful, because it would kill everyone. So they transport it away from the planet, bring it back, disintegrate the matter using our replicator technology and convert it into useful energy. Then, somewhat ironically, it uses that energy to feed *back* the replicators to produce more edible food and supplies. It's not that different from the way we recycle, actually. It's hardly an efficient process for them, I know, but it was necessary for them to survive."

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LeCroy pressed his index finger on his lips and looked at the ceiling, as if deep in thought and carrying out complex calculations in his head. “I would imagine that Draloos IV consumes, maybe about eighty exaJoules of energy globally. By itself, to satisfy those energy needs Draloos IV only needs maybe, ninety or so kilograms of biomatter – *if* it converts all of that matter into energy with one hundred percent efficiency (which it doesn’t). But to feed back into the replicators to *synthesize food and materials*...that’s orders of magnitude higher. To power those things without the use of matter/antimatter...well, that’s just plain silly,” LeCroy explained.

“That’s why they need the biomatter. The energy they derive from it is equivalently enormous,” Seth added.

“But to deconstruct matter, and then construct it again, is a costly process because it takes a lot of energy to power the conversion process. This means that they need to start with a lot *more* mass at the start of the process to arrive at the desired level of food. I estimate that they need maybe a *half a million metric tons* of biomatter every day just to create enough of it. If we include other materials, like clothing, construction materials for buildings, vehicles, or what have you...well, that probably quadruples the requirement,” LeCroy said. “We’re

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looking at a need of *two million metric tons of biomatter daily*. That's more than the size of this ship!"

"From what I'm told, the bioregeneration abilities of Draloos V are impressive. They claim that the planet recovers whatever it takes."

"That's impossible," Dr. Min said bluntly. "I know very little plant life that recovers *that* quickly. What you are saying is that full grown trees and forests spring up daily."

"Well, that's what we're being sent to investigate," Seth responded.

"And now, something is wrong with how Draloos IV in getting its biomass?" Counselor Jenovia interrupted.

"That's right. The cargo ships are being destroyed when they get near the surface, even though some of them never step foot on the planet. And every team that is sent there never comes back. We were sent to investigate what the problem is, and hopefully restore the cargo shipments. If we fail at that, and it becomes absolutely necessary, we are to begin an evacuation plan."

"Our knowledge of Draloos V is sketchy, in part because research teams that go to investigate are never able to get a solid footing on it. We can scan from orbit and get a good amount of information, but we just can't get close and personal

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with it. Not only is everything toxic there, but the organisms that inhabit the planet, from reptiles to insects down to basic plant life, are all very aggressive. Starfleet has recently reclassified the planet from Class M to Class Z.”

“A ‘Demon’ world,” added Ensign Ester.

“Remember, the *U.S.S Ion* lost a whole away team there, including their commander, while visiting the planet,” Santiago reminded everyone.

“In fact, Admiral Kim’s final instructions were not to beam down to the planet. Too many casualties. “

“Then, how do we....?” Ariele openly asked.

“Lieutenant Commander LeCroy has brought aboard a solution that we will discuss later. But at the moment I want everybody to stand ready and make preparations for our assignment. Ensign, what’s our E.T.A.?”

Ensign Ester quickly ran her fingers on the conference table where she was sitting, which was really just one large keyboard, to run the calculation. “At Warp 9.3, it will take us a little over five days.”

“The *Dragonfly* has been primarily assigned to restore the cargo shipments, if possible. The *Excelsior* has been assigned to begin evacuation plans should it be

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deemed that the situation is irresolvable. The *Excelsior* is larger and can carry more passengers, but until we can get reinforcements, Captain Santiago will be evacuating the major political figures.”

Santiago stepped in. “Both Captain Seth and I will be leading this mission. If, in the event, Captain Seth and I disagree on a decision, the Admiral has given me authority to have priority decision. I trust that there won’t be a problem?”

Captain Seth was immediately annoyed. *Why did he have to mention it here?* He vehemently disagreed with Admiral Kim’s decision on that, but in the end, he knew he had to obey orders. But he held his cool, because he knew it would look foolish in front of his crew to bring up a fuss now.

Everyone nodded. “Dismissed,” Captain Santiago said.

Captain Seth waited for everyone else to leave the room, and then shot a glare at Santiago. “Did you really think it was necessary to mention that to my crew?”

“Come on. I made no lies here, Darren. Those were Admiral Kim’s instructions. You have your assignment, I just have the authority to oversee the mission and to make sure it goes well. It’s nothing personal, I’m just a little more senior than you.”

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“*By a month,*” Seth reminded him. “And you could have waited until the time came. In fact, there was no reason for you to even mention it. Under those circumstances, as much as I disagree with Admiral Kim’s orders, I would have respectfully ceded to your commands. You just decided to take the opportunity to undermine me in front of my crew,” Seth said sternly.

“I did no such thing,” Santiago said. “You just can’t stomach the truth of the situation.”

“Which is what exactly?”

“That in all likelihood, we *will* have to evacuate the planet.”

“You mean, that I would fail in my part of the mission? Is that what you’re saying?”

“I didn’t mean it like that...” Seth already started heading towards the door. Santiago raised voice, “Look, don’t blame me if the Admiral chose to trust my judgment over yours—”

But before Santiago could finish that last sentence, Seth was already headed towards the doors. “I think it’s time to return to your ship, Captain. I’ll meet you on Draloos IV.”

Chapter 13

That night, Captain Seth had a difficult time sleeping. Maybe it was the mission that kept him up, maybe it was the fact that he lost the race, or maybe it was Santiago's behavior in the conference room. He looked at the clock by his bed: 0159 hours. Usually, when he tossed and turned like that, it was better for him to get up and about rather than to continue to try and fall asleep. That way he could wear himself out sooner. Or at least, that was his theory. He decided to stop by the bridge for the night-watch. There were only two or three officers there, with

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one sitting directly in his seat. He stood up to his feet as soon as he saw the captain. “Captain on the bridge.”

“At ease, Lieutenant. I’m just having a little trouble sleeping. You mind if I take over for an hour or so?”

“She’s all yours. I’ll be in my quarters when you need me to resume my shift. But you don’t have to do anything; as soon as you leave the bridge, the computer will alert me to come back and take over.”

“Understood, Lieutenant. You’re dismissed.”

For some reason, he really wanted some alone time on the bridge, just him by himself piloting the ship through the emptiness of space. He quickly signaled the other two officers on the night-shift to leave the bridge. *I should be able to handle it*, he thought. He sat in his seat, and took a deep breath as he embraced that ‘new ship smell.’

Suddenly, he heard the doors open from the turbolift. *Damn, didn’t I just send everyone away?* he thought. But to his surprise, it was Commander Ariele from the *Excelsior*. He thought that both she and Santiago had already returned to their ship hours ago. “Commander,” the captain said, “How nice of you to stop by. Coming at a rather late hour, aren’t we? It’s two-hundred hours.” In truth,

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Captain Seth was really glad to see her, if for no other reason than to talk to someone from the *Excelsior* who wasn't Santiago.

"I might have said the same to you, captain. Surely, the captain of the *Dragonfly* can find some other officer to take the night watch."

"I...just had a little trouble sleeping, that's all."

"I only wanted one last look around the bridge before I went back to the *Excelsior*. I may not have many other opportunities to get a tour. She's quite a ship, I hear."

"Yeah, well, I'm really just getting to know her. I'm just hoping that it's a start of a beautiful relationship, you know? Like a first girlfriend, you want it to be perfect." *Damn*, he thought, *that was corny*.

She couldn't help but smile, to Seth's relief, but it was actually difficult to see because the bridge was so dark. "And of course..."

"...it never is," he said, finishing her sentence.

Seth thought that there was something very charming about her. She was also quite young for her position of first officer: she was only twenty-seven, according

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to her profile. She had long, blond hair that was bunched up in the back. He knew that she could be strong and authoritative, but he sensed something else from her.

“So? What do you think of the bridge?”

“It’s....*sleek*,” she commented, laughing as the words came out of her mouth. “Not like our archaic bridge on the *Excelsior*.”

“Have you seen the new navigational system?”

“I’ve seen Ensign Ester use it, but I’m not familiar with how it works.”

“Here, let me show you. Have a seat.” She jumped into the seat at the helm on the right side of the bridge. “Just hold still for a moment,” Seth said. Immediately Ariele felt something materialize on her eyes, and it felt very cold. She was momentarily startled by it. “Don’t worry about that. As soon as you sit down the computer transports specialized contact lenses onto your eyes. This is your ‘screen’. It allows you to see a three-dimensional view of the ship and the systems around it.”

As she stared ahead, she could in fact see a small image of the ship right in front of her eyes, with all of the navigational information there as well, including the exact speed and charted course. “Starfleet in fact has the technology now to have everything in three-dimensions, but with navigational control, tactical display,

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and a huge main viewer, there was just too much clutter going around on the bridge all at once, and proved too distracting to other officers. So Starfleet invented specialized contact lenses that allow only the operator to view the necessary information. So Lieutenant Commander Thorn also gets his own for tactical display, where it shows our complement of torpedoes, phaser capacity, shield strength, and also for enemy ships. Although, I have a hard time imagining exactly how those lenses fit onto his eyes, since I've never seen his eyes before."

"This is amazing. How do I navigate the ship?"

Seth punched in commands to drop the ship out of warp. "Put your hands out, just above the console," he said. She did, and the console lit up just below her hands. "The positioning of your hands will dictate the orientation of the ship. Raise your right and lower your left hand, and the ship will tilt to the left. Raise your left hand and...well, you get the idea. Ensign Ester can actually perform very complex maneuvers with the new navigational system."

"Incredible," she said. "Where was all this when I was an ensign?" She got out of helm control, and immediately she felt the contact lenses lifted from her eyes.

"Don't worry, it's all new to me, too. You've seen our main viewer, haven't you?" She got a good look at the very wide screen. Seth wanted to expand the

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view to the whole bridge, so that they could see the stars pass over, under, and behind them. It was possible now, because of the number of holoemitters installed all over the bridge. Functionally, they were designed to support the Medical Holographic Nurses, in case the doctor was unable to reach the bridge. That was standard on all ships now. “Can your main viewer do this?”

Captain Seth programmed the view of space to cover them entirely, over their heads and under their feet. It felt a little bit silly actually, since it looked like two bodies just floating in space at sublight speeds. But no one could deny that the view was stunning. Seth navigated the ship right by a nebula, which had a stunning mix of blue, red, and purple gases. “The computer takes the sensory information and projects it as a holographic image.”

Ariele laughed a little more. It was nice to see her more loosened up; Seth had only seen her as a commanding officer. But they both soon realized that having this view was a little disorienting, because they couldn't see the ground below them. The holographic images didn't make everything around the bridge invisible, just muted. They both struggled to stand straight, and stumbled around a little bit.

“Careful,” said Seth, “the holoemitters can make the room look like empty space, but that chair is still very much there.”

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“You know, I’m pretty sure this would be easier to do on the holodeck,” she said.

“I know,” he admitted. “But in a holodeck, you know you’re just standing there with a bunch of fake images. This way, you really know that we’re flying,” he said, smiling. “And that’s a *real* nebula.”

“Yes, it is,” she said, allowing herself to be mesmerized by the sight of it. “Thank you, Captain.”

“We’ll be arriving at our destination in just a few days,” trying to diffuse the awkwardness. It felt just a little unusual that he was talking so intimately with someone *else’s* first officer.

“Are you nervous about the mission?”

As a sign of confidence, his instinct was to say no. But in truth, he was quite nervous. “Well, since you are Captain Santiago’s first officer and not mine, I guess I can be a little more honest with you. But yes, I’m a little nervous. I truly am grateful of the trust that Admiral Roth has placed in me. But I can’t help but be a little apprehensive about the outcome. I mean, we had only just a few days of shakedown time, and we’re already on our first mission? I don’t know my ship yet, I don’t know my crew...I don’t even know myself...as a captain, anyway.”

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“Don’t worry, captain. You will do fine, I’m sure of it. Captain Santiago and I also only had a few days to get our seats warm. We started our first mission almost immediately, with many of the senior officers still yelling at Captain Santiago because ‘that wasn’t the way we did things,’” she joked. “But, he ended up doing fine.”

“What do you think of Alan?” Seth asked her, abruptly changing the subject.

“You mean, Captain Santiago?”

“There’s no need to be formal. I won’t spill a word.”

Ariele looked suspicious at first, with her eyes narrowing when he asked her. But she soon decided that there was really nothing to hide. “Do...I have permission to speak freely?”

Seth nodded his head gently. “Of course.”

“Well, we’ve only been with him for a month, so it’s hard to fairly judge him. But, if you must know, I think he’s brilliant, opinionated, strong-willed, eager. I want to say brave, but that’s not quite the right word. He’s fearless, which sometimes makes him look like he’s taking unnecessary risk. He’s young, as are you. So some of the, um, more experienced officers often question his decisions.”

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“I’ve already run into a little bit of that myself.”

“But at the end of the day, his crew trusts him.”

“A natural leader, you think?”

“Yeah, I suppose you could say that. He’s a very passionate person. There’s no doubt that he will make a great captain one day, if he isn’t considered one now. But like I said, he’s only been in command of the *Excelsior* for a month.”

“I see.”

“Look, you just have to show your crew that you’re thinking of them in all of the decisions you make. This is the twenty-fifth century, remember? There’s no money. You can’t tell someone to do something just because you’re paying them. I mean, ultimately you have your rank, but if you really want to pull out the best out of your officers, you have to show that you have their interests at heart, even above your own. Even if your decision comes at their expense, or *their life*, they’ll listen to you. There are so many people in this universe with power, and yet so few good leaders.”

The captain fell silent, unsure of how to respond. Suddenly Ariele looked a little embarrassed.

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“Look at me,” she chuckled, “a commander telling a *captain* how to be a leader.”

“No, please, I wanted you to speak your mind. I can only hope that I can follow through. Sometimes, you’re in such a race to advance your career that you forget what you’re supposed to do once you get there.”

“You will, captain. Despite what I’ve said, Captain Santiago can certainly come off as an arrogant jackass. He has that big certificate on the wall of his Ready Room that has big letters that announces that he’s a graduate of *Red Squad*. If you’re an officer meeting him for the first time, he’ll eye it repeatedly until you ask about it,” Ariele explained, laughing a little as she remembered it happening to her. “I *know* it irks some of the other officers. Most of us are just ordinary graduates, mind you. I’m not entirely sure what makes a *Red Squad-er* so special.”

“But you’re a first officer at the age of twenty-seven. That’s no small feat. And from what I hear, you do a good job at it.”

“Thank you, captain. That means a lot, coming from you.”

“He must be giddy with joy having won that race,” Seth said with regret. “*I can’t believe I lost.*”

“I should probably keep quiet then...” Ariele half-joked.

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“I’ve had the fortune of knowing him since we were young cadets. He always had to get the last word, or the highest score. His brilliance made it all the worse, too, since in many instances, he indeed got the last word, and the highest score. For a while, I hated him. I just couldn’t stand the guy.”

She gave a peculiar look. “What changed?”

