

STAR TREK HORIZON



*First Command
Part 2*

Darrin Drader

First Command part 2

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Historian's Note: The following takes place in 2378, just after the return of the U.S.S. Voyager from the Delta Quadrant.

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By Darrin Drader

1

Chief Medical Examiner Drokka looked over to the shirtless patient. Like the others with advanced cases of the illness brought on by the virus that was ravaging his world, the patient had developed light purple splotches covering his entire body. Drokka estimated that without treatment, the patient would be dead in another one to three days. The advanced stage of his disease made him the perfect candidate on whom to test the cure brought to them by the Federation starship *Horizon*.

According to Starfleet Medical, the retrovirals should be completely safe, and cure the disease completely within moments. The retrovirals work by entering the host's cells and converting the RNA contained within the treatment to DNA that was incompatible with the attacking virus. The result was

that the attacking virus would be broken up and neutralized. Aside from that, the altered DNA should have no other effects upon the body, and the mutations would be passed on to any future offspring.

Drokka approached the patient and glanced at the chart displayed above the biobed to get his name. “Harch, do you have any questions before I administer the treatment?”

The patient looked at him through pain-dulled eyes. “I’m ready,” he said as he cracked a wan smile. “It’s either this or I die soon.”

“You are unfortunately correct. Your condition has deteriorated to the point where death would be imminent within the next seventy-two hours without the cure,” Drokka said, carefully keeping all traces of emotion from his voice. He brought the hypospray to the patient, held it to his neck, and pressed the button to inject the cure.

Initially, he noticed little difference in the patient and the biobed still detected the virus in the patient’s body. Starfleet Medical had told him to expect the cure to work almost instantly, but it didn’t seem to be having any effect yet. Drokka couldn’t help but scowl.

“Is it working?” asked Harch, clearly becoming alarmed by the doctor’s silence.

“They said it would work almost instantly,” Drokka said. “I expected we would at least see a drop in viral levels by now, if not a reduction in splotching.”

The patient lowered his head, clearly discouraged. He knew his end would come soon if this cure didn’t work. “I shouldn’t have hoped...”

“We should give it a little more time before we...” Drokka stopped as the number on the viral display began dropping. “Wait a moment. The viral load numbers are dropping.”

Harch raised his eyes to look at the doctor. “Really?” was all he managed to ask. Drokka could see the tears forming in his eyes, and he could read the elation in his expression. He’d seen

this with many patients over the years when they were given a new lease on life.

Drokka watched the numbers continue to drop until they registered as undetectable. Likewise, the splotches on the patient's skin began receding rapidly. Within moments, the symptoms were almost completely gone, and all that would be left was for his body to heal from the damage caused by the virus—but he had other drugs at his disposal to speed that up. “It appears that you're cured.”

Harch stood up from the biobed. “I feel better already,” he said. He looked over his arms, chest, and legs, at the places where the purple splotches were already almost faded to nothing. “This is amazing.”

“Please stay seated,” Drokka said. “I'd like to keep monitoring you for a while. I'd like to make sure that the virus is truly gone from your system before I release you.”

Harch sat back down. “Sorry doc,” he said. “I just didn't think this was going to work.”

“I also had my doubts,” Drokka admitted. “I'm going to keep you under observation for a few hours, and so long as I don't see any complications, we'll begin administering the treatment throughout the population.”

Drokka turned away from the patient and began updating the case notes in his PADD.

That's when the beeping began.

Drokka turned back to the biobed. Harch pitched forward, his fingers pressed to his head. The biobed was registering that a new virus was detected, and he saw the numbers climbing rapidly. Every cell in his body was suddenly producing a virus that hadn't been present before.

“Computer, level one containment field around the biobed,” Drokka said quickly.

He watched as the area around the bed shimmered as the energy field sprang into place. A new alert sounded throughout

the exam room. “Warning. Airborne virus detected outside the containment field.”

“Emergency protocol one!” Drokka shouted. This would shut down all the ventilation throughout the facility and place a force-field outside the main door. Even as he heard the force field activate outside the lab, another alert began to sound throughout the facility.

On the biobed, the patient was beginning to scream. All the veins near his skin bulged outward. He remained that way for several seconds, and Drokka watched as numerous veins burst, causing fresh bruises.

And then his vital signs went flat. The patient was dead.

“Damn,” he muttered. It wasn’t a cure, it was death.

“Computer, how far has this new virus spread?”

“The virus has spread beyond the medical center.”

“Am I infected?”

“Affirmative.”

Just as he received the response, he felt a sharp pain in his head. He would be dead in seconds.

* * *

Kevia Turner gasped. “Kill us? Why?” Moments before Tarim, the High Chancellor of Gour II, had captured the away team in a crowded public square, and announced that he planned to put them to death. But first it sounded as though he intended to torture them.