“While we were at the Academy, there was a time when we were on the holodeck on a piloting examination. Remember, this was *Red Squad*, so the competition was intense. Out of twenty-three classmates, the bottom six were to be eliminated in a series of consecutive exams. There was no room for error. We were piloting along a complicated asteroid field where their trajectories were unpredictable. At one point, I got extremely greedy and tried to rush through a tight space that I thought I could make, but it was one that was closing rapidly. I punched it up to full impulse, but I ended up ramming my shuttlecraft into one of the asteroids. I suffered major damage, but more alarmingly the holographic simulation did not end. I quickly realized that there was something very wrong with the safety protocols. As I crashed, I was tossed around the inside and I suffered major trauma to my torso and to my head. Without functioning navigational control or proper maneuvering thrusters, I was doomed to crash again,

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and this time the outcome would likely be fatal. I remembered being extremely dizzy, and I most likely had a major concussion. I couldn't think of what to do.

“The only one who had realized what had happened, or even bothered to try and help me, was Alan Santiago. He realized what was going on, and deviated from his course to try and help me. He quickly transported me off of the shuttlecraft instantly before it finally got crushed between two of the colliding asteroids. It all happened very fast, but that meant that he lost an entire six seconds from his time. In this kind of competition, one second lost is too many. Both he and I came in last place, and we were eliminated from further examination. We couldn't move to the next class.

“The instructors saw what had happened, but they insisted that there was nothing wrong with the safety protocols. Records show that they were in fact functioning within normal parameters when the simulation was being run. That was bullshit. And I had the injuries to prove it. Naturally, they didn't give Santiago any credit for saving me. They would not allow for a re-test. They wanted to know *who would do what was needed to get ahead*. And to them, it wasn't Santiago.

“Alan never says anything about it now, but I know he always resented me for it. It was a stroke of luck that we were allowed to re-test the following year. We

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both worked extremely hard following the accident to catch up. We couldn't let anything get in the way of our goals. In the end though, Santiago came out ahead of everyone else. We were close friends since, or at least, until we graduated Starfleet. After we got our first assignments, we didn't really keep in touch."

"I...I wouldn't have guessed that about Alan," Ariele said.

"The competition at *Red Squad* is cut-throat. Most of the other cadets didn't want to know that I was in trouble, so they just pretended not to see me. In *Red Squad*, you either make it or you don't. I owe Alan my life."

Ariele was still mildly stunned to hear this about her captain. It was so unlike anything she had experienced with him.

"So *that's* your captain," he said. "I hope you don't need me to tell you that I would prefer it if you didn't mention anything about this to him..."

"Of course, sir."

"Good, because I *still* hate his guts," he joked. She gave one last grin, almost trying to suppress her laugh. "I hope I've at least inspired you."

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“Thank you, Darren, you have,” she said. “Well, I should get back to the *Excelsior*. I have a report to prepare for him. I sincerely hope that I have the honor of working closely with you on this mission, Captain Seth.”

“Likewise, Commander.”

Ariele left the bridge and headed towards the transporter room, leaving the captain to himself on the bridge. He looked at his watch: 0259 hours. He quickly realized how sleepy he had become after talking with her. He got up from his chair, and headed straight for his quarters. Barely after the clock hit 0300, the captain fell to sleep.

Chapter 14

*“Captain’s Log, Stardate: 63845.2. After a long journey, we have at last made our way to the Dralos System. Our first stop will be Draloos IV, home to the large human population. The senior officers from both the *Dragonfly* and the *Excelsior* will be transporting to the surface to talk to a man known only to us as Jerad, the political representative of the largest faction on the planet and a man of worldly influence. I have not seen the situation on Draloos IV first-hand. I have only read the reports that often describe the world as ‘desolate,’ ‘poor,’ and ‘a travesty.’ I*

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must admit, despite days of mental preparation, I'm not sure that I am ready for what I am about to see."

"We are approaching Draloos IV, sir," Ensign Ester announced.

"Alright then, Ensign. Full stop," the captain ordered. "Scans?"

"Population: one point two billion humans. The air is heavily polluted. Many industrial pollutants: carbon dioxide, sulfur dioxide, methane, ozone...they have everything. They also have relatively low oxygen levels," the science officer said. "It might not be very pleasant to breathe down there."

"I think we'll be able to handle it. Lieutenant Commander Thorn and Counselor Jenovia, you will accompany me down to the surface. Ensign Ester, tell Captain Santiago to meet me on the planet along with his own away team. After you've given him the message, you can meet us in the transporter room to go down to the surface."

"Aye, sir," Ester said.

Shortly later, Captain Seth and his team materialized on the surface. They stood there in the stones and rubble, with very few individuals in sight. The conditions were amazingly harsh. The population was essentially living on barren rock, with little precipitation. The clouds were ominous. The sun was there, but

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the light just couldn't penetrate the clouds very well, leaving the surface only dimly lit and leaving the horizon very hazy. People lived in very old buildings that have been previously abandoned. It looked closely like the conditions of post-war Europe following World War I, or at least, the conditions that were depicted in the photographs that Seth had studied as a child. There must have been a previous civilization that lived here that either completely evacuated the planet, or perished.

Captain Santiago and Commander Ariele beamed down from the *Excelsior* soon after. They looked as surprised by the conditions as Seth had been. In the distance, the Starfleet group could see three individuals walking towards them, accompanied by several security guards.

“Greetings, captains. I am Jerad. These are my diplomatic associates, Yavin and Ikitti. They represent the northern and western factions, respectively.” His face was peppered with dirt, and he had heavy facial hair. His clothes looked more like robes.

“A pleasure, Jerad. I am Captain Seth of the *U.S.S. Dragonfly*, from the United Federation of Planets,” Seth began. “These are my officers: Lieutenant Commander Thorn, Counselor Jenovia, and Ensign Ester.”

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“And I’m Captain Santiago of the *U.S.S. Excelsior*. This is my first officer, Commander Ariele.”

“It is a pleasure to finally meet you, captains. We’ve needed your help for quite some time now. I am sorry if our hospitality is poor. We have very little to offer...” Jerad said apologetically.

“Not to worry,” Seth replied respectfully. “We’re fine, thank you.”

“Please, let’s take a walk. I’ll explain everything.” Jerad gestured to have them walk down an open road. People wore ragged clothes, and their faces were covered in dirt. It was horrifying to see first-hand.

“The Jem’Hadar took over our homeworld over thirty years ago,” Jerad began. “The twelfth Federation fleet was supposed to be protecting us, but they were diverted to a more urgent mission. The plan was to use our planet as a base to launch attacks on more strategic planets, but after the Dominion began regrouping, they scrapped that plan and leveled our homeworld. Our planet had a population of one point eight billion, Captain. When they were finished with us, *we were down to less than half.*”

“Luckily, the sixth and ninth fleet came in to drive the Jem’Hadar out, but by that time, most of our home was already destroyed. Our buildings, roads, bridges

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were leveled, the soil rendered useless for agriculture, the atmosphere poisoned by toxic gases...everything was gone. Our rescue ships were able to carry us to this system. Far away from the nearest Federation outpost, that's for sure, but it suited our needs at the time.

“Our first choice was Draloos V, being a more natural choice because it was Class M. It was like Earth. But the planet was essentially unlivable. We soon found that we could not consume anything from there, and some of us, the few that were left, even went missing. We couldn't settle on such a planet, with our population already dwindling to dangerous levels. So we abandoned that planet and settled here.

“At first, we actually used our matter/antimatter reactor from our warp drives to power us. For a long time, that gave us more than enough for us to get by. Ten years ago, when our population began to grow again, we found that we depended more and more on our technology for basic supplies: food, materials for shelter and clothing. But we can't generate enough energy to power that technology, Captain. We get very little sunlight, and there is no indigenous life on this planet. We can't grow our own vegetation here. And as you can see, captain, we're not exactly equipped to make our own antimatter. We derive almost everything from Draloos V.

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“It was a great long-term solution. The rate at which the biomass recuperates is incredible. We can take two million metric tons a day, and the total biomass remains essentially the same.”

“But our last several cargo ships were destroyed,” Yavin interrupted. “We don’t know why. We don’t exactly have a lot of spare cargo ships either. Normally, we wouldn’t be that concerned. But we asked for Starfleet’s help, and they sent the *U.S.S. Ion* to investigate. The away team was killed when they landed.”

“At the moment, we have to ration out our food replicators until we get our energy source back from Draloos V,” Jerad said. “So you can see, we have food and clothing, and for most of us, we have roofs over our heads. We are getting close to building ourselves up again, but, with our shipments halted, we are again in danger, captain.”

“Jerad,” said Seth, “We should have a little spare antimatter on the *Dragonfly* that we can use to temporarily meet your energy needs on Draloos IV. It won’t be much, but it should be enough to power the entire planet for another week or so. Assuming you guys don’t up your power usage too much.”

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Santiago agreed. “That’s a good idea. I will ask my Chief Engineer if there’s any that we can spare on the *Excelsior*.”

“A temporary solution, but a good one. I thank you, captain. Both of you.”

“These buildings, they look much older than thirty years,” Seth observed.

“Quite right, captain. We believe there was a previous civilization here on Draloos IV. Industrialized, imaginative, clever. Or at least, that’s from what we can tell from the few things they left behind. We don’t know what happened to them, whether they just picked up and left, or went extinct. Either way, I know why: *there’s nothing left here to use.*”

“Every great civilization that perishes does so for one reason: the civilization expands to the point until all resources are exhausted,” Commander Ariele noted. “Our civilization might have suffered the same fate had we not invented a way to generate sufficient quantities antimatter.”

“I thought that this planet had no indigenous life,” Santiago recalled.

“We know very little of the planet’s history ourselves, captains. All we know is that there was a civilization here at one point, and now, everything is gone.”

“Tough luck,” Santiago muttered.

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“It’s a good planet, captains, and we have good people. Yes, we are still hungry, but we are building schools again, hospitals, government buildings. All of our waste is being carefully used to help rebuild our soil. We don’t want to see thirty years of hard work go out the door.”

“We are under order from Starfleet command to evacuate this planet, if necessary.” Captain Santiago interjected. “I will be leading the evacuation plan, and you and other political figures will be escorted aboard the *Excelsior*.”

“We are not leaving. This is our home,” Jerad said firmly.

“I’m sorry, Jerad. You are, if it becomes necessary,” he said even more firmly. “Let’s all just hope that it doesn’t come to that.” He looked at Captain Seth as he said it.

“We have one more request of you, Captain Seth, Captain Santiago,” Yavin said. “The people are still hungry, and so crime is now a pervasive problem. We’ve been having terrorist attacks with increasing frequency. With the shipments from Draloos V now halted, I’m afraid it will become an even bigger problem. Our security forces are still very thin. We may need your help in this matter.”

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Captain Seth nodded in understanding. “Lieutenant Commander Thorn, would you oversee the security details? Assist them in any way that you can.”

“*Understood*,” Thorn said, in Breen.

“They are not bad people, Captain, they are just desperate,” Jerad added.

“Captain, I would like to stay behind and help out as well,” said Counselor Jenovia. She and Ensign Ester had been playing with the children nearby.

“What will you do?”

“Our schools and hospitals are still not very well organized, Captain. We could use some help coordinating them. Both are under-staffed,” Ikitti said, stepping in front of Jerad.

“That’s really not necessary, Ikitti...” Jerad said, nearly whispering.

“I believe they could also use help with psychological evaluation, captain,” Jenovia added. “I would imagine that for many, their mental conditions are precarious, at best.”

Jerad seemed to agree, but reluctantly.

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“Very well, then,” Seth said reassuringly. “Do everything you can, Counselor. Jerad, we will do all that we can to figure out what is happening with your cargo, and hopefully start restoring your supplies.”

“In the meantime, please discuss with your other political leaders about an evacuation plan. Nothing set in stone, just a backup plan in case we can’t figure out what’s going on.”

“Thank you, captains. I must return to my duties. Please, contact me if you have further questions.”

The captains nodded to him as a sign of acknowledgement and respect. Seth’s head fell lower than Santiago’s, out of sheer habit of bowing. As Jerad turned away, Captain Seth’s face grew increasingly concerned. The living conditions were far worse than he originally imagined. “How is it that we still have humans living like this?” Captain Seth asked his crewmen. “How is Starfleet allowing this?”

“The Federation gave them as much help as they could: replicators, transporters, shuttlecrafts, medical equipment, construction tools, and even some of our own engineers, nurses, and emergency holographic medical programs. We can’t just give them everything they want,” Commander Ariele explained.

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“If they weren’t human, we’d be violating the Prime Directive like crazy,” Seth said.

“Then they should consider themselves lucky that they are human. Even the Romulans are not getting as much aid as they are,” added Santiago. “If they’re going to stay, they’re going to need to get their act together,” he warned. “I should probably hold off on telling you this, but I was told that Federation aid to this planet was to be reduced.”

Seth was taken aback. “Who told you that?” he asked.

“Admiral Kim,” Alan said. “He said that we need to divert more aid to the Romulans. These guys here need to be more self-sustaining, because at least the Romulans are giving us something in return.” There was something unnerving and cold about that statement.

“Since when did we revert to *opportunism*?” Commander Ariele asked.

Seth acknowledged her point. He was not pleased one bit. “Let’s get back to our ships. I think it’s about time we visited this ‘Demon’ planet.”

Chapter 15

It took all but twenty minutes to reach the sister planet, Draloos V, but that was only because the two planets happened to be very close to each other in their orbits. From space, the planet looked somewhat like Earth, but the ratio of land-to-water seemed larger on this planet. As such, the planet was more green and brown than it was blue. There were also many beautiful white swirls of clouds in its atmosphere. From orbit, the planet looked rather harmless.

“We’ve arrived at Draloos V, sir,” Ensign Ester announced.

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“Very well, Ensign. Full stop,” captain said. “What can you tell from here, Lieutenant?”

“Breathable atmosphere, moderate temperatures, and plenty of moisture. There is heavy vegetation in most parts of the planet. I’m not detecting any humanoid life,” said the science officer.

“Do we know where the cargo ships crashed?”

“Yes, sir, we do. There are several crash sites.”

“Alright, remember, nobody beams down to the planet under any circumstances, everybody got that?” the captain reminded everyone.

“Then...what do we do instead? We can only do so much up here,” asked Jenovia.

“Chief? The stage is all yours,” Seth said.

“Uh...yes, thank you, captain. We are using one of Starfleet’s new experimental devices to serve as ‘surrogates’ for ourselves when we transport to hostile environments. They look like simple, metal puppets, and in many ways, you’d be right, that’s what they are. But they’re strong and durable, and can be connected to us in a way that responds to our physical movements. So, I raise an

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arm, it raises an arm.” And so he did, as a demonstration. It was rather underwhelming, but he got the point across. It was interesting to see the odd expressive mannerisms of LeCroy being exhibited by the mechanical android.

“*Ahem...*the point is, we can transport these surrogates to the planet and we can operate them safely from the ship. This idea has been explored before, but we’ve developed it to the point where we can use them reliably on everyday missions. We call them surrogate androids, or – *SA*’s, for short.”

“And, we just stand here on the bridge?”

“Um, no, you guys move into that room on the side of the bridge there.” The doors on side of the bridge opened up to reveal a small holodeck. The doors opened almost as if it was a hidden room in a mysterious mansion. Seth didn’t recall this room being in the technical manual.

“The surrogate machines can also transmit advanced sensory information to this holodeck, so while you guys stand in there, you will be able to see and hear everything that they do. So since you can sense everything that they sense, and they move in every way that you move, it will literally be like you are there.”

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“So there are going to be five of those puppet things walking around on the surface? What if on some other planet, we had to talk to people? We’d look like idiots,” Santiago remarked.

“Err, good question, captain, but not to worry. They are each equipped with holoemitters, so that they will project an image that is exactly the same as yours. So, they will look exactly like you. These were invented not only for crew safety in hostile environments, but also to protect the environment from our own contaminants. We carry a lot of microscopic organisms that could mess up an ecosystem. Not that our microbes would have any chance on Draloos V...”

“So there’s also no need to wear the biohazard-suit,” Dr. Min added. “You’ll be safe there.”

“I say it’s about time they invented something like this.” Ensign Ester said.

“Although you will essentially be holograms, your tricorder and phasers on the surface will be real,” LeCroy added.

“I’m looking forward to this,” Santiago said, with almost child-like enthusiasm. He did a little dance, and watched his SA ‘self’ do the same. He laughed. LeCroy was not amused.

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“We only have eight of these androids on the ship, and they are expensive and difficult to make. So please take care of them while you’re down there,” LeCroy said. He was looking straight at Santiago.

“Do we feel exactly what they feel?” Seth asked.

“Well, the neural connection will cause you to ‘feel’ changes in pressure and temperature. It is designed, however, to mute any pain. So if the surrogate broke its arm, you would definitely feel it and a strong sense of discomfort. But it wouldn’t feel the same way as actually breaking your arm. Incidentally, you also won’t be able to use your arm the same way; it will really behave as if it was broken. The computer will alert you to disconnect from your, um, counterpart.”

“In case you’re wondering, if anyone gets ‘killed,’ or there is severe trauma, the connection will automatically be severed. But to make my job easier, *please* try to stay out of harm’s way,” Dr. Min said pleadingly.

“No promises, Doctor,” Captain Seth said. “Let’s go.”

The SAs beamed down to the planet, and the holoemitters that projected their images activated momentarily after. The team, which consisted of Captain Seth, Dr. Min, Ensign Ester, Captain Santiago and Commander Ariele, looked around

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and tried to get a feel for their 'bodies.' The feeling was eerie, because they couldn't tell from their senses alone where they were; was it the ship or the planet?

"This is messed up," Captain Santiago said. "I'm really still on the ship, right?"

"Yes, that's right," Dr. Min said.

"Alright, people, let's get moving. We need to find out as much as we can. Ensign, you know where those cargo ships are?" Seth ordered.

"Yes, sir. They're seventy meters ahead of us."

"Amazing," Dr. Min said. "According to my readings, these plants are extremely photosynthetically efficient. Their sunlight-to-biomass conversion is nearly three times that of a typical Earth plant. They use several different light-absorbing compounds to utilize a much wider range of the light spectrum. These plants can even capture ultra-violet radiation."

"That's just fascinating, Doctor, but let's save the science project until later."

"I'm just saying, Captain, that if for some reason Draloos IV can't recover their cargo shipments, there are other ways to satisfy their energy needs. There has to be a more elegant solution than just stripping this planet of its biomatter."

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“Noted, Doctor. I wouldn’t mind hearing your ideas, but let’s just focus on the mission right now.”

A very pretty and unusually shaped butterfly landed on the hand of Ensign Ester. It stood there, slowly flapping its delicate wings. She studied it carefully, and smiled from its beauty. She tried to scan it with the tricorder in her other hand. With the ability to roam around this planet first-hand, it might be a good opportunity to study some of its rich species. Biologists all over the Alpha Quadrant would love to use the SA technology.

“Ensign, *don’t touch anything*,” the captain ordered.

“Aye, sir.” She shook it away. “The cargo ship is just up ahead, maybe fifty meters or so.”

The ensign suddenly stood an inch or two shorter than usual. Seth looked at Santiago, who seemed to notice it, too. “Ensign, are you ok?”

“Yeah, why?”

“You seem....” And she became shorter still. She was sinking. The soil beneath her began to soften, and she began to sink further. Everyone took a step back.

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“Ensign, don’t move. Take my hand.” Seth signaled Santiago to pull his other arm for support. As the ensign began to realize what was happening, she began to panic. She was breathing heavily, nearly hyperventilating.

“Captain...”

“Ensign, I need you to calm down. Hold on...” but it was not working. The earth around her was getting looser at the surface, but she could feel it getting tighter at her feet.

“Captain, it’s pulling on me...*I can’t...*”

Seth bolted towards her. “*Hold on!*” he yelled, extending his arm as far as he could to reach hers. But his hands slipped and he and Santiago fell backwards.

Ensign Ester toppled to her knees and hands, and now she was sinking on all fours. “*Captain, help me...*”

“Don’t be afraid, you’re not really here, remember?” Seth said, trying to calm her down.

“*Well, it feels real to me!*” She could feel how cool the soil was on her hands beneath her. It was getting slimy deep down. She was almost at her neck now.

“Captain to the *Dragonfly*. Something’s happening to Ensign Ester.”

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“We see it, Captain. We’re going to sever the connection.” It was odd to see the Ensign in danger while being on the holodeck. The surrogate android was transmitting all sensory information and projecting it as a holographic image, so whatever it ‘felt,’ the ensign had to feel too. And since the android was being devoured by the soil, so must the ensign. In essence, *the holodeck was eating her alive.*

“Guys, hurry up. She’s exhibiting signs of shock,” Dr. Min quickly added.

Ensign Ester, or at least her surrogate android, kept sinking. She gasped and gasped for air. The ground just got softer, and *moister*. It looked like the ‘roots’ from the nearby trees were sprouting from under the ground and grabbing her as well, further pulling her into the ground. Seth pulled out his phaser.

But Ester’s face suddenly went silent, and her head just drooped, which hopefully meant that the link was severed. “Is she alright?”

“Yeah, we got her. Be careful guys...”

Her image on the SA dissolved, and all that lay there was the naked stick android, sinking fast into the ground and eventually disappearing. Seth turned to Santiago. “It’s a little unusual that that particular spot would suddenly go weak.”

“You think something was trying to get her?” Santiago asked. Had to be.

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“Get out your phasers. Wide dispersal pattern. Everyone spread out,” Seth ordered.

Seth and Santiago fired their phasers and evaporated the soil, maybe several meters deep, where Ensign Ester’s android body was taken. Nothing yet, just more soil. Dr. Min took out his tricorder.

“I’m...I’m reading faint signs of...something massive beneath. Maybe another several meters.”

“Something? What is it?”

“I don’t know. The reading is too faint, but it’s large.”

“Where’s the body of the SA? We couldn’t have destroyed it, not on that setting.”

“Alright, maybe we should get back to finding that cargo ship. I’m not sure I want to know what’s down there. If necessary, we can come back to it. Everyone, watch your back.”

They began moving again, but with greater unease. Through the tropical calm was an eerie sensation that everything was out to kill them.

“Captain, we found the missing biohazard-suits.”

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The biohazard-suits lay there, contorted into awkward angles. Dr. Min did a quick scan on each of them.

“The men inside these suits were ‘digested,’” Dr. Min began, “by some sort of corrosive enzyme. But the suit itself remains largely intact. The enzyme appears to corrode relatively quickly, at least by enzyme standards, but it must have felt like an eternity to these victims. It looked like they died very painful deaths. I’m not detecting any sort of anesthetic or numbing agent.”

“What can you make of them, Doctor?”

“I should take them back to my lab, so I can study exactly how this was done to them. It may shed some light on what’s going on here.”

“Very well, Doctor. Keep me apprised.”

“Doctor to Transporter Room. Lock onto the following coordinates, and transport the subjects directly into my lab. Be sure that they are quarantined by a Level 3 force field,” Dr. Min explained.

“Understood, sir.”

“I should be heading back to investigate. Will you need me much longer here?”

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“Actually, we’re getting close to the cargo ship. We’re only about thirty meters away,” Ester added.

“Understood, then I’ll be heading back.”

The remaining three team members headed toward the crash site where the cargo ship lay in ruin. The cargo ship was fairly large, and rather boxy. It had to be, in order to bring in the amount of biomatter that they did each day.

“It doesn’t look like it crashed from space. We probably would have seen much more extensive damage,” Santiago suggested.

“Jerad said that their transporter range wasn’t that long, maybe forty or fifty meters. So the cargo ships had to stay relatively close to the ground,” said Seth. “Where are the crewmen?”

“There doesn’t seem to be any traces of them,” Santiago said. “Hold on, I’m picking up small quantities of their DNA from my tricorder. Looks like there were three of them...” Santiago followed their trail right outside the ship. He stopped about twenty meters away from the ship. “Looks like they left the ship, but the trail seems to stop right here.”

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“Let’s check the logs.” The captain dusted off the console, and managed to pull up some files from the ship’s primitive computer. An image of one of the crewmen appeared on the small screen.

“Cargo Ship’s Log, Stardate 63840.7. ‘Nother day, ‘nother dollar, figuratively speaking, anyway. This is the last day of our shift, and we’re just cruising around picking the best spot with the densest vegetation. We’ve already hit the northern part of this continent which is pretty clear now, so we’ve started moving south to pick up more of this crap. But the type of vegetation seems a little different down here than up north. But I’m sick of all of the stupid paperwork I have to fill out every time we transport up an “unknown” species. It’s a freaking plant, for God’s sake. Ya hear that, Gordon? Oops! Don’t know what the hell we just picked up there, but it looked pretty scared...haha. I’m going home once we’re finished here. Should be a breeze, ship is fully operational and skies are sunny. Honey, don’t wait up, I’ll be home in time for dinner. End log.”

“There’s more a little later,” Seth said.

“Cargo Ship’s Log, Supplemental. Dang it, looks like we’ve hit a bit of snag here. This was supposed to be a routine operation: Pick up shipment and go. I can’t believe this. Not sure what it was, thrusters seemed to be working fine when we left Draloos IV. As we were initiating the transport, we started getting really

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heavy. Our windows got real dark by some large and growing mass. Like some giant bird kept taking a huge crap on us, and our navigational thrusters just couldn't handle the extra weight, you know? We don't have the means of viewing our hull, so we had to land the thing just to see what the heck was going on. Christ, on my last day before my vacation, too. Anyway, once we're all suited up we're going to clear whatever's on our hull and hopefully get the hell outta here. End log."

"I didn't see anything on the hull. Whatever it was, it's cleared out now," said Santiago.

"So is the cargo bay. There's nothing in there, and they said that they completed the transport," said Ariele.

"The last log is fragmented. Maybe we'll get a few more answers. I'm trying to clear it up a bit."

"Cargo Ship's Log, Supplemental. Oh my They got....Jefferson and Sam.....the....something.....*SHHH*.....I'm locking the door. I don't know what's going on, I left those two alone for just a few minutes just to see what was going on our hull, and.....I thought the...supposed to be *safe!!*.....*SHHHH*.....face....they can't inside here....can't...."

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The log ended. “Captain Seth, there is only a biohazard suit left inside. There is no body inside of it,” said Commander Ariele.

“Great, we have more questions now than before,” said Santiago.

“I’m reading faint traces of everyone’s DNA...well, *all over the place...*” Ariele said. She stepped back trepidatiously. Her hand that held the tricorder was beginning to tremble.

Everything Seth heard and saw left him with greater unease. This planet wasn’t just hostile. Something or someone *hunted* these men. Whatever it was, it was not likely that the people on Draloos IV could depend on these shipments any longer to sustain them. Captain Seth tapped his combadge. “Seth to Lieutenant Commander LeCroy, I want this cargo ship back on *Dragonfly*, and I want you and Dr. Min to go over every centimeter of this ship. I want a full report when you are finished. We’re not getting any answers by us just looking at it.”

“Understood,” LeCroy responded.

“Seth out.” Seth turned to Santiago and Ariele, with a look of deep concern etched in his face. “I think we need to come up with an evacuation plan.”

Chapter 16

Counselor Jenovia spent a great deal of time at the largest hospital in the city on Draloos IV. She started there because she at least had some basic medical training that could be useful. Lieutenant Commander Thorn was busy overlooking the city's security forces. It was quite a task for both of them. It was a city of two million, and the city was largely chaotic. Both of them had very little to work with. It was a wonder that these people had survived for so long on their own.

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Humanitarian work was one of Jenovia's greatest pleasures; she never considered it work. Prior to joining the Starfleet Academy over ten years ago, she spent three years on a humanitarian relief mission on New Romulus to help rebuild their school system. She was only fifteen, and it wasn't exactly her intention at the time, but it was a major turning point in her life. The Romulans essentially had to build from scratch after their homeworld was destroyed. She worked tirelessly to teach the young children basic reading and mathematical skills, something that had become somewhat of a luxury on the broken world. Jenovia understood full well what the people of Draloos IV were going through, because she saw it first hand on New Romulus. She may not have the telepathic or even empathic abilities that other species have, but she didn't need them to know when an individual, or an entire civilization, was in pain.

The hospital didn't look like a hospital at all. In fact, all of the windows were blocked off and further protected by force fields. It looked more like an abandoned administrative building that they just used as a hospital. It was low on rooms, so there was a large hallway that was used where they squeezed nearly a hundred beds. Nearly all of them were occupied with injured patients. It looked more like an emergency room. Jenovia decided that this was a good place to start.

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Hours had passed as Jenovia continued to perform basic medical procedures, like taking care of small open flesh wounds, cuts and lacerations, ankle sprains, dislocated joints, and sometimes broken bones. Most of these conditions didn't necessarily require the full attention of a medical doctor, many of which were busy doing major surgeries. Jenovia took a Federation tissue regenerator and was working on her twelfth patient. It was a young girl who had suffered a deep laceration in her forearm. The tissue regenerator started blipping on and off, and soon just died in her hand. "*Damn, that's the third one today,*" she blurted in frustration. "*Doesn't anything work around here?*" The little girl just stared at her in confusion. "Hold on, OK? I'm going to get another tissue regenerator."

When she came back, she tried to make conversation with the girl. "So what happened to you?"

"Nothing..."

"Come on, you can tell me."

"*Well...* I was playing in the yard, when I tripped onto some rocks. One of them was *really* sharp."

"That sounds like it must have hurt."

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“You have really pretty eyes,” the girl said to her. “How come they are so yellow?”

“That’s just the way I come,” Jenovia replied. “Just like you come with your eyes brown.”

“I wish *I* had yellow eyes...” she replied. Jenovia smiled. It was little comments like that made her enjoy her work so much.

“Do you think I could explore the stars, just like you?” the little girl asked.

“I don’t see why not. You can do anything you want.”

“*Wow...a Starfleet officer...I’m going to make sure I study hard to get into Starfleet!*”

“I’m sure your parents would be very proud of you to hear you say that.”

“My parents are dead,” she said, with chilling candor that only a child could pull off.

Jenovia looked at her and stopped what she was doing, almost reflexively. “I’m sorry to hear that. Do you live with guardians? In an orphanage, maybe?”

“I live in an orphanage...”

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“I see...And do they educate you? And take care of you?”

“Oh yeah, I’m learning something called *algebra*...”

“You’re just learning algebra *now*? But you’re already seven years old!” The little girl had a confused look on her face, as if wondering if she had done something wrong. “Look, I’m sorry. You’re all fixed up now. How are you feeling?”

She giggled. “I feel fine. Thanks, green lady!”

Jenovia moved over to try and help some of the other patients. She needed to set up several I.V. drips for the near hundred patients that occupied the room. Jenovia went to help a woman who had lost her leg during an attack in her neighborhood. She also had a patch on her eye. She was severely dehydrated and was suffering from malnutrition.