“I think I made that clear,” Tarim said. “While we were suffering here, the Federation turned a blind eye. It deemed us unimportant, and allowed us to die by the thousands. This is not the act of an ally, but an enemy.”

“Tarim, listen to me! The Federation didn’t turn a blind eye to you, nor did it discount your suffering in any way. It simply wasn’t possible to synthesize a cure and get it here on a faster

timetable than what we managed. We really did our best,” Turner pleaded.

“Well, it wasn’t enough,” Tarim said and began to turn his back on the Starfleet officers.

“Just let us go,” Turner shouted. “Keeping us captive doesn’t serve you in any way. We’ll board our ship and leave.”

Tarim looked to one of the Breen and nodded.

The Breen officer approached Turner and buried his fist in her gut. He then pulled brutally struck her in the face.

Turner fell to the ground and raised a hand to feel her face, which was exploding with pain. She wasn’t bloody, but it was too soon to tell if a bone had been broken in her face.

“I’m afraid you won’t be leaving aboard the *Horizon*. The Breen have informed me that it’s been destroyed.”

Turner’s gut reacted, as though she’s been punched again. Of course Tarim might be lying. That would be the easiest way to break their spirits and stop them from trying to escape. But, with the Breen operating openly, that could only mean that the *Horizon* had been neutralized.

Bashir started to kneel down to examine Turner, but was stopped by one of the Breen holding them. He spun toward his captors. “This is an act of aggression and it will not go unanswered by Starfleet!”

“I’m sure,” said Tarim. “The thing you need to understand is that we have withdrawn from the Federation and are now under the protection of the Breen Confederacy. Therefore, it was your starship intruding upon Breen space, not the other way around.”

“Until you’ve formally withdrawn from the charter...” Bashir began, but his words were cut short when the sound of a siren screeched throughout the city. “What’s that?” he asked.

“Quick!” Tarim shouted. “Get the prisoners to cells.” He then gestured to the crowd. “The rest of you, get indoors immediately!”

The Breen began marching them toward the far side of the square. “What’s happening?” Nod asked.

“Some sort of a biological attack,” Tarim replied. He then turned on his heel and marched away.

* * *

Captain’s log Stardate 55065.3. The Horizon is currently hidden behind a moon of Gour II after taking a shellacking from three Breen warships. I find it troubling that the Breen have managed to gain a foothold on what had been a Federation world up until recently, but I sense that not everything here is as it appears. I’m also troubled by the away team that beamed down to the planet and have since become trapped there where we cannot offer them support.

Sheppard tried to suppress the outward appearances of the nervousness he felt. The ship was in pieces, lights were still dimmed and running on emergency power, and to make matters worse, most of his senior staff was on the planet. Cunha should be aboard leading the engineering team while they made repairs to the warp engines, but instead she’d been sent on the away team simply to try and help her gain experience in the field. This was a mistake. Tavika was a highly capable tactical officer who could out-perform most of her peers in ship-to-ship combat. She had been sent to the planet because he wanted to try and force her and Nod to work out their differences. That was another mistake.

The two officers he agreed should be on the away team were Doctor Bashir and Commander Turner. The doctor needed to oversee the distribution of the retrovirals, and Turner was his diplomatic replacement while he remained aboard the ship.

And that brought up another point for Sheppard. If they actually managed to survive this, he wasn’t accustomed to waiting behind on the ship while someone else led the away teams. This had been Starfleet regulation since the later days of

Captain Kirk, and many people believed that it was precisely because of Kirk's exploits that this came about. But Sheppard had been first officer until recently, he was used to running away teams himself, and he fully intended to exercise captain's privilege to leave the ship a little more often than most Starfleet captains.

He stood up from the center chair. "Ch'qahrok, are you still seeing no signs of pursuit from the Breen?"

The Andorian pulled up the tactical controls again on his LCARS display and ran a passive scan of the area. "They are still orbiting the planet inside the two moons, and they don't appear to be aware of our presence."

"I think we should look more into who The Oppressors were," Sheppard said. "If we could find a connection between them and the Breen, we might be able to end this diplomatically."

Ch'qahrok nodded his agreement. "That might be valuable information, but where would we look for it? We've already reviewed the information in the Federation database and it made no reference to the identity of The Oppressors."

"We'll just have to start digging. What's the status of the warp drive?"

"Still down. Repair estimates from engineering continue to fluctuate between three and eight hours."

"I have to appreciate their accuracy," Sheppard said wryly.

"Odds are that their repair estimates would be more accurate if their chief engineer were aboard. She has a great deal more practical experience than the other personnel in the engine room," Ch'qahrok said.

"Yeah, I've considered that," Sheppard admitted. "I can't change who we included on the away team now so we need to have our ship running efficiently without their department heads. Who's the ranking officer in engineering?"

"Lieutenant Sharve," the Andorian replied.