“We’ve healed the wound on her leg with standard Federation medical tools,” a nurse said, muffled as she talked through her mask. “But I’m afraid we are not able to give her a new leg. Limb regeneration is just not possible here. We can’t even give her an artificial one. All we have are simple, archaic devices.” The nurse showed Jenovia what looked like basic, mechanical sticks. Far from what anyone would call a leg.

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“Maybe we can have our ship’s doctor take a look. In the meantime, that should suffice for now. But it looks like it still requires some basic surgery for it to be...um, *installed*.”

“We don’t want to trouble your doctor. This is not an isolated incident. He would have to work around the clock to help thousands in this hospital alone.”

“Why don’t you let me worry about that. I will contact him as soon as the *Dragonfly* returns from their visit to Draloos V. It may take some time, but most everyone here is in stable condition, at least for now.”

“We are so appreciative,” the nurse said. “Thank you.”

Jenovia could see that even the nurse was not all well. “How about you? Are you OK?”

“Yes, why do you ask?”

“I can see that you have a slight fever,” Jenovia said. Her species’ field of vision included part of the infrared spectrum, so Jenovia could detect a slight change in body temperature in others. In fact, she noticed this among several individuals around the hospital. Her temperature was just slightly above normal.

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“It’s just a mild flu,” she said. “I think something’s going around. It’s why I’m wearing this mask, so I don’t infect the others.”

“You shouldn’t be here then. You should be at home resting.”

“Maybe after my shift.” The nurse smiled. She spent most of her day taking care of everyone else; it was rare to have someone ask about her.

“I understand,” Jenovia replied. It was important that the nurses were taken care of as well, otherwise they would be useless in being able to help out the patients. Jenovia took incredible pride in being sensitive to others. But just when she was feeling good about herself, the ground of the hospital shook beneath her feet.

People looked around to try and determine what had been happening. Jenovia got up and approached one of the security guards that was assigned to guard the hospital. The hospital shook again, and she nearly lost her footing.

“Officer Jeffery, isn’t it? Do you have any idea what’s happening here?”

“Ma’am, it would be safer if you returned to where you were. We have the situation well under control,” he responded.

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“Yes, but *what is the situation?* Are we under attack? Does this area frequently have earthquakes? Is there major construction going on that we don’t know about?”

“I said we have the situation under control. There’s no need to panic,” he said more forcefully. But to Jenovia, it was clear that he was flat out lying. She could tell that even before she came to him that he was just as apprehensive as she was. Face sweat. Wandering eyes. Nervous twitches.

“Surely, you must have some idea...” she tested further.

“*Ma’am, I won’t repeat myself...*”

“No, sir, *you listen to me,*” she said, sounding increasingly impatient. “I am here on behalf of the United Federation of Planets on a humanitarian mission. But I can’t help you if I am being intentionally kept in the dark on matters of urgency. If we are under attack or if there’s an earthquake, then we may be better off moving these patients to a safer location.”

The security guard was caught off guard. His face was really starting to sweat now, not in a visually obvious way, but she could detect a small change in skin temperature and literally smell the sweat beading on his skin. His eyes looked to the ground, lost, unable to make eye contact with her anymore. At this point, it occurred to Jenovia that this security guard had absolutely no idea what was

happening. He only stood there because those were his orders and he was told to keep everyone calm. His job was only to guard the door. “Ma’am, please...return to your designated area. We will let you know if and when it is necessary to move the patients.” The hospital shook yet again as he said it, and this time it was more intense. This time he ducked and looked around like a frightened puppy. This time, there was no hiding it.

Jenovia stood there and glared at him. Without even saying a word, the guard understood that this woman knew that he knew nothing. She folded her arms and continued to stare in a manner that was deep and piercing. Without even whispering a word, she was telling him that even though he didn’t know, *he should get off of his ass and find out*. He succumbed to her and quickly turned around, unable to face her, and opened his communicator. “Jeffrey to Rogers,” he whispered. “Can you tell me what the hell is going on here? We’ve got frightened people.”

“Please stand by.” The officer stared back at Jenovia, as if to tell her, *‘See? There’s nothing I can do.’*

Jenovia just turned around and started heading back. *Useless*, she thought. She would have to figure this out herself. She pulled out her tricorder from her belt. Like the medical tricorder, the normal tricorder looked more like a small,

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skinnier hand-held PADD. It was transparent, as if made of glass. She activated the tricorder and a sketch of the hospital immediately appeared on the screen. She scanned for life signs, which littered the screen with little red dots, since they were packed with so many patients. The readings showed no signs of an earthquake. She flipped through the different floors on the tricorder screen to see if there was anything unusual going on, but it soon became apparent that she couldn't see anything from a two-dimensional standpoint. She set the expanded tricorder onto a small table. She then adjusted the settings to give her a three-dimensional view of the entire building. A sketch popped above the screen.

“Computer, is the building equipped with Federation surveillance devices?”

“Affirmative. Five Type I surveillance devices are detected within a one hundred meter radius. Visual feed and bioscans only.”

“Tie in all available sensory information from those surveillance systems and add visual detail.” Miniaturized human beings colored in red against a blue transparent outline of the building were scattered all over each of the floors. Jenovia walked around the table to try and get a good look from multiple viewpoints.

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The building shook yet again. But this time her tricorder was taking readings. “Computer, can you determine the origin of the building’s vibrations?” The tricorder highlighted the main floor of the building, specifically the left wing entrance of the hospital. She began to notice a small group of people clustered around that area, maybe fifteen people. Two of them were banging their shoulders against the door, as if trying to break in, but couldn’t. There should have been two security guards in that location. *What is everybody doing there?* “Expand the view of the left of the wing of the hospital,” she ordered the tricorder.

The little red life signatures grew in size and showed more detail of the people that crowded the entrance. She could now see that there were two human beings that were on the ground unconscious. “Can you show the vital signs of the individuals that you have shown here?” Little numbers and heart monitors from the bioscans appeared on top of all of the individuals. The heart monitor on top of the two security guards showed that *they were dead*.

A wave of fear washed over her that stopped her dead in her tracks. Something was very wrong. She could see the ground around the door was carved out somewhat, a sign that an explosive had been in the vicinity. *That’s what those*

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vibrations were, she thought. She saw another one of the men put down another device again near the door. They looked determined to get through the door.

She collapsed the view on the tricorder to the normal size so that she could see the rest of the main floor. Most of the other entrances were blocked off with multiple security guards on stand alert. She could see that there were several other security guards rushing towards the left wing entrance. The building was in lockdown. She decided that they were all in trouble and that she needed help, but she obviously couldn't rely on the security teams that were designated at the hospital. She would need to call in real help.

She quickly hit her combadge. "Jenovia to Lieutenant Commander Thorn," she cried.

"*Thorn, here,*" he said, in his robotic voice.

"We have a problem," she said. "It looks like there are some terrorists who are trying to break into the hospital."

"*We were just alerted to that. But we've been busy putting out fires all over the city. There are break-ins and burglary attempts everywhere. I will bring a team to your location. What is your situation? How many are there?*"

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“I don’t know, maybe fifteen. It looks like they are trying to break in through the left wing.”

“Are you armed?”

“I have my phaser. Other than that, just the standard security forces here. And quite frankly, I don’t think they’re very capable of handling a situation like this.”

“We will be there in five minutes. Get everyone to a secure location.”

“Please hurry...” she whispered. Jenovia turned around after Security Officer Jeffrey had tapped her shoulder from behind. He had a frightened look on his face, most likely after overhearing her conversation with Lieutenant Commander Thorn. *“So...can you tell me what’s going on?”*

Jenovia sighed when she realized that she would have to look out for this little boy, too. She could smell it long before he came to tap her shoulder. Officer Jeffrey had wet his pants.

Chapter 17

Lieutenant Commander Thorn was busy preparing to meet Counselor Jenovia at the hospital. He definitely sensed urgency in her voice, which called for a little expediency. He organized a small team of five, including himself. But before he left, he realized he needed a bit more information. Better he knew everything now while he could still stock up on supplies. He punched his combadge. “Thorn to Counselor Jenovia.”

“Jenovia here,” she responded.

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“I need you to tell me more about the nature of the terrorists. What kind of weapons do they have?”

“It looks like they are using old-generation Federation Type II phasers. They’ve already shot down most of the security guards.”

“Type II phasers? The old-generation ones?”

“It was really the only weapons that Starfleet could spare,” Jenovia told him.

Perhaps that was a good thing, Thorn thought. Those things are obsolete. “They must have stolen them from the security forces,” Thorn concluded. He just looked at one of the security officers, who just stared at the ground, clearly guilty and embarrassed. “What kind of defenses do they have? Are they well protected?”

“It doesn’t look like it. They have padding for basic body protection, but most of their clothes are raggedy.”

“Good. Now how many patients are there at the hospital?”

“I can’t be sure at the moment, but just in this room, there are a hundred patients, a few nursing staff, and a medical administrator. There are many other

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individual rooms with patients in them, as well as physicians that are performing surgery right now.”

“Is there a safer location you can move everyone?”

“I’m not familiar enough with the building. I’ll have to take a look around and get back to you.”

“Sit tight, Counselor, we’re on our way.”

Jenovia was beginning to get nervous. How the hell was she going to move a hundred patients? And to where? There was nowhere else to go. The only way to protect themselves was to set up some sort of blockade in that room. What did these terrorists want? Why attack a hospital with little or no value?

She decided that it was time to get some answers from the medical administrator, who happened to be nearby trying to calm some of the nurses. *“Excuse me...”* she started. The man turned. “I am Counselor Jenovia, from the *Dragonfly*.”

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“Ah yes, Counselor. Dr. Ivey, the hospital administrator. I’ve been meaning to welcome you to the hospital. I wish we could have met under some better circumstances. Unfortunately, we have very little control of what goes on here.”

“I understand. There are a few things I would like to know so that I can better inform the security team that’s coming here. Has this happened before? Who are these men?”

“We don’t know exactly. We call them ‘terrorists,’ for lack of a better word, but they have no official name or organization. They have never resorted to explosives before.”

“What do these people want?”

The hospital shook again, and now they could hear phaser fire in the distance and people screaming. He sounded very frustrated, like he had been through this a dozen times before. “These guys usually come here wanting medical supplies. They take basic things: bandages, hyposprays, antiseptics, tissue regenerators, medical tricorders, all of that stuff. Usually, it involves only a few men.”

“And you just let them take them?”

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“We are generally unarmed. We can’t defend ourselves. We’ve pleaded to the police station in the city’s capital, and they’ve posted a few officers to help guard us, but they are only occasionally successful in fending them off. They are almost always under-staffed.”

“They don’t look particularly well-trained either.”

“Just between you and me, they’re useless. But Jerad is trying to change that. He finds the situation intolerable and is sending more and more security guards to help us. But his hands are always full. He has trouble keeping the city under control.”

“Do they usually hurt people?”

“Sometimes.”

“Who are they?”

“I told you, we don’t know. Our feeling is that they are just ordinary citizens who can’t afford basic healthcare.”

“You have armed citizens attacking hospitals?”

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“They’re people who have nothing now. We don’t exactly have social programs to help them. And now, with rumor that the biomatter shipments have been halted, the number of them will be growing wildly.”

“Alright,” Jenovia said in restrained frustration. “Where do you store these supplies? I assume that’s where they are targeting.”

“In that storage room over there.”

Jenovia felt a slight chill run through her spine. She was hoping that they would hold everything in a basement or something. A place *far away* from where they all were. “So it’s inevitable. They’ll be coming near this very room.”

“Something’s wrong,” Dr. Ivey said with some trepidation. There was something that distracted him. “How many men did you say there were?”

“Fifteen.”

“Something’s not right. Usually they only commit a few men, no more than four.”

“*Four?!?*”

“Yes, that’s right.”

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“What are you suggesting that means?”

“I’m not sure...” he answered. “They must want something else.”

Chapter 18

Thorn and his security team of five were nearing the hospital. Thorn could see that the terrorist soldiers were already inside the hospital. He stopped the others for a moment. He could see the interior of the hospital. “Thorn to Jenovia,” he said. “Can you give me visual feed?”

“Yes, Lieutenant Commander,” she replied. “Just hold on.”

He could see all ten terrorists running through the halls of the hospital. Many of them were firing their phasers at security guards and hospital personnel, but

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overall, they appeared inexperienced and disorganized. Besides their own phasers, they brought little else.

“Everyone get through around the back and meet up with Jenovia and the others. I can take care of this myself,” he said to his team.

Thorn got up and moved quickly through the entrance that the terrorists had entered. He was nearing an entrance where roughly half of the terrorists were, pointing their phasers at the security guards. Thorn rolled a small round spherical object from his belt into the center of the room. It caught the attention of the terrorists and it made a series of quick flashes. They seemed momentarily stunned, but what they saw afterwards caught them by surprise even more. The small sphere began to ‘leak’ blackness that quickly started spreading all over the room. It began spreading over their bodies like a black ink, and they squirmed as they tried to make sense of what was happening. They began to panic. In desperation, they tried scratching it off, but with no avail. That was because there was nothing there; it was an illusion. Blackness soon covered the entire room. They were all now paralyzed with fear. It was really just a stun grenade, but one specially made by Thorn, with a twist of Breen cruelty.

Thorn walked across the room, lit normally from his point of view, unaffected by his own weapon. He saw their frozen, paralyzed bodies standing there in

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awkward body positions, twitching in fear and their pupils dilated and cloudy from the weapon's effects. *This was a joke*, Thorn thought to himself. He began to follow the path that the others had walked. These individuals will eventually fall unconscious as the effects culminate into a full panic attack, and they find themselves unable to breathe.

“Frank to Morie,” one of the communication said, “Come in.” Nothing. “Damn it, guys, quit wasting time. We’ve secured most of the floor here. Do you guys copy?”

Thorn grabbed the communicator and tried using it to triangulate the position of the other members of the group.

“Guys, we have a problem. Looks like something happened to the others. Everyone stand guard,” he said to someone else over the communicator.

Thorn came across a hallway that separated him and the rest of the group. But it was guarded by three of the terrorists, two on one end and one on the other. He couldn't get near the entrance of the hall because they faced outwardly. There was no other way around; he would have to confront them.

The lone guard stood there quietly. He heard a whisper behind him. Already jittery, he jumped and turned around with his phaser pointed. All he saw were the

backs of the other two guards all of the way down on the other end of the hall. Suddenly, he felt his arms locked from behind and another set of arms reaching around his neck, grabbing him in a headlock. He saw quick flashes come from the hands and immediately he was out. He collapsed in Thorn's arms, unconscious.

The two terrorists on the other end of the hallway quickly turned around from the noise, and fired their phasers at Thorn. But Thorn saw this coming; he put his left arm in front of himself and before the phaser fire could touch him it dissipated through miniature crystalline-shield that erected from his forearm. Thorn then instantaneously raised his right hand, and what could only be described as 'metallic-tubes' snaked out from his artificial forearm, and connected in his hand to form his phaser. Almost as quickly as Thorn had raised his arm, the phaser had fired two simultaneous shots at the terrorists and both fell instantly to the ground. The phaser snaked back into his arm.

Thorn was now moving closer to Jenovia's location. He only had to move around a few more corners, and he was there. No more terrorists in the vicinity.

"Lieutenant!" Jenovia cried. "I'm glad you were able to find us."

"It was not a problem. The terrorists were untrained."

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“Even so, you could have gotten hurt. I couldn’t believe you took them by yourself.”

“I appreciate the concern. But they were no threat to me.”

“I’m glad.”

“Did they ever get near any of you?”

“Not yet...at the moment they’re more interested in taking out the security guards and securing the hospital. I was told by the medical administrator that typically they barge into this hospital for medical supplies.”

“We will need to secure the storage room as well them. The hospital should not allow them to take what they want,” Thorn said, looking straight at the medical administrator.

“It is their habit to let them take the supplies,” Jenovia told him.

“That’s unacceptable,” he said icily.

“Thorn, the administrator tells me that they may be ordinary citizens who have nowhere else to go to get help.”

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“Then they should devise a better system to let the people have them,” Thorn said, with his cold robotic voice. *“By allowing this behavior to continue, people are going to get hurt.”* It was hard to argue with that point.

“How many of them did you take out?”

“Ten.”

Jenovia couldn't help but be impressed, but then again, she wouldn't expect anything less from a Breen officer. “That means there are about five more of them. Where do you suppose they are?”

“My scans are telling me that they're scattered. Two of them are looking at their unconscious colleagues, and three of them are shooting down the other security guards. They're trying to establish a foothold in the hospital, but they're disorganized.”

“You should be able to control the situation then? Everyone here is scared...”

Thorn noticed something disturbing by the hospital entrance. There was a large movement of red dots on his tricorder coming from the left wing of the hospital. It looked like at least *twenty* more of them. According to his readings, they also brought Type III phaser rifles. They began flooding through the entrance of the hospital. *“Maybe not,”* Thorn said. *“They've brought reinforcements.”*

Chapter 19

Captain Seth sat in his quarters, reviewing the cargo ship's logs over and over again to try and extract *something* that could be useful to him. Who or what could have been behind these attacks? A large, hungry animal? A poisonous reptile? A humanoid species that couldn't be detected by their sensors? If he couldn't figure it out, then there was almost no way that he could help restore the cargo shipments to Draloos IV. He might as well just tell the *Excelsior* to start evacuating

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immediately. But that was exactly what Santiago wanted to hear, and there was no way that Seth would give him that satisfaction.

Seth was tiring of just staring at the logs; he was getting absolutely nowhere. The information given away by the logs were just too fragmented and cryptic. He would realistically have to wait for Dr. Min and Chief LeCroy to uncover more clues before he could even begin to hypothesize what went on down on the surface. He needed a break, a distraction of sorts, to help re-orient his mind. Almost conveniently, he heard the door chime. He turned slowly, and saw that it was Ensign Ester by the door. “Come in,” he said.

“Am I disturbing something, captain?” she asked.

“Not at all. What can I do for you, Ensign?”

“Well, captain, I....” Before she could even finish her sentence, she was immediately drawn to something in his quarters. “What is *that*?”

She was staring at the captain’s fish. It was a frightful water creature that had extremely long and sharp teeth and a long, dart-like body. Its bottom teeth jetted out further than its top teeth. The top of the fish was dark red, but the bottom was a shimmering silver.

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“You don’t want to get near that,” he teased. Under normal circumstances, that might have been true, since in its typical habitat it would eat at an unsuspecting human. It was not large enough to maim the human, but it could remove a small chunk of flesh from a limb. And it wouldn’t stop at that.

“Is it *swimming in mid-air*?” asked Ester. Indeed, that’s exactly what it looked like. She could still see the water that it was swimming in, but at the same time, there was no glass that contained the water. The water was also quite clean and clear, so it was barely visible. From far away, it really did look like the fish was swimming in mid-air, and that at any moment it would swim towards you and bite you.

“Well, that’s just what it looks like.” He took his hand, and gestured as if to pet the creature. He could see Ensign’s look of nervousness as his hand got closer. He then swiped his hand at the creature. It went right through it. She giggled.

“A hologram?”

“Of sorts, yes, but there really is a fish. The fish tank is below, where you can’t really see it. The tank is surrounded by lenses that take images of the fish and water from all angles, the information is then transferred, and the images are projected up here. This way I don’t ever really have to come in contact with the

dangerous creature. Plus, it gives the nice illusion that it's swimming in mid-air." The fish made the motion of a sharp bite, and Ester jumped.

Seth took out a small fish to feed it. He opened a small door on the side of the real fish tank, and dropped the little fish into it. It suddenly appeared on the top, the two could see the large fish quickly nab the little one and swallow it. Ester was thrilled. *The merchant was right, Seth thought, girls love it.*

"A little interesting toy I picked up on one of my missions on the *U.S.S. Chicago*."

"You will have to tell me where to get one of these tanks..." she said with amusement.

"So what can I do for you Ensign? I'm going to assume that you didn't stop by my quarters just so that you could look at my fish."

"Dr. Min wanted me to ask your permission to take samples of some of these organisms on Draloos V to assist him with his study. He needs them to help him figure out exactly what killed the men, and to determine exactly what we're up against. He will be transporting a number of them from the surfaces directly into containment fields. He promises that all of the species will be appropriately quarantined. When he's finished, he will safely return them to the planet."

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“Does he really think that’s wise?” Ester only looked to the ground. Seth wasn’t really asking her. But it was something that he had to seriously consider; he did not want whatever happened on the surface to happen on his ship. But on the other, it may be the only way that Dr. Min can get some answers. Seth was a little surprised that Dr. Min didn’t ask him himself. “Since when did you become the messenger?” Seth asked her.

“He and Chief LeCroy were busy with work on the cargo ship. I wanted to be helpful.”

“You can tell him that I will approve it, assuming he follows the strictest of safety protocols. I will pay him a visit to tell him myself,” Seth instructed.

“Captain, I’m sorry about what happened on the surface...” she whimpered, looking at the ground as she said it. She seemed embarrassed that she let herself become the victim.

“Don’t worry about it, it wasn’t your fault. You were being attacked. Just be glad that you were all right. Dr. Min said that you were starting to go into shock.”

“I should have been more careful. I just...I just haven’t been on many away missions.”

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“Look, don’t be too hard on yourself...the *Dragonfly* is your first assignment,” Seth said, trying to be encouraging. Although, he realized that this was an aspect of command that he needed to work on. He grew up learning to take care of things himself, so he didn’t think it should be any different for anybody else.

“I went to Dr. Min’s office and I saw what happened to the crewmen. I couldn’t stop thinking about what happened to those men. They...were *mutilated*.”

”I know. We may be dealing with a very hostile life form. Perhaps many. We just need to be careful.”

“Do you think we’ll be able to restore the cargo shipments with this life form around?”

“I don’t know, ensign. I’m here to try.”

Seth was starting to tire of all of the questions. But he supposed that it wasn’t entirely unusual for such a junior officer to be very curious about every little detail of the mission. But Seth didn’t have time to babysit her and entertain her questions all day. “Look, ensign...”

“Do you think Jerad can be trusted? Especially after what Jenovia said about him?”

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Seth's ears perked up. "What did she say about Jerad?"

Oops, Ester thought. She thought that Jenovia had already talked to the captain. "...Oh, it was before we left her on the surface of Draloos IV. I was playing with her and the children, but actually she was watching Jerad from a distance."

"...And?"

"Well, she mentioned to me that she got the suspicion that Jerad was a practiced liar." Seth felt his stomach turn a little. "She thought that he was one of those people who speak with clarity and confidence, but do that only for show. She said his pulse rate jumped a little every time your eyes looked in a specific direction, almost like there was something that didn't necessarily want you to see. She just felt that she couldn't trust him. But she wasn't a hundred percent sure, and didn't want to start accusing him on the spot. She wanted to learn more about the planet before she came to a definitive conclusion, which is partly why she asked to remain there. Or at least, that's what she told me..."

"I see..." Seth said. He wished Jenovia had consulted him about it first. But she was right; bringing it up on the planet might have seemed accusatory.

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“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to rat her out...I thought that she had already talked to you,” she said regretfully.

“Don’t worry about it. In fact, I am glad you said something. In regards to Jerad, I’m sure it’s nothing. It’s natural for people to be apprehensive when faced with a difficult situation. But you’ve given me reason to look at the facts more closely, and I appreciate that. Dr. Min and Lieutenant Commander LeCroy are turning over every rock to find out what’s going on. I am confident that they’ll be able to uncover the truth.”

“Yes, sir, I understand. Thank you, captain,” she replied, feeling a bit more at ease. “I feel better.”

Seth gave her a nod. “You’re dismissed.”

After she had left his quarters, Seth looked back at his fish, which now looked a little bloated after engulfing the smaller fish that he fed to it. He only wished that *he* believed what he just told his ensign. *Well, Dr. Min and Lieutenant Commander LeCroy...the mission rests on you.*

Chapter 20

Lieutenant Commander LeCroy and Dr. Min were in the largest shuttlebay, examining one of the broken cargo ships that they had dragged up from the surface of Draloos V using the tractor beams of two shuttlecrafts. They tried to leave everything as it was when they removed it, but that meant most of the toxic chemicals that laced the cargo ship were still there and major precautions would have to be taken. For one, both LeCroy and Min had to approach the shuttlecraft using their SA's, which they found to be quite fun.

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“Well, whatever brought down the cargo ship isn’t here anymore,” LeCroy said.

“It looks to me like the cargo was removed *after* it crashed,” replied Min.

“But removed by what? We’re talking about mostly vegetation here.”

“And from the latest logs, the doors were locked by that last crewmember.”

LeCroy felt an immediate kinship with Dr. Min. Perhaps it was because they were collaborating on the BX-12 project, or maybe it was because they both had an affinity for nerdy subjects. Or maybe, it was because he understood so well how people like Dr. Min could be so completely absorbed into their work. “Let me ask you something,” LeCroy said. “What are your thoughts on the captain?”

“*Young...*” Min immediately said.

“My thoughts exactly.”

“I don’t doubt his abilities or intelligence. But he’s half-baked. It takes a certain amount of experience and hardship before you can properly lead a crew. He needs at least another five or six years.”

“I’ll be perfectly honest, I have never had a good experience with a *Red Squad* graduate,” the Chief said, smirking as he said it. “Worse, Starfleet and the media shower them with attention because their *Red Squad*, feeding their egos even more.”

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“You shouldn’t be ashamed of your credentials just because you were an ordinary cadet back in the day. You’ve accomplished great things. You even have a Ph.D. in engineering from Cambridge, if I’m not mistaken.”

LeCroy nodded, still paying close attention to his tricorder readings. But it occurred to him that maybe that was why they got along so well: they were both doctors.

“You have a name for yourself. That’s more than most *Red Squad*-ers, I might add, which is usually all they have. The *Red Squad* title.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean to give the impression that I was jealous,” LeCroy replied.

“Regarding Captain Seth, I like the guy, but I seriously have doubts that he’ll be able to make the right decision when the time comes. Like Santiago, he’s just too young, and too emotional. They’re both still adolescent boys,” Min said.

“You’re talking about that ridiculous race?”

“If you need an example...yes, absolutely.”

“Well, Admiral Roth made him the captain, and he deserves at least a chance.”

“You’ll get no argument from me. I’m not here to plan a mutiny.”

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Min couldn't help but notice LeCroy's slight slouch. But he didn't have a hump or anything. His back was actually quite straight, but he had a tendency to bend forward at the hip, always seemingly carrying a tricorder in his hands. It made Min cringe just slightly, because that kind of posture was never tolerated on Vulcan. Min's posture was near perfect. "You know, it's not good for your lower back to bend forward like that."

LeCroy sharply tilted his head towards Min. "So I've been told," he said, moving his attention back towards the shuttlecraft.

"It doesn't hurt?"

"I was born this way. My lower spine has always been...*abnormal*."

"I can probably fix it for you. My surgical techniques are quite advanced..."

"Thank you, Doctor, but I'm fine, really," LeCroy said, with a hint of annoyance. "I've been told to 'fix it' throughout my life."

"I didn't mean to imply that there was something wrong with you..."

"Yes, I know. There's no need to explain yourself."

"I just thought you'd be a little more comfortable, that's all."

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“Thank you, Doctor. But I *am* comfortable.”

Min decided not to press further. Clearly, LeCroy had received numerous lectures about this before. In fact, it was likely that his parents and school teachers yelled at him for this as a young child. Quirkiness aside, LeCroy was a very well-respected individual. Min couldn't help but wonder whether it was his brilliance that caused him to behave so strangely, or whether it was his strangeness that drove him to greatness. Either way, LeCroy was LeCroy. And brilliance was brilliance.

“Sickbay to Dr. Min,” the comm system interrupted.

Min tapped his combadge. “Dr. Min here.”

“Sir, your shipments of alien species from Draloos V have arrived in your laboratory. Each one has been quarantined in an appropriately sized containment field. They are ready for your inspection.”

“Understood. I'll be there shortly.” LeCroy could see a certain amount of excitement in Min's eyes when his medical staff told him that his shipment was here. Min was just making his way out, when he realized he'd be leaving LeCroy to himself. “Hey, are you going to be alright without me?”

“Yes, yes, I will be fine, I can take it from here. Go to your lab.”

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“Alright, well, if you see anything unusual let me know. You’ll know where I’ll be.” Min’s SA deactivated and his image dissolved, leaving behind the SA skeleton just standing there. LeCroy turned around to see what was inside the cargo ship, which might have some clues as to what attacked the ship.

And then something leaped from the cargo ship onto LeCroy’s chest.

Chapter 21

Min reveled at his laboratory, which was filled with species he had collected from Draloos V. He had also collected the biohazard-suits that had been left on the planet, with the remains of Lieutenant Ray and a few others. For hours throughout the day he had been studying and documenting everything he could find on the species. He was eager to put all of the pieces together once he had collected enough data. First and foremost, Dr. Min was a physician, and most of the time he followed standard medical protocol. It was not often that he was confronted with a true puzzle and had the opportunity to be a scientist.

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There were dozens of specimens in his laboratory. Everything that he sampled was found near the empty biohazard-suits and the crash site. This included insects, spiders, weeds, grass, tree samplings, lizards, and things that Dr. Min couldn't even describe, because there was no term in existence to describe it. Each of them stood in isolation from the rest of the room, in a clear plastic-like cube that was appropriate for their size. Though he had worked with the most unusual and deadly species before during his studies in exobiology, Min was still a little apprehensive about what he would find here. It was likely that *every* species here was deadly in some way. Though he loved to study exobiology, he didn't love it *so* much as to lose his life over it.

Hours had passed as he examined each and every one of the species. These were organisms that he had never seen before, and he documented their abilities carefully. Although some bore a striking resemblance to creatures on Earth, many had a genetic twist that made them hideously lethal, or, have a remarkable defense mechanism to protect itself. The possible medical therapeutics, or even bioengineering ideas that could be derived from this planet would be too numerous to count.

About halfway through his studies, he came across one specimen that caught his eye. It was a large, spider-like organism. It had eight legs, eight *long* legs, but it

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only had a single body. It was really rather quite chubby. The entire body was a pale yellow color, and actually a little transparent so that you could see many of the different cells inside it. The texture of the skin looked soft, and a thin mucous layer covered its body. It didn't look like it had fangs, or even a mouth for that matter. From visual inspection alone, it was hard to tell if it had any sensory organs whatsoever. But it was hard to imagine how an organism without a sophisticated sensory nervous system could survive an ecosystem like Draloos V.