Sheppard nodded, recalling the young Tellarite engineer. He had been assigned to the Idaho prior to this. “I’m going to have a word with him. I’ll be in my ready room. Ch’qahrok, you have the bridge.”

The Andorian nodded as Sheppard exited the bridge and entered the small adjacent room. Ready rooms were traditionally one of the few areas of a starship other than their quarters where captains were expected to personalize the space to reflect their personalities. The captain set the tone of the ship, and was the single most influential member of the crew. Sheppard had laid out his ready room months in advance, and Starfleet personnel had been kind enough to implement his designs prior to his arrival. In the corner next to the door was a cat tree, and upon it rested his enormous yellow tiger striped male cat named Ramses. On the wall was a print of Van Gogh’s *Starry Night*, and in a glass case in front of his desk was a model of the *HMS Victory*, a sailing vessel from Earth’s history that was active during the nineteenth century. Below that on a shelf were the collected novels from a dozen different worlds, all printed on paper despite their availability in PADD format. Sheppard felt comfortable in his ready room, but he still felt that it needed a little more to make it his own. Rather than try to fill it with random interests and curios, he decided that the empty space in here would be filled with things from his journeys aboard the *Horizon*. It was an optimistic philosophy that assumed they would make it away from this world intact.

Sheppard sat down behind his desk and keyed on his console. “Sheppard to Lieutenant Sharve,” he said.

A moment later the image on the screen shifted to a view of a Tellarite with dark hair and a long curly beard in front of the engine room. “Yes captain?” he said gruffly.

“Lieutenant, we’ve been getting some pretty wild variations in the repair estimates on the warp drive. Is there anything you can tell me about that?”

The Tellarite frowned. “Apologies Captain, we’re still trying to get a handle on the full extent of the situation down here. We’ve had to shut down the warp core to prevent a breach, and diagnostics are also offline. Every time we think we have a handle on the extent of the damage, we find something else that complicates things.”

“I understand,” Sheppard said. He felt frustration mounting, and part of him wanted to lash out at this crewmember, but he did understand his position. “Listen, I understand the difficult situation you have down there, but we need an accurate assessment on the amount of time repairs will take. It could literally mean the difference between surviving and not surviving this. How long will it take for you to accurately assess the damage and give us a timetable for repairs?”

“Give us half an hour to get the diagnostics back online. Once we have that, I should be able to give you a better estimate.”

“And I’ll be able to hold you to that?” Sheppard asked.

“This isn’t my first time in an engine room, Captain,” Sharve snapped.

“All right. Half an hour and I want to know when my engines will be back up and running.”

“Aye sir,” Sharve said.

Sheppard cut off communications with the engine room. Now it was time for him to make a far more difficult call. Starfleet Command needed to be apprised of their situation. “Computer, initiate a communication with Admiral Jellico.”

The ship’s communication array initiated a transmission with the subspace relay beacon located in the Gour system, putting in a request to contact the admiral. If Jellico wasn’t available to speak to him at the moment, someone on his staff would either take the call or refer him to the next admiral who could speak with him now.

A moment later, Jellico appeared on the monitor. “Captain?” was all he said.

“Admiral, the mission hasn’t gone as planned,” Sheppard said bluntly. “The Breen were waiting for us in the system. Gour II cut off contact with us and we were attacked by three Breen ships.”

“Three? That’s a bold move. You’d think they don’t realize that they were just on the losing side of a war against us.” Jellico said, raising his eyebrows. “What’s your status?”

“To be blunt, they trashed the *Horizon*, but we took out their lead ship during the battle. Warp drive is currently offline. We vented drive plasma and ignited it as we warped behind one of the moons of Gour II. It looks like the Breen are buying that we were destroyed in the battle.”

Jellico nodded and remained silent for a moment.

“Sheppard, at this point we can only assume that Gour II has left the Federation. As soon as the warp drive is repaired, I want you to get the *Horizon* back into Federation space. I don’t think we have a choice but to let this one go.”

“Admiral, I have an away team down on the planet. Some of my senior officers are there. I can’t leave them behind. I plan on mounting a rescue mission once the ship is put back together.”

“Listen to me Captain,” said Jellico. “It’s captain’s discretion whether you want to get your people back, but do not sacrifice the ship for the sake of the away team. Starfleet can always bring diplomatic measures to bear to have your crew returned.”

With Breen involved, there was no guarantee that his people would survive long enough for diplomacy to secure the release of his people. That wasn’t an acceptable solution to the problem, but he wasn’t going to tell the admiral that. “Aye sir,” Sheppard said. “I’ll get her back in one piece.”

“And Captain,” said Jellico, “Don’t try to be a hero. One Breen warship is a challenge for any Federation vessel. It’s amazing you survived a fight with three of them, but there’s still two of them out there. Bring your crew home alive.”