Dr. Min looked at his watch. It was 0006. He had already worked on this for fourteen hours straight, and his mind was beginning to tire. He still had other things to do, most especially organize his findings at his desk, so he decided to call it quits for the night and wait until tomorrow to finish. It looked rather harmless anyway, walking around rather clumsily, so it was highly doubtful that it was this organism that was responsible for the crew's deaths. That was his primary assignment. Besides, he had his suspicions on another species. Min yawned and made his way to his office to finish his paperwork.

The next morning, Dr. Min walked into sickbay with an extra large cup of coffee in his hand. He had always tried to start the day before 0700 hours each morning, but the exhausting work that he did the previous night caused him to

walk in several minutes late that morning. His plan was to investigate the last specimen that he had left last night, but not before he finished his coffee, and not before finishing his usual morning reading of *Starfleet Medical News*.

When he walked into the lab, he immediately noticed something unusual. *The organism had multiplied.* There were now eight. It must have reproduced. He looked at his watch. It had been about eight hours since he looked at them last the previous night. If the growth was exponential, that roughly translates to a doubling nearly every three or so hours. They weren't walking around though like the one had previously done, instead they flattened on the surface of the container and their legs appeared to be interconnected. The surface of their bodies appeared darker, hardened, and protected. All eight were flashing in unison.

Dr. Min began to notice the manner in which the organisms were flashing. It didn't have any discernable pattern, and yet it seemed oddly familiar. Min could not put his finger on it. Where had he seen that pattern of flashing before? Maybe it was just too early in the morning, and he was seeing things. He turned around to see if there was anything else that was flashing. He noticed that Dr. Zable, his medical assistant, was using a medical tricorder in the distance on another patient. A tiny blue light on the tricorder was flashing in the same (and seemingly

random) manner as the organism was flashing. *The organism was mimicking the flashing of the medical tricorder.*

This meant two things to Dr. Min. One, the organism *did* have a way sensing visual stimuli, even though it was only responding to something very simple. Two, by mimicking it, it suggested that the organism was somehow ‘aware’ of its environment. Min didn’t see this at all when he looked at the lone organism the day before. He decided not to make too much of it for the time being. He needed more information. He decided that he would come back with tests that measured basic intelligence, like scientists on Earth had done with dolphins, monkeys, and the like. He needed to do some basic research before really concluding anything. In the meantime, it looked a little crowded in the container with all eight of them in there, and maybe it was time to give them a little more room.

“Computer, expand the containment field of Species DV-72 by twenty-five percent.” The plastic-like cube stretched out a little further. The specimens didn’t like the disturbance very much and had to readjust their connections to accommodate the added space. *It looked almost like a cluster of neurons*, he thought. So intelligence may not at all be out of the question. He began to run the multiplicity effects in his head if and when the specimen number reached a certain level. There may very well be a ‘critical mass’ in which the number of these

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organisms reach a certain level that would allow him to see some sort of emergent properties, like problem-solving abilities, behavior, and even *consciousness*.

The idea of an intelligence brewing in his lab was unnerving to Dr. Min, because it would enormously complicate the situation that his captain was facing. But the more he thought about it, the more it made sense that an intelligent life was at work. Unfortunately, to Min, there was really only one way to find out if what he thought was true: *let them multiply and watch what happens*.

Chapter 22

Several days later, Dr. Min was growing increasingly restless, at least for a man with a Vulcan demeanor. He had just completed his analysis and was ready to discuss what he had learned with Captain Seth. He paced from one end of sickbay to the other, reviewing in his mind what he was going to tell the captain. What he had discovered from his studies of the specimens of Draloos V was both fascinating and frightening. He had no idea what to make of it. One thing was for sure, after the mission was over, Min was going to write several papers in high-end scientific journals, papers that would likely propel him to stardom among the

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scientific community. But he brushed that thought aside. He was still worried about Seth's reaction once Min had explained everything to him.

The sickbay doors hissed open, and Captain Seth marched in. He saw the doctor in the laboratory. "What have you got for me, Doctor? Good news, I hope."

Dr. Min took a deep breath. "Well, I have a mixture of both. I think you're going to want to see most of this for yourself." He led the captain to his laboratory where he kept most of the species. Seth looked very uncomfortable being in the center of so many Draloos V species, given their reputation. "Not to worry, captain, the organisms are in specialized containment fields that look and feel like clear plastic, but the organisms are completely isolated. I use them because I can change their size and shape, and manipulate the inside of the containment without ever exposing it to us or this environment."

"Fair enough."

"There's a lot for me to tell you, captain. What do you want to know first?"

"Well, telling me how the crewmen were killed would be a good place to start."

"Of course. This way, captain," Dr. Min started. "I've determined that the life form responsible for these men's deaths was this species of *tree*." Dr. Min directed him to a small, young sample species that was contained.

“A tree?!”

“It is apparently a highly aggressive carnivorous species. Allow me to demonstrate to you what it is capable of doing.” Dr. Min transported a small gerbil from another container, also from Draloos V, into the container with the tree. But Dr. Min also isolated the small gerbil away from the tree in another small round containment field such that the tree could not physically touch the gerbil. Immediately, the green leaves of the tree, maybe only about twelve total, began flapping, and then released themselves from the branches and launched themselves at the gerbil.

“They look like small butterflies. What are they doing?”

“Watch closely.”

The butterflies paced around the spherical encasement that surrounded the gerbil, without any direct path for them to get to its prey. But the gerbil was nevertheless reacting in pain, and fumes started emanating from its body. It was horrifying to watch. It may have only been a few minutes, but to see the gerbil reacting to such torture felt much longer than that. The body of the gerbil was reduced to a small red smudge on the bottom of the container. The wings of the

butterflies looked plump with blood. They retreated back to the tree and soon the blood-filled veins of the “leaves” faded away as the blood was absorbed by the tree.

“As you can see, captain,” he started, “They have *transporter technology*.”

“*What? How do you mean?*” Seth demanded.

“I mean exactly what it sounds like. They can *transport*.”

“You’re telling me that a *non-humanoid species* has transporter capabilities?” Indeed, it was never heard of in the Federation. Most aliens with transport technology have been humanoids. They either invented it or eventually traded for the technology. Furthermore, it was usually most useful when species wanted to travel across great distances, like in space travel. It was unheard of that a non-humanoid species isolated from other systems would develop the ability to transport.

“When I examined the biohazard-suit,” Dr. Min began, “there was no trauma on the material of any kind. And yet, whatever attacked him, was able to “eat” this officer. This material was designed to protect against corrosive or digestive agents. I could only conclude that the organisms that attacked him were able to transport digestive enzymes *through* the suit. As the body liquefied, they were able to transport it back into their bodies, as demonstrated here.”

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“That’s...incredible....” Maybe *horrific* was a better word. Although he tried not to sound enthusiastic, there were few words to describe the phenomenon he just witnessed. But as he was thinking it, something occurred to him that caused him to take a step back. “*Wait...so doesn’t that mean they can transport out of the containment field and attack us?*”

“Theoretically, they can, but so far they haven’t.”

“*That’s not exactly a satisfactory answer, Doctor.*”

“I’m not exactly sure if they won’t or if they can’t. I just know that so far they *haven’t*. It may have to do with the fact that I always keep their bellies full, and they don’t see a need to find food.”

“I don’t think you need me to tell you that you need to find a way to prevent them from running loose on my ship. I don’t want what happened to the crew of the *Ion* happen around here.”

“Yes, sir,” Min answered. “To see it like this, captain, means that the species has transporter capabilities on a *genetic* level.”

The captain stopped to consider the implications. ”An alien species with the *natural* ability to transport...”

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“The organisms on this planet, captain, also use DNA as the carrier of genetic information,” he said, using the three-dimensional image again to demonstrate. “But they play with a much greater variety of amino acids than the twenty that we use on Earth.”

Seth shrugged. He may have aced all of his biochemistry exams back in the Academy, but that was a subject he had put to bed a long time ago. But from his recollection of his studies, he knew that the implications were significant.

“What that does is allow them to play with a lot more amino acid combination in its proteins. Since they use so many, some of which use elements I’ve never seen incorporated in biological tissue, they can have properties in their proteins not normally found on Earth.”

“Including the ability to transport?”

It was Dr. Min’s turn to shrug. “Possibly, although I would never have guessed it. Take this one as another example.” Dr. Min gestured the captain to look at another container, which looked completely empty. Dr. Min took a pair of tongs and put in a large cricket into the container. It hopped around for a while, trying to feel its environment, and suddenly just stopped in mid-air. *Right in the middle of*

the container. It just sat there, wiggling around every now and then. The captain looked perplexed. *What the hell was it doing?*

Suddenly, the cricket was squeezed and its juices squirted out of its body. “It’s a spider which allows most of the electromagnetic spectrum to run through its body, including its web. Except for ultraviolet, or UV.” He took a lamp and showered the spider with UV rays. It glowed bright purple and the captain could in fact see the spider eating the cricket.

“*A spider with cloaking ability?*” the captain asked.

“In a manner of speaking, yes. Although, I don’t like to use the word *cloak*. It operates in no way like a Klingon *Bird-of-Prey*.”

Using amino acids beyond the typical twenty natural ones as building blocks for their proteins was not unheard of. The term ‘natural’ only implied that they were from Earth, but many species use a completely different set of building blocks to construct their proteins, if they use proteins at all. Even on Earth, as chemistry got more advanced it was quite possible to create new amino acids, and actually build a genetic code that instructs the cell to incorporate them into their proteins. This allowed for them to have unique properties that even surprised the scientists that created them.

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“Could this transportation ability have evolved?” asked Seth.

“I doubt it, but if it could, the advantages to an individual species would be enormous. Any prey that could transport itself away could easily escape its predators, and vice versa. In other words, predators with this ability could easily catch their prey. I have never seen it on any other planet, captain. In fact, that brings me to my next point. This ability, captain, has never been documented or observed in any studies on Draloos V. This Class 3 biohazard-suit was *recommended* by Starfleet when exploring this planet. It was considered safe on this planet before last week.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning, this is a new phenomenon. Something learned, adapted, evolved, I don’t know. But the rate at which lifeforms are evolving and adapting on this planet is much faster than normal Darwinian evolution would predict.”

“You’re saying this transportation ability just...*popped up*?”

“Quite correct, sir. I cannot fathom the possibility that this event, or any of the events that we have observed up until now, have been coincidental. *There must be an intelligent life at work.*”

“So which organism is it? This tree? That’s ridiculous.”

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“No, I believe that there is a ‘master’ organism that is orchestrating everything.” Captain Seth didn’t like the sound of that. “Whatever this life form is, I believe that it can literally synthesize much of what it wants and release it to the environment. Create a genome, tweak a genome, cut and paste whole genes...I can’t think of how else a tree of such sophistication can spring up so quickly, and *with the specific intent of killing individuals protected by a biohazard suit*. It is limited only by the physics, and the time it takes to create them. They must have a sophisticated level of control, some sort of advanced neural system, something that connects the intelligence to the biology, such that they can manipulate it,” Dr. Min explained. “I admit, it is not a very *likely* explanation, I’m just giving you the facts and a *possible* explanation.”

The captain’s face grew more concerned. It was becoming clear that this “master” species had no regard for human life. Seth was right, these men weren’t just killed by some accident, *they were hunted*. And if the species were intelligent, that could have more far-reaching implications than just a few casualties from harvesting operations. They could be a direct threat to the population of Draloos IV. “I have to admit, I wouldn’t expect to hear that kind of far-reaching explanation from you. But we don’t have a lot of time to run a test on every theory that’s out there. If we give your theory the benefit of the doubt, *then we have a real problem*.”

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“One thing is for certain, captain,” Dr. Min began to warn.

“What is that?”

“When it comes to biological warfare, *we are no match.*”

“Do you have any leads to what this species is, Doctor?”

“Follow me.”

Captain Santiago and his Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Monty Centress, transported to the surface of Draloos V from the *Excelsior* where they had previously been with Seth and the others. Or at least, it was their surrogate androids, their SA's, that went to the surface. Santiago decided that he wanted to know more than what Seth was telling him. For one, he wanted to know what was beneath the surface that they had shied away from earlier. And he did not want to tell Seth about what he was doing.

“Here,” Santiago said. “This is where we first blasted a hole into the ground.”

Had it not been for his tricorder, Santiago never would have known the location. The hole had already been covered back up. They fired their phasers in a wide-dispersal pattern at the highest setting, and blasted a huge deep hole in the

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ground, even getting past the massive ‘crust’ that had separated them before. The crust was certainly thick and incredibly tough, but once they got past the outer layer, they immediately recoiled and tried to climb back out of the hole. Dr. Centress lost his footing and was slipping more and more into the hole, and might have fallen in were it not for Santiago.

“*Be careful,*” Santiago told him.

It was dark and damp, but deep within the hole seemed to be an infinitely large but disperse mass of biological tissue, with brief moments of flashing from one area to another. They did *not* want to fall in, even if they were only their SA’s.

Dr. Centress was horrified, and Santiago very concerned. Both of them managed to climb back to the surface, but that didn’t shake their fear. “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.”

“But sir, isn’t this Captain Seth’s miss—“

“I’m *ordering* you to do it...” he began. But having barely finished that last sentence, the hole that they had blasted had already closed up.

Chapter 23

“Well, Captain Seth. Here it is,” Dr. Min said, gesturing to one of the containment fields. “I had to pry one of these organisms off of the chest of LeCroy’s SA earlier.” It was a single organism of the species that Min had been studying. To Seth, it was just a clumsy, slimy, chubby spider. He was not impressed.

“*This* is the deadly intelligent organism that I’m supposed to be worried about?”

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“Bare with me, captain. This is *single* organism. Individually, they’re simple.” Dr. Min showed him an isolated specimen, which appeared rather underwhelming. “Now watch what happens when I put it next to another one of its kind.” He put two of the cubes right next to each other, and let the side that connected them melt away so that two of the creatures could come in contact with each other. The two seemed to recognize each other. The two immediately flattened to the ground and extended each and every one of their legs. Two of their legs began to ‘grow’ towards each other. The two were connected. The outer layer of their bodies began to darken a shade of red and harden, and the center of their bodies began lighting up.

“What are they doing?”

“They are linking with each other, establishing a network. They can communicate with each other, share thoughts, and ideas. Watch what happens when I put it next to a few more.” Dr. Min added several more of the species and watched all of them connect with each other. He then pulled out a blue light and began flashing it several times. The ‘linked’ network began flashing the same number of times as Dr. Min had flashed it. First once, twice, then three times, then four times. “The fact that it can mimic my patterns doesn’t necessarily suggest *intelligence*, but...”

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“It was something not seen by the creature individually.”

“Precisely. By itself, it has its own collection of neurons... a limited ‘brain’, if you call it that, but it’s not extensive enough to do anything significant. It’s just another organism that eats, breathes, reproduces, produces waste, and dies. In terms of intelligence, it’s really no more intelligent than, say, a small canine or a large lizard.”

“Dare I ask, Doctor, what would happen if many *more* were to link together?”

“I think you know where I’m going with this,” Dr. Min replied. He gestured the captain to move to another room, a much larger room. There was a huge curtain that hid something within the room. “Well, captain. I present to you...*the face of your enemy.*”

When he pulled the curtain, he unveiled a container much larger than the earlier one. It must have contained maybe a hundred and fifty or even two hundred of the organisms, all connected to each other.

“Put even just a few in proximity to each other, and they can create a small neural network,” Dr. Min explained. “*Collectively*, they can combine their abilities to form a major intelligence. Their physiology changes drastically when they are connected to each other. They can share information, solve problems, and come

up with ideas. I determined through basic tests that they understood basic math and problem-solving abilities. That was when there were only about thirty of them. With increasing number, its complexity increases and its intelligence grows,” said Dr. Min. “I suspect that there are *hundreds of billions* of these on Draloos V. I suspect that that was the large mass we were detecting below the surface.

“We’re seeing the intelligence in this species as a sort of *emergent property*, a basic principle of biology, in which seemingly complex properties arise from the multiplicity of effects from many smaller, simpler components. You understand it as ‘the whole being more than the sum of its parts.’ It has even been argued that *consciousness* is an emergent property that is derived from the vast complexity of neurons in the brain. It’s a rather convenient way of defining it, and not altogether descriptive, but there is sometimes no other way to accurately describe it. In any case, this species we see here is acting in an analogous way as the neural connections in our brains.”

“Yes, I had a rather lengthy discussion about this earlier with Lieutenant Commander LeCroy about his toy robot,” Seth recalled.

“That’s right.”

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“So, back to the subject at hand. You mean to say...that with enough of these organisms, there could be a *consciousness* on the planet?”

“Quite possibly, yes. At the moment, I don’t know how they exactly function on a macroscopic level, whether they are compartmentalized into regions that have specific functions, like we have a prefrontal cortex and a hippocampus, or just loosely distributed. I don’t know if they are divided as separate individuals, or collectively as, well, as you put it, *one massive consciousness*.” The doctor paused, and looked at the container. “What is also happening, captain, is that it is building an intelligence right here.”

“Can we communicate with it yet?”

“That’s hard to tell. Right now, on a basic level I am communicating with it using basic visual stimuli. I’m not exactly sure how they would communicate, even if they wanted to. If we wait, they could come up with a way on their own.”

“In other words, we will need to let it reproduce further if we wanted to talk with it.”

“I believe so, unless you want to go down to the surface and get sucked down into the ground like Ensign Ester nearly did.”

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Seth raised a brow. “I was afraid you were going to say that. We might not have choice in the matter; *we need to talk to it.*”

“I might add that there is no way of knowing if they will be aware of what is going down on the planet,” Min noted.

“How fast is it reproducing?”

“At the moment, it’s approximating an exponential growth rate, although that won’t go on forever. Currently, it’s roughly doubling every three hours. I imagine on the planet they reach some sort of limit or equilibrium with the environment. Once it reaches a certain level, it appears to generate a type of ‘cocoon’ to physically protect itself. But because it’s in an isolated environment right now it’s going through an initial growth phase. Their number is manageable now, but in a couple of days or so, we’re going to have large problem.”

“And every three hours,” Seth realized, “they’re going to get smarter.”

Chapter 24

On the *Excelsior*, Alan Santiago was fuming in his Ready Room. Seth had sent him an update, as per Admiral Kim's request, on Dr. Min's findings on the Draloos V alien species, and he was getting more and more uncomfortable with the fact that there was an intelligent species at all on Draloos V. The issue was no longer about restoring cargo shipments. The equation of the mission had changed.

Then there was the issue of the aliens now simply being a direct threat to the human population. *An intelligent species that has mastered the art of designing*

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life...was a frightening thought to Santiago. If somehow the aliens were able to unleash a deadly plague, or a monster to Draloos IV, the entire population could be wiped out. Both Seth and Santiago would lose their commands. Hell, they would likely be ejected from Starfleet altogether.

Commander Ariele came into his Ready Room, upright and proper as usual. “Captain, we’ve finished finalizing the details of the evacuation plan for Draloos IV. We’ve sent the plan to the political leaders, including Jerad.”

“Good.”

“The whole process is estimated to take about three weeks, assuming that Starfleet can send us the ten *Galaxy*-class starships and twenty transport vessels that we requested. It will take several trips to evacuate everybody,” Ariele explained. “We don’t yet have a permanent home for them, so they may be scattered for quite some time.”

“Excellent work, Commander,” he answered dryly.

Even after only one month, the Commander had grown to know her captain well enough now to know when he wasn’t satisfied with something. “Is...something bothering you, Captain?”

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“Yes, Commander. *Everything is bothering me,*” Santiago said. “Have you read Captain Seth’s report on the aliens of Draloos V?” Santiago threw the PADD on the desk as he asked the question.

“Yes, sir, I have. It won’t make restoring the cargo shipments any easier.”

“It was *this* species that was stopping the shipments in the first place. And they’re not going to want them to continue to do that. And they’ve already shown contempt for human life. Which means if we *don’t* stop them, the population on Draloos IV will have even bigger problems.”

“It makes the evacuation plan even more critical,” Ariele noted.

“Yes, Commander, it does. The crew of the *Dragonfly* hasn’t found a way to communicate with them yet. But I’m not willing to give up. *There has to be a way to deal with this without moving the people.*”

“What are you planning to do?”

Santiago bit his lip. “I don’t know. But the fact that there is a hostile species means that Seth and I are in this mission together. It’s no longer about cargo shipments; it’s about dealing with a direct threat to a human population of *one billion.*”

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“Captain, the mission of the *Excelsior* is to head up the evacuation,” Ariele reminded him. “It’s Captain Seth’s job to handle the aliens on Draloos V. *Let him deal with the situation.*”

“I don’t need you to remind me what my orders are, Commander,” he fired back, perhaps with more ferocity than he had intended with her. “I have a responsibility to ensure the success of this mission. *If Captain Seth fails, then I fail.*”

“Captain Seth will object to your interference...”

Santiago looked at her squarely. “He won’t have a choice.”

Captain Santiago decided to walk to the lab where his doctor, Dr. Centress, was doing his own investigations on the aliens of Draloos V. Commander Ariele decided that she wanted to follow him down there, because she had slowly become unsure of her captain’s intentions. Unbeknownst to Captain Seth, Santiago had been doing studies of his own on the aliens. They had their own containment field that held thousands of the interconnected aliens.

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Santiago looked over to Dr. Centress, who had been hard at work documenting his findings for the past several hours. “How are you, Doctor? Have you learned anything about this species from your studies?”

“Captain, Commander,” Dr. Centress acknowledged. “I haven’t discovered much more than what Dr. Min has already discovered, I’m afraid.”

Santiago paused for a moment, as if somewhat hesitant to ask him something. “Doctor, forgive me, but I’m going to jump straight to the point: what do you know about their defense mechanisms?”

Dr. Centress furrowed his eyebrows slightly, taken aback from the question that was just posed to him. “Well, from what Dr. Min on the *Dragonfly* tells me, by themselves, they are soft and vulnerable. A shot from a normal hand-phaser at a high setting should kill them individually. As they become more interconnected, they appear to develop a greater resistance and better defense mechanisms. On the planet, especially, they are more protected. You remember the thick protective layer separating the hive of the organisms and the planet surface, right?”

“So our standard weapons wouldn’t work?”

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“They could – I just assume that we would have to get past the protective barrier first. It would just take a while, and by the time we got through, they would likely be able to launch a counter-measure.”

“You mean kill us?”

“Put simply, yes. I need to know more about what protects them.”

“I was afraid that you were going to say that.” Santiago paced from one side of the room to the other, in deeper thought than Ariele had ever seen him. “We need to develop a way to neutralize them.”

“*You mean a weapon?*” Ariele demanded.

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

“Possibly,” Dr. Centress told him. “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,” Santiago

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said. “We need to gain a hand over them, should the aliens become hostile to us. We need a way to gain leverage.”

Commander Ariele couldn't believe what she was hearing. “Captain...*this isn't part of our assignment,*” she reminded him again. “We should be back on Draloos IV making preparations for the evacuation in case we need to-”

“I know, but neither of you know Captain Seth like I do. He won't do what's necessary to save the people on Draloos IV,” Santiago said coarsely. “I don't think he's up to the task.”

Chapter 25

On Draloos IV, back at the hospital, Jenovia and some of the medical staff helped set up the blockade in front of the doors of the room, while Thorn made his preparations to engage the enemies. The blockade hardly seemed sufficient, but it would have to do given their limited equipment. Jenovia made her way over to Thorn to make sure that he was ready to go, but she would also try one last ditch effort to have him stay with them.

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“Lieutenant, you can’t take on *thirty* men, even if they are untrained. You said so yourself, they’re armed with Type III phaser rifles, you have one Type-*whatever*,” she said. Jenovia was right. Thorn’s phaser was specialized and wasn’t classified, because it was integrated into his forearm and only his forearm.

“No choice. Besides, it won’t be just me. I will be bringing two officers with me.”

Jenovia just rolled her eyes. “You’re kidding, right? We need you to protect us here.”

“Your blockade won’t be sufficient,” he said, trying to change the subject. *“I’ve brought portable force field generators. Place them near the entrances to this room. The problem is that they have only enough power to last you twenty minutes. Turn them on only when you feel it is necessary.”*

“Thank you, Lieutenant. You’re still going to engage them, aren’t you? Despite me telling you how stupid that is?”

“It is only stupid if I don’t stop them.”

“I don’t want to order you to stay, Lieutenant.”

“Then don’t,” he replied tersely. And with that, Thorn disappeared.

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Captain Seth entered the conference room to meet Lieutenant Commander LeCroy and Dr. Min to discuss their findings on the cargo ships that had crashed on the planet surface of Draloos V. He was not at all sure what to expect from them, but from their expressions alone, he could tell that whatever they were about the report Seth did not want to hear. “Report, gentlemen.”

“Captain,” Dr. Min initiated. “I’m not entirely sure how to begin. There is something that Chief LeCroy and I found that I think would be of interest to you.”

“Is it good or bad?” Seth asked both of them.

“Well...*not good*,” LeCroy said strangely. “I don’t think Jerad has been completely honest with us. When we collected the transportation logs on the cargo ships, we found that the mass that they were transporting just kept getting larger and larger. They went from three-hundred thousand metric tons, to four-hundred, then five-hundred. They’ve been taking more and more each shipment.”

“We suspect also that they have been more and more indiscriminant when it comes to choosing what to transport. In other words, they’ve been transporting more than just plant life, captain,” said Dr. Min.

“You mean, they’ve been transporting animals also?”

“More than that, captain.”

The captain raised an eyebrow. “*The aliens?*”

“LeCroy found trace amounts of their genetic material in the shipments, captain,” the Dr. Min explained. “If they transported these species from the planet, a section at a time, *it would be like scooping out a piece of your brain at a time.* They rely on their interconnections for their higher functioning.”

Jenovia was right, Seth thought to himself, *Jerad was holding something back.* “*That’s why they’re so angry,*” he said. He furrowed his eyebrows deeper and had a look of grave concern. “We need to find a way to communicate with the aliens soon.”

“I’m still working on it, captain,” Dr. Min said.

“Then you’d better hurry, Doctor. We’re running out of time.” Seth hurriedly moved towards the door.

“What are you trying to find out from them?” the Chief asked curiously.

Seth stopped. “I need to know if they understand the concept of *revenge.*”

Chapter 26

Lieutenant Commander Thorn and his two accompanying officers moved down to the main area where the terrorists were mostly congregating. All of the security guards that were assigned to guard the hospital were disabled and tied down. It would only be Thorn and his team. He could tell from his tricorder that all of the entrances to the hospital were now guarded by them, so they were trapped inside the hospital. The remaining men looked like they were ready to go after whatever they were looking for. About twenty men were moving towards the room where Jenovia and the others were.

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Fifteen of them were moving towards a large room where Thorn and his team already were. It was quite spacious, with pillars and large desks to hide behind. The ceiling was very high. One end of the room had two curved staircases that led to an upstairs floor. Thorn decided that this was the best place to make their stand. Having thought that there were only fifteen men, he only brought two flash-bombs. He had only one left. This was going to be tricky.

Thorn knew that they probably had Federation tricorders and would likely detect their presence. So Thorn and his team probably just couldn't hide behind a wall. But he didn't have much time; if the terrorists were headed towards them, their life signatures would soon be within range of detection. Thorn's tricorder may have much more range than the old-generation ones, but that advantage was soon about to close.

The terrorists soon rushed into the large room, armed and ready to fire. One of them held out his tricorder, scanning the room. "I'm detecting two life signs, human," he said. "Over there." He was pointing to a large desk that Thorn's team had hidden behind.

Suddenly, a stun grenade flew from the desk and rolled to the center of the group. They could tell immediately what it was. "Everybody turn away!" Morie yelled. They all followed his command, but when the stun grenade stopped rolling,

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it didn't do anything. *Was it OK to look back?* Phaser fire then ripped from the team behind the desk and struck Morie in the chest. He flew back, and lay on the ground completely knocked out. The other terrorists immediately dispersed for cover behind the pillars in the room and returned fire with their phaser rifles, but they didn't even know who they were firing at. Thorn specifically had his team target the lead terrorist first; without him, the rest of the team was lost.

The other officers of Thorn's team hid upstairs behind the railing where the two staircases connected. They employed typical cowboy tactics of take cover and fire, but that was only to concentrate the terrorists' attention to one location. Little did they know that Lieutenant Commander Thorn was behind them, hidden from view. He was clinging to one of the pillars, *faced down*. Thorn knew that in the time that he had before the terrorists arrived, there was no way that he could hide the human life signatures of his team. But his own physiology allowed him to escape undetected, because the old-generation tricorders couldn't properly detect Breen life signatures. With a little control, he could appear 'dead' to the tricorder, at least by human standards.

Thorn targeted the outermost terrorist trying to fire at the team, and quickly put him in a choke hold from behind. Unable to breathe, he fell unconscious, but the others were still too distracted with phaser fire to notice. One terrorist hid behind

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one of the large pillars. He immediately jumped out, ready to fire, but before he could even raise his weapon, Thorn had intercepted him on the other side and struck a blow to his face, striking his nose. He fell backwards, his face bloody. But Thorn paid a price for that move: it made him visible, if only for a moment. One of the terrorists on the other side turned his phaser toward him and began firing. "Over there!" he yelled. Thorn immediately pulled out his shielding from his left arm, but still hid for cover. The other terrorists were firing at him as well.

The advantage of surprise was over. Thorn had already taken out three out of the fifteen, including the lead terrorist, so that wasn't a bad turnout. But he needed another advantage, because he couldn't win in a phaser fight being outnumbered four-to-one. He did have one more surprise for them.

The terrorists saw Thorn come out of hiding and throw a glass vial in the middle of the room. They could hear the glass shatter as it landed, and they were immediately afraid of what would come out of the vial. But only a clear liquid spilled from the vial, no more than a few milliliters. But even that few milliliters had a noticeable effect on everyone in the room, including Thorn's team. Everyone, with perhaps the exception of Thorn, could no longer stand

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properly or aim their rifle properly. They stumbled in a drunken stupor, unable to even differentiate each other.

Thorn immediately stepped in and began picking them off, one at a time. His first order of business before any attack was to separate the terrorist from his weapon. One terrorist made a weak attempt at a punch, but Thorn was easily able to grab the arm, and flip him to the ground. He quickly turned and made a sharp karate chop to the throat of another nearby terrorist, who keeled over and collapsed with his hands cradling his neck. He was about to engage a third, but his target was shot down by one of his own, also in a confused state. Thorn blasted him with his own phaser.