“Understood sir,” Sheppard replied. Jellico knew exactly what was going through his head. This was an official warning,

which meant he could face charges if he disobeyed and the ship incurred heavy casualties or damage as a result.

“Jellico out,” the admiral said as the connection was terminated from the other side.

Turner's face still hurt where the Breen soldier had struck her, but at least she and Cunha were somewhat safe and out of danger in their cell, which was barren of any features other than a bench to sit or lay on and a single unit in the back corner that functioned as both a sink and toilet. The front was blocked by a force field, but it was otherwise open to the other cells in their block.

The rest of the away team shared the block with them. Bashir and Cruz were in the cell to the left, Tavika and Nod shared the cell to their right, and the two remaining security guards were in a cell on the right wall. Turner was quietly amused that Tavika and Nod were placed together, but said nothing about their awkward silence. There were no guards in the room, though she assumed that they were being monitored remotely.

As Starfleet officers, their first duty at this point was to escape confinement. This was not so easily accomplished, however, especially considering that the holding facility had been built to Starfleet standards. They might have all been trained for situations like this, but Starfleet built their cells to be escape proof—meaning that they were impervious to standard methods of escape that were taught in Starfleet academy.

Similarly, Starfleet was well aware of its own regulations on communicating when monitored, and yet it was vitally important that she find a way to speak to the others without being overheard by their captors. The only method she could come up with was Morse code via tactile contact, and that would only work with her immediate cell mate.

Turner whispered quietly enough that the audio sensors might not pick it up, “Sit next to me and put your right arm behind your back.”

Cunha, who wore one of the most frightened expressions she'd ever seen on a Starfleet officer, did as instructed.

Turner also slid an arm behind Cunha's back, and she held her as though trying to offer a measure of comfort. She began squeezing her wrist lightly in Morse code. ... --.- ..- . . --- . / --.- - / .-. .- - / .. --- / --.- --- ..- / -.- .-. / ..-. -...-. . . -.-. - .. --.-, which translated to "Squeeze my wrist if you can understand."

Cunha squeezed her wrist in return.

The lines of silent communication were open. "I believe they were lying when they said the ship was destroyed," Turner communicated.

Cunha glanced at her incredulously. "What makes you think that?" she signaled.

"Officers are trained to preserve the vessel and its crew at all costs. Sheppard is a new captain, but he's earned it. I'm sure he was able to get the *Horizon* out of there rather than let it be destroyed."

"There's something you should know," Cunha said. "The Doctor and I visited a defense facility where they were building small maneuverable shuttles that were designed for combat. I managed to steal some kind of Breen data storage device."

"Do you still have it?"

"It's in my uniform hidden in the small of my back. I've been careful to keep it from showing. I think it might help if we got a look at the data."

"Can you access it?"

"Not yet, and I don't dare bring it out where they can see it here."

Turner nodded silently. "All right. Our first duty is to get out of this cell. Are you familiar enough with these systems to get out? Any ideas?"

"Not without a plasma torch or something to bust through the concrete in the floor," Cunha replied.

“That’s about what I figured as well,” Turner said. “So we’re going to have to resort to another method. They’re going to come for us sooner or later. When they do, it’s our job to knock out the guards unarmed.”

“I’m not very good in a fight,” Cunha said.

“You made it through Starfleet Academy, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then you’ll be good enough. Just follow my lead and back me up. I’ll take care of the rest,” Turner said.

“Now go back to your bunk. Feel free to make small talk, but don’t discuss anything relating to our mission,” Turner said.

“Aye,” Cunha agreed.

They settled back to their corners and waited. One of the advantages of Turner’s cranial implants was that she had functionality to occupy her time that others did not. She had a heads up display that she could call up and run various programs. She normally kept this in the background so it didn’t interfere with her ability to experience things normally, but there were programs built into it that could provide some distraction. She had a vast library of memories she had archived and could play back. She also had a short-range audio communicator she could attempt to use, though doing so would likely attract the notice of her captors. She had a function that she normally likened to an internal holodeck, which allowed her to create an elaborate fiction, and then experience it as though it were real—she tried not to access that when in front of others since doing so made her appear to go into a catatonic state, though she was able to snap out of it at will in response to external stimulus. She could create logs and other written communication without the use of an external device. Finally, she had a few games that she could play to amuse herself with.

For the time being, she decided to play a simple game where she cleared three or more blocks on a grid by color by sliding them one space in any direction. It wasn’t particularly challenging, but it awarded points for speed, and she was quite

fast at it. She had to admit that it wasn't the most productive use of her time, but it was enough to keep her mind occupied while she waited for something to happen.

An hour and a half later, the game paused when the door to the central area opened and two figures entered. They were Breen. She had hoped their visitors would at least be Gouran guards, because the Breen were armored and had a penchant for brutality, but they would have to do. If she could get the upper hand in a fight, she could always steal their clothing and helmet and escape.

As the door hissed closed behind them, one of the Breen walked from cell to cell eyeing those within. She wasn't sure what it was looking for. When it reached her cell, it stopped and glared at her. She hoped it was looking for whoever had the greatest number of pips on their uniform.

"You," it said in a metallic screech as it gestured to her. "Come with us." The Breen approached the control panel to her cell and dropped the force field.

Turner sprang into motion, throwing her body against her opponent, burying her fists into the cushioned uniform. Cunha also moved, kicking the same one in the foreleg.

The Breen grabbed its leg, and said in a quiet hiss, "Hey, we're not who you think we are. Stop."

Turner ceased her attack immediately and stood. "Who are you?"

"We're here to get you out of here. All of you," it said.

"You're Breen?" she asked.

"No," it replied. "It's just a disguise."

"How did you get in here?"

"Do you really want to play twenty questions right now, or would you like to get out of here?"

"Let's go," Turner replied.

The other individual dressed as a Breen approached the cell where Bashir and Cruz were held. He was about to tap the control to lower the force field when the door opened behind

them. Three Gouran guards ran into the room brandishing phasers. Turner heard more footsteps coming from the hallway.

“Damn!” said the faux Breen as it spun around to face the newcomers. Phaser fire filled the room and one of the guards fell to the floor stunned.

“Just follow us!” it said.

They fled through the open door and Turner saw three more guards approaching, their phasers at the ready, but their faux Breen escorts were faster on the draw. The one to her immediate right fired twice in rapid succession, stunning two of the guards, while the other one punched the remaining guard in the face, knocking him to the floor.

They exited the corridor into a processing room. Two guards were already slumped to the floor, obviously stunned.

“Wait, we have to go back for the others!” Turner said.

“No time,” said one of their rescuers. “We’ll have to come back for them later.”

The faux Breen led them through a glass double door and onto the street in front of the detention facility then stopped.

“What are we waiting for?” Turner asked.

Their rescuer simply pointed up. Turner looked up to see a hover vehicle descending rapidly toward their position. A moment later it landed and a hatch dropped from the back. “Get in and we’ll get you out of here.”

Turner motioned Cunha to follow her as she ran through the door and into the vehicle’s squat, dimly lit, tan interior. She ran to a seat near the front of the vessel where a female Gouran sat at the controls.

Once the other two faux Breen were in, the hatch closed behind them and Turner could feel the vehicle leave the ground and accelerate upward.

Once they were off the ground, the two dressed as Breen removed their helmets, revealing a pair of Gourans who appeared to be young adults, and powerfully built for their species.

“Kevia Turner?” one of them said.

“Yes,” she replied.

“We’re with the Resistance. We’re trying to stop our world from making a terrible mistake.”

* * *

Julian Bashir heard the door to the cell block hiss open and he looked up as four figures, High Chancellor Tarim, a slight middle aged female Gouran wearing a white coat who he had not seen before, and three guards, entered the room. Bashir looked to Cruz and rolled his eyes. After the Breen had inexplicably come in and broke Turner and Cunha out of custody, the guards had wasted little time hauling away their injured, and they had not bothered checking on them again for the past few hours.

Tarim approached Bashir’s cell. “Doctor, it appears that there’s a serious problem with the retrovirals you delivered.”

Bashir pushed his anger toward the Gourans to the side as soon as Tarim uttered those words. As a doctor, it was his job to cure the sick, and it didn’t matter if those who needed his care were friends, enemies, or something else that was presently undefined. “Did it not work?”

“Worse,” Tarim replied. “The cure took care of the initial virus, but administering it created a new virus that is airborne and immediately lethal to any of us who are exposed.”

Bashir frowned. “Starfleet medical synthesized the retrovirals on a genetic level based on your species’ DNA and the elements of the virus that interacted with your biology. I don’t understand how this is possible.”

“Neither do we. Drokka was one of the first to fall to the new virus. The moment it went airborne, it began spreading rapidly, bypassing containment measures like they weren’t even there. This is Yellite,” Tarim said, motioning toward the female.

“She has accepted the temporary position of Chief Medical Examiner.

“Good to meet you, Yellite,” Bashir said. He turned his attention back to Tarim as his anger began to reassert itself. “I suppose next you’re going to claim that this is Starfleet’s fault,” Bashir said, his irritation with the High Chancellor returning quickly.

Tarim sighed. “It would be an understatement to say that our people are angry with the Federation, but we have never observed it to commit genocide. I do not think this was intentional.”

“I’m glad you see that,” Bashir snapped. “The *Horizon* came here to help you, and you’ve repaid us by destroying our ship, imprisoning us, and siding with our enemies. Honestly, I don’t even know what you’re doing here if it’s not to level new accusations against us.”

“We need your help. I’ve already spoken to the Breen and they insist that they don’t have the medical knowledge to find a cure,” said Tarim.

“What makes you think I can help?” Bashir asked. “The most advanced medical equipment, which I would need, is aboard the starship that you allowed them to destroy. You might not even have the minimum technology I would need to diagnose the problem.”

“Nevertheless, you’re the best chance we have. Gouran II is not medically advanced. We can thank The Oppressors for that.”

“All right, first thing’s first. What have you done to protect your population from the threat?”

Yellite said, “The entire city of Toras is under quarantine. The death toll is already above two thousand, but everyone has been ordered to their homes and to cycle their air from within. So long as they keep their doors closed, they should be safe from the virus.”

“That won’t protect you for long, and it’s likely the new virus will find a new vector to infect your population in other cities,” Bashir said. “I’m going to assume the entire population has access to replicators to keep them from going out for food? This needs to be handled fast or your entire world could be eradicated.”

“We understand that, Doctor,” Tarim said. Bashir could see the grimness in the High Chancellor’s countenance.

“Is this new virus contagious to those who originated from other worlds?”

“It doesn’t seem to be. We have small alien populations within the city, and none of them have contracted the virus yet.”

“Well, that’s small consolation,” Bashir said.

“Doctor, I’ll say it again. We need your help.”

“Fine,” said Bashir, mustering as much resolve as he could under the circumstances. “Let us out and I’ll do my best to help you find a cure.”

Tarim paused for a moment. “I’m afraid that’s not something I can do.”

“Why not?”

“The arrest of your crew was authorized by the High Council. Allowing your release would be a violation of law.”

Bashir sighed and rolled his eyes. “That law is unjust, and as a matter of principle, unjust laws should be opposed. Besides, I’m not able to help you from the inside of a cell.”

“Given the urgency of the situation, I’ve been able to secure your release, provided that you remain closely supervised.”

“Convenient,” Bashir said. “And if I refuse?”

“Your Hippocratic oath would not allow you to refuse,” Tarim replied. “But if you did, your inaction in light of the current crisis would be deemed grounds for execution.”

“And my cooperation will still lead to the same outcome, only after I’ve helped you. Is that right?”

Tarim sighed. “Doctor, we can talk in circles for the rest of the day. I need an answer now. Are you willing to help us, or are you going to let our world die?”

Bashir said nothing, trying to look as though he was undecided. He’d known from the moment Tarim described the problem that he had no choice but to help, but he wanted them to clearly understand that doing so did not make him happy. It was his duty to aid them, and he would have no choice to do so, even if the Federation were at war against the Gourans, which they were not... at least not yet. “I’ll help, but on the condition that you don’t execute any Starfleet personnel you’ve taken into custody until you’ve opened official negotiations with the Federation. And I want to check on them hourly to ensure you’re keeping your word.”

Tarim nodded slowly. “That is a deal I can make.”

“Perfect,” said Bashir. “My cooperation will be dependent upon you keeping that promise. I expect you to return the combadges to the others. If they suddenly go quiet or inform me of any abuse on the part of your guards, I’ll cease cooperation immediately and destroy any research that might be of value to you.”

“I understand. I’ll allow it,” Tarim said. He gestured toward one of the guards. “Drop the force field. Let him out.”

The guard did as instructed. The normally invisible energy field went fuzzy for a moment, and then disappeared. Bashir stepped through the open portal. Cruz looked at him meaningfully, and he knew she was asking for permission to try and take advantage of the situation. Bashir shook his head slightly. Assaulting them now would show their captors that they couldn’t be trusted in any way, which could undermine the agreement he’d just made. Cruz gave a slight nod, acknowledging her understanding.

The guards led Bashir out of the cell block and to the main room beyond. Windows looked out upon the street. Bashir walked over to them and looked out on the street that had been

bustling when he'd been taken into custody. They were now devoid of people. No hover vehicles zoomed overhead, but the sky had darkened with clouds that appeared positively oppressive. Other considerations be damned, the emptiness would become the norm if he wasn't successful, and he had to admit his own complicity in the situation, even if it was unintentional. He could have insisted that he be present when they administered the cure for the first time. He could have even tested it aboard the *Horizon* before beaming it down to the planet. He just assumed that Starfleet Medical had done their job perfectly. He had followed Starfleet protocols to the letter, but he could have taken extra precautions.

"Doctor, follow us to the transporter room. We're not taking the chance of going outside," Yellite said, motioning toward a door on the other side of the room.

Bashir nodded glumly, the full weight of the situation already beginning to weigh upon him.

“So let me get this straight,” Turner said, “A new virus that’s completely lethal breaks out just as we arrive with a cure for the virus you have? That doesn’t seem like too much of a coincidence?”

Dorna, the female Gouran at the craft’s controls sighed. “The government hasn’t been forthcoming with any information. And yeah, it seems extremely coincidental... almost planned.”

“Who would try to kill an entire world’s population?” Turner mused.

“I’m pretty sure we didn’t do this to ourselves,” Dorna replied. “Even if the goal was to set up Starfleet to get the rest of the population interested in secession, the casualties would be too high to make it worthwhile.”

“The Breen?” Cunha asked.

“I wouldn’t put that past them,” Turner said, “But if they’ve been courting Gour II as allies, why would they try and kill them?”

“That doesn’t make sense to me either,” Dorna said.

“All right... What do we know about The Oppressors?” Turner asked. “Is it possible they came back to get revenge?”

“We don’t know anything about them,” Dorna replied. “It’s been a hundred years since they were driven out, and even when they were here, they didn’t allow us to know anything about them.”

“So no idea where they were from, where they went? Do you even know what they looked like?” Turner asked.

“They were very careful not to reveal themselves to us. When we rose up, they vaporized their dead rather than allow them to fall into our hands. Anyway, that was a hundred years ago,” Dorna said.

“A hundred years is the blink of an eye on the galactic scale,” Turner said. She sighed. This line of questioning didn’t seem like it was going to be fruitful. “So what’s our next play?”

“They city’s on lockdown,” Dorna replied. “But people are allowed to go from the places they work to their homes. I’ve been steering clear of the commerce and industrial areas and sticking to the residential areas. That way if we happen to see a patrol, they should assume we’re just headed home. I know a few routes out of the city where they probably won’t notice us.”

“Do you think they really destroyed the ship?” Cunha asked.

Turner saw a wave of sorrow and panic creep over the young woman’s features as she asked, and even Turner had to admit that she’d felt sick in the pit of her stomach ever since Tarim had broke the news to them. But he wanted them demoralized and broken. It was her job to keep Cunha optimistic. “No, I don’t think so.”

“But Tarim said...”

“I know what he said,” Turner interrupted. “What we need to remember is that it takes a lot to take down a Starfleet vessel. I’d wager that at worst, the *Horizon* simply had to leave orbit. But we should try and contact them.”

“We don’t have our communicators,” Cunha reminded her.

“Does this thing have a transmitter strong enough to contact the ship?” Turner asked.

“There’s one back here,” said one of the Gourans in Breen armor.

“You don’t mind if I use it to try and raise the ship, do you?” Turner asked.

“No, go ahead,” Dorna replied.

Turner moved into the rear seats and situated herself near the communications console. “Do you have the Special Operations comm frequency for the *Horizon*?” Turner asked Cunha.

“Three-fifty-seven point eight,” Cunha replied.

Turner entered the frequency in and the recorded her message. “This is the away team to the *Horizon*. Speak up if you can hear me.” She hit a button to put the message on loop. It would only alert them if there was a reply.

“So tell me about this resistance of yours,” Turner said.

One of the men seated next to the radio responded. “We’ve been organizing for a couple years. The government has gotten more and more oppressive, and when they started talking about breaking off relations with the Federation, a lot of us decided it would be better to fight than accept the path they’re leading us down.”

“Are you actually fighting them, or just organizing?”

“We’ve been focusing on recruitment and keeping the whole thing secret. We’ve struck against the government a few times, but never openly.”

Turner nodded. “So busting us out of that prison was just because we’re Starfleet?”

The other man nodded. “We feel that you’re too important to leave at the mercy of the government.”

“That makes sense. Does your group have a leader?”

The first male she’d been talking to looked to the other who shook his head. “We do have a leader. We can tell you she’s a senator, but we don’t want to reveal any more about her at this time.”

Turner nodded. Precautions made sense if they didn’t want their patron in government to be caught. She decided to change the subject. “Lieutenant Cunha, that piece of Breen equipment, do you think you can hack into it?”

Cunha frowned and gave Turner a wry smile. “I won’t know until I start trying. I need to interface with it somehow, figure out how its machine language and logic work. If I can get that far then I’ll probably have multiple layers of security software and encryption to get through.”

“So you’ll have it by tomorrow?” Turner asked.

“Sure, if you can freeze me in time for a month or two. You know, we don’t even know what the Breen written language looks like...”

Turner put her palm to her forehead and felt where the implant met her skull. There had been no response from the *Horizon*, she wasn’t sure how useful these Resistance fighters were going to end up being, and the one thing Cunha might have that would point them in a decent direction would probably prove to be an empty pursuit. Still, it beat sitting in a cell.

* * *

Bashir tried not to think of the toll he was witnessing before him. Bodies were piled up like cordwood, uncounted, and would soon be moved to a mass grave where they would be disposed of. Small flying insects were already swarming the mass of fresh biomass.

He was not taking any chances. He wore a full self-sealing biosuit that consisted of a single-piece polymer jumpsuit with a clear face-shield. It also contained its own supply of air, which he felt was safer than a filtration mask. Like the original virus, it didn’t appear that this one could affect humans, though he wasn’t certain yet whether or not they could become carriers, and the last thing he wanted to do was spread this around to other Gourans. There was also the remote possibility that it could mutate to infect humans, at which point there would be no telling what the lethality of it would be.

He was doing his best to not personalize the loss of life he was witnessing here. He had become a doctor to help people, and to try and prevent situations like the one he was witnessing here, but there was nothing he could do to help the dead. Concentrating on making sure that this didn’t spread to the living was the only worthwhile use of his time. That didn’t change the fact that there was a bleakness he felt in his soul

right now that wasn't passing, regardless of what he told himself about how he should feel.

Bashir withdrew a hypo-extractor and placed it to the artery in one victim's leg and hit the button to extract a sample of blood. He watched the container fill with the brownish fluid and moved on to another one. With an abundance of victims already slain by this new virus, it did not take him long to collect the ten samples he wanted. He placed them in his medical bag and tapped the combadge under his biosuit. "This is Bashir. I have what I need. Please beam me back to the laboratory."

"Yes, sir," a male voice responded. As he felt his body dematerialize, he mused that he didn't even know who was assigned to handle him from the Gouran government. If not for the fact that they needed him alive, he wasn't convinced that they wouldn't simply spread his molecules into space around the planet. A moment later he felt himself rematerialize, which once again proved his fears unfounded.

He was alone in the lab they had provided him. This was the most advanced lab on the planet, yet most of the medical equipment dated back a hundred years. It reminded him of the equipment he had encountered when he, Sisko, O'Brien, Worf, and Jadzia Dax had gone back in time and boarded Kirk's *Enterprise*, which just happened to be when that ship had been in the midst of its infamous tribble infestation. It occurred to him that perhaps their complaints with the Federation weren't completely unfounded. They were a remote world that provided them with labor and political power, but what they received in return fell short of the promise the Federation had made to them. He could see it for himself, and he was sure that if the *Horizon* was still out there, captain Sheppard would see it as well and do something about it. What was the point of commissioning a crew to troubleshoot the cracks in the Federation following a war if they didn't have the political authority to actually fix anything?

Bashir sighed and placed the vials of blood into the blood analyzer. He looked into the eyepiece at the cells, then turned a knob that would zoom in to view any viruses within. More modern medical equipment would put a three-dimensional rendering of the virus up on a screen, or even create a holographic display. The virus was long, and wormlike, with tiny spine-like protrusions on it. It was similar in appearance to the one they had come here to cure. *So why have the retrovirals unleashed this?* he asked himself.

He pulled up a record of the original virus on another display. They looked almost identical. “Computer, give me a readout of the genetic code of both samples.”

“Working,” said a monotone female voice. A moment later piece of paper emerged from a machine with two sets of genetic codes. The first one was substantially longer than the second one. Both were too long to compare side-by side though. Bashir frowned. Was it possible that the complete genetic code from the new virus was contained within the old one?

“Computer, analyze the genetic code of the new virus and tell me if it exists within the old one.”

“Affirmative,” the computer said.

“So the original virus acted like a package and a delivery system for the new one...” he said to himself. “Killing the original virus in the host’s system unleashes the new one, and the new one just happens to be completely contagious and completely lethal...” An idea that he wasn’t comfortable with began to occur to him. “Computer, compare the RNA in this second virus to any other plague or virus that the Federation has ever encountered. Are there any similarities?”

“There is an eight-eight percent match with the plague on the Teplan homeworld,” the computer replied.

“The Teplan plague?” Bashir asked incredulously. That had been a Dominion-created weaponized virus that they had used in the Gamma Quadrant. It had been incurable, it had wiped out the entire sentient population there, and he had visited that

decimated planet himself. With the Dominion War over, he quickly dismissed the idea that they had planted this here themselves, and there was no way the virus would have found its way here naturally. That only left a few possibilities. “This was bio-engineered specifically for the Gouran population... Someone is actively trying to murder an entire world.”

* * *

Tavika sat silently across her cell from Ipesh Nod, looking out into the vacant open area between cells. They hadn't said a word to each other for hours, ever since their incarceration began. She didn't want for them to speak to one another either. Her Romulan ancestry would continue being a problem for him, and she was unwilling to allow him to belittle her for something she had no control over. The fact is that numerous people in Starfleet had been underestimating her throughout her entire career, and at first she had dealt with it by working harder and over-compensating until she won their grudging respect. And now, decades into her career, she was no longer willing to cater to other people's xenophobia.

Nod sighed loudly, which was a clear indication to her that there was something he wanted to say. She continued looking out of the cell and not at him. She was beginning to wonder if the assignment aboard the *Horizon* was going to work out. She knew Sheppard was solidly on her side, but she was also expected to work alongside Nod, whose attitudes she found contemptible.

“I'm sorry they stuck