It didn't take long before everyone was disabled and unconscious. But it left the problem of Thorn's own team also being in a confused stupor. "*Keep calm,*" he tried to assure them. "*I used a volatile chemical that momentarily disrupts the cerebellum. Your sense of coordination has been shut down. But the effects should only last a few minutes.*"

Thorn kneeled and took one of the communicators of one of the fallen terrorists. He could overhear a conversation that was happening remotely. "Damnit, our men have been taken out again. Frank to base. Look, we need all of you to come."

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“You want everybody? But Frank, there are like, a *hundred* of us. We need people to protect our base here.”

“Forget the base. This is much more important. There is this damn Federation officer that’s taking everybody out, do you copy? We can’t stop until we get what we need.”

“Yes, sir.”

“*God damnit*...this must be Jerad’s doing. He’ll be the death of us all.”

“Do you want us to bring more of those Type III phaser rifles?”

“Absolutely. Bring everything. Stun grenades, too. Everything. *Get here in five minutes.*”

Lieutenant Commander Thorn was becoming increasingly concerned that the terrorists were not giving in. Not that he was afraid that he couldn’t handle them, in fact, he eagerly welcomed the challenge. But had he known that he was going to tackle nearly a hundred men, he would have been more prepared. What was bothering Thorn was that their *motive* was coming into question. Why attack a hospital so persistently? There must have been something specific that they

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wanted to devote so much manpower. Either that or they were the worst terrorist organization in the Alpha Quadrant.

Thorn grabbed one of the unconscious terrorists and started dragging him by the collar. *“Fall back,”* he ordered to his only two officers. *“There is no way we’ll be able to take a hundred men. It’s time to change our tactics.”*

The team made it back to the room, with one unconscious terrorist in one hand. Jenovia rushed to help him. *“Bring up the force fields,”* he quickly instructed. *“We need to secure the area.”* Jenovia could sense the urgency in his voice, as mechanical as it sounded.

“This doesn’t make any sense,” Thorn said. He turned to the medical administrator, *“They would not commit so many men ‘just for a few medical supplies.’ There is something that you’re not telling us.”* Jenovia translated for him.

“There is nothing! I swear it! They attack us all of the time!” he pleaded.

“They’re coming.”

“Get the physicians and nurses out!”

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Thorn turned back around in disgust. He awoke the terrorist that he dragged in. *“I want to talk to you. I want to ask you a few questions.”* Thorn was losing patience. He grabbed him by the hair and started dragging him across the floor. The terrorist began screaming at the sudden pain.

Thorn slammed him against the wall, with a force that would put a Klingon to shame. *“Why are you attacking the hospital? What is it you want?”* The terrorist looked up in confusion, unable to understand him, and still very much afraid. He could sense that Thorn was demanding something of him and could feel the intensity of his grip, but he didn't have a universal translator to help him translate the Breen language.

“Here, allow me,” said Jenovia, gently placing her hand on Thorn's shoulder. She bent down and glared at the terrorist. “We want to know why you are so persistent in attacking this hospital. What is it that you want here?”

“We...we need medical supplies...” he whispered.

“We heard that already. You need more than just hyposprays and tissue regenerators.”

“...We....”

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Jenovia grabbed him by the collar, and boiled with an intensity that even surprised Thorn. “*You have almost a hundred more men wanting to break into this room,*” she yelled. “*You need to tell us why, or more people are going to get hurt!*”

His face was silent. He didn’t want to talk about it. He just wanted to get the damn thing, and go home. *Why is the Federation interfering, of all days to interfere?*

“*TELL US!!*”

“...We need...” he began reluctantly, “...*a vaccine*. Everyone on this planet is in danger.”

Chapter 27

It was time to confront the aliens. *We either need to communicate with them, or get rid of them*, Seth thought. *We can't keep them here*. He and Captain Santiago from the *Excelsior*, and several members of the *Dragonfly* crew approached the large rectangular containment field that held the aliens. Even Jerad from Draloos IV was in the cargo bay after Captain Seth insisted that he witness the aliens firsthand. The containment field was now enormous. It stretched maybe forty meters wide and thirty meters tall. They numbered in the hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions. The near exponential rate of their growth has now caused each passing

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minute to become more frightening than the previous. Now the organisms flashed in groups, seemingly at random, but more likely with an order that they just couldn't recognize yet. It was unsettling to see, and quite frankly, they were running out of space. The container had taken up essentially the entire cargo bay.

“*Ewww...*” Ensign Ester muttered.

“Goodness...how many are there now?” LeCroy wanted to know. “There must be a million of them.”

“Close,” answered Dr. Min, “there are exactly seven-hundred and eighty two thousand, four-hundred and fifty nine of them, according to my readings. But remember each individual has their own collection of neurons, their own little brains. As a whole, there must be over a *trillion* neurons at work here,” he explained. But something continued to bother him. “I don't know how they are continuing to grow like this. I haven't given them an energy source. Reproduction, in any species, is extremely taxing.”

“Could they be using the lights?” LeCroy wondered.

“I don't think so. I've never detected any photosynthetic activity in my earlier studies. In fact, because they live underground they are actually quite photosensitive, which was why I kept the light levels somewhat low. The energy

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must come stored away in high-energy molecules somehow, like some sort of super-fat. Although, it does seem that their mass per individual is receding. It suggests that there is a limit to how much they can keep growing like this.” Min looked carefully at his tricorder.

Indeed, from Seth’s recollection, each one looked a lot skinnier than the first one that he saw in Dr. Min’s lab. By comparison, the one in the lab looked a like a puffy marshmallow with legs. “That’s good to know. I’m a little concerned about how smart it’s getting.” Jerad was looking particularly uncomfortable.

“Actually, now that I’m looking at their growth rate, the rate has indeed slowed in the past couple of hours,” Min added, still on the earlier topic.

“They look...*different*...” Seth remarked.

“They are more compartmentalized now. Each cluster may serve a specific function,” Dr. Min answered. Indeed, they started to look much more organized, and many of them flashed in unison. It was still the same frightening mess, but definitely more organized. Many of them walked around individually, but with purpose now. This meant that in proximity to a large cluster, they still retained intelligence even if not in direct contact to it. They could still operate remotely.

“The question now is whether or not it possesses consciousness,” LeCroy added.

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“Can it hear us?” Seth wondered.

“I don’t think so, or at least, not while they are in the containment field. But they do respond to visual stimuli, so I suspect that they can see us.” Santiago was looking increasingly uncomfortable. He had absolutely no desire to talk to it.

“Maybe we need some sort of sign language,” LeCroy joked.

“Like I said, I haven’t discovered a way to communicate with it quite yet. But you’re right, my initial experiments suggest we could use some sort of visual language. Perhaps we should get Counselor Jenovia back here. She does have a background in linguistics.”

“Security Officer Jones to Lieutenant Commander LeCroy, please respond,” the comm system blasted unexpectedly.

“LeCroy here, this is not a good time, Lieutenant.”

“But, sir....the BX-12 project...”

That immediately caught his attention. “What about it?”

“....He’s...*active*.”

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The Chief choked. “*What?* That’s impossible. *How?*” The Chief made a quick glance at Dr. Min, who also had a look of grave concern. They were the only two people on the ship capable of activating him, and neither had even come close to completing him.

“I...I don’t know...nobody was in the lab, and all of a sudden, it started walking around. He has incapacitated two security guards and now it’s walking the corridors.”

“*Impossible...*” the Chief muttered. “Alright, Dr. Min and I are on our way.”

“There’s no need, sir.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s already walking towards you.”

The android bolted in through the cargo doors, full of purpose and intent. His body was still not finished. Most of his musculoskeletal system was complete but there were still some missing parts, so sections of his skeleton were still visible, and he was dripping fluids as he walked. His skull was still bare, with only parts of his facial muscles and mouth complete. The team could see the large quadriceps

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and other muscles contract and relax as he walked into the room. It was still a little clumsy, but both Chief and Dr. Min were amazed that it could walk at all. Its naked eyeballs quickly scanned the team, and then fixated on the captain.

It opened its mouth, but nothing came out. It was as if it was trying to mimic a human's mouth movements, but didn't know what to do. Seth was annoyed that he had to deal with this at the most inopportune time. "I don't have time this. Chief, get him out of here."

"There's something that's not right about him..." Dr. Min noted.

"Someone's been messing with my machine?!" LeCroy barked.

"SOMETHING...NOT RIGHT...HIM?..." it mimicked. "...CHIEF...OUT OF...HEEEEEEE-RE..."

"...It's trying to comprehend our syntax," Dr. Min said, while examining its tricorder. "And it's learning how to use its lips for the first time. Whatever lips that he has." Indeed, only one side of his mouth was complete. There was only jaw muscle on the other side.

"I don't understand how he's functioning. Dr. Min and I weren't finished with him," the Chief continued in disbelief. "He's still missing vital organs, parts of his brain, and a circulatory system. He's..."

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“*It’s not him,*” Dr. Min interjected.

“What? What do you mean?” Seth asked.

Dr. Min moved his eyes towards the Draloos V species, which were flashing internally, on and off, brimming with activity. “It looks like we’ve just answered the question of how we can communicate with them. They have found a way to use the android. This is...*amazing.*” Indeed, on the back of BX-12’s neck, they could see an organism attached to the base of the skull. They had found a way to access his brain and control it. Min didn’t think that synthetic neurons would be compatible with natural ones, but since they were designed to perform the exact same function, maybe it wasn’t so outrageous.

“That’s not the word I would have used,” Santiago said.

“They must be in control of the hippocampus and other sensory parts of the brain, and must have synthesized all of the necessary neurotransmitters for the brain to function. His visual and auditory cortexes must be active. But I wasn’t finished with him. He shouldn’t have any knowledge, memory, or higher reasoning.”

“WE...ARE...*THE ANNECTA...*”

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The very sound sent chills through their bones, maybe because it was the first solid indication that this was a sentient species.

“It must be Latin...or *annecto*, for *the connected*,” Ariele said.

“Why would they be using Latin on their planet?” Ester bursted aloud.

“They don’t,” Dr. Min interjected. “We transcribed some basic Latin skills onto BX-12’s brain. They must be drawing on those skills to come up with a name that conveys to us a meaning of their existence.”

Seth stepped forward, and decided to repeat his introduction. “I am Captain Seth of the *U.S.S. Dragonfly*, speaking on behalf of the United Federation of Planets,” he began. “Do you understand why you are here?”

“...UNDERSTAND...Captain Seth of the *U.S.S. Dragonfly*...”

Seth was getting impatient. He turned to Dr. Min. “Can we help it in some way?”

“Just keep talking to it. It’s learning as it is listening to us.” It was true; its’ pronunciation was significantly improving with each passing sentence. “Don’t forget, these things here may not hear sounds the way we do, or process them the way we do. This is likely the first time that it is able to hear our voices like we

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hear them, because we've shaped the ear of BX-12 and the ear canal like a human's," Dr. Min explained. "Even if it already knows the language, which I'm presuming that it does if it's trying to speak with us, it will still take some practice."

"We want to understand your relationship with the people of Draloos IV. You have killed several innocent people from there. We want to understand why." In fact, the captain knew why, but what he was trying to get at was whether or not they had a concept of revenge.

"...KILLING INNOCENT MISSING CREWMEMBERS
UNDERSTAND WHY..."

Captain Seth threw his hands up in the air in frustration. "Give it time, captain," Dr. Min said. "They're actually learning very quickly."

"We don't have the time," Seth said to Min. "I want this situation resolved before the situation on Draloos IV escalates."

"...YES, RESOLVED..."

Dr. Min moved closer to the android. He took out a small flashlight to get a better look at some of his interior. "His circulatory system's active." The team could see his heart pumping, and his lungs expanding and then contracting. "He's breathing. We originally had a closed system where the blood wasn't going to

other major organs, just in and out of his pulmonary system. Right now, there is ‘blood’ flowing to his brain.”

“Why the disturbed look?” asked the captain.

“*Because I haven’t made any blood for him yet.* He wouldn’t exactly be using human blood; I needed time to determine all of the necessary components for him and to synthesize it. He has been pumping essentially saline solution prior to...*this.*”

LeCroy continued to be flushed with anger. He did not enjoy seeing anyone mess with his work. Yet he couldn’t help but be curious as to what had happened to the android. “His musculoskeletal system isn’t complete yet. And his vascular system is still currently limited, and he is still missing vital organs, like a spleen and pancreas. He won’t last long like this. I suspect that they understood that he had the bare minimum to function, and activated him for the sole purpose of communicating with us.”

“...COMM...COMMUNICUT...FOR CAPTANE...UNDERSTAND WHY KILLING...,” it continued. “...SPEAK WITH CAPTAIN...UNDERSTAND WHY KILLING INNOCENT...”

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“I’m right here,” said the captain reassuringly. “I am Captain Seth. To my right is Captain Santiago. To my left are Dr. Min and Chief. Can you understand us?”

“...WE UNDERSTAND CAPTAIN. WE WISH TO SPEAK WITH CAPTAIN. WE WANT UNDERSTAND WHY KILLING INNOCENT...”

“Yes, we want to know why you have been killing innocent crewmembers. You crashed a ship from Draloos IV and the men were killed.”

“...YOU HAVE BEEN TAKING US FROM SURFACE...KILLING FROM OUR PLANET...WANT TO UNDERSTAND WHY KILLING...”

This was getting frustrating. Its crude way of speaking was causing Seth to develop an unwavering headache. But admittedly, their grammar and skills were quickly improving, which surprised the captain more than he’d realized. At the same time, their voice was getting deeper, and angrier. “We don’t understand you,” Seth told them.

“Captain, I don’t think they’re talking about the destruction of the cargo ships. They’re talking about the killing of their own kind,” observed Dr. Min.

“YOU ARE DISRUPTING ECOSYSTEMS ON OUR PLANET. OUR BIOSPHERE HAS BEEN...*COMPRIMISED*.”

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“They appear to understand everything that is happening on the planet, even though they grew in the labs of the *Dragonfly*,” Dr. Min told the captain. “That means they have some means of communicating with each other over large distances.”

“The people who have been transporting your bio-resources are from a neighboring planet, Draloos IV,” Seth explained. “This is Jerad, a representative from that planet.” Jerad was dead silent.

“I was right, captain,” Dr. Min interrupted. “The transport of enough of their species at any one time will significantly affect their neural net.” The android stared at them intently. His look seemed curious, but since it had no eyelids or eyebrows it was difficult to tell exactly what his expression was.

“WHY? YOU ARE DISRUPTING ECOSYSTEMS ON OUR PLANET. OUR BIOSPHERE HAS BEEN COMPRIMISED. WE ARE ACTING IN RETRIBUTION.”

Its voice was angrier still. Ensign Ester grew scared.

“WHAT RIGHT DO YOU HAVE.”

“The population didn’t know that there was sentient life on the planet. Had they known, they never would have taken your species aboard,” Seth lied.

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“THAT DOES NOT ALTER OUR QUESTION. WHAT RIGHT DO YOU HAVE.”

“We have *every* right,” barked Captain Santiago, from out of nowhere. “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.*”

“THEN...” It seemed perplexed. “...IT IS THE SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST...THOSE WHO HAVE THE POWER DESERVES THE RIGHT...?” It looked straight at the two captains.

“Yes,” Santiago said sternly.

The android responded in kind, “*SO BE IT.*”

The android instantly fell to the ground as the Annecta ‘disconnected’ from him. The organisms themselves began to glow brighter. They could see the fiery neural activity that was zipping between them. They were up to something.

Commander Ariele turned to Santiago. “*What have you done?*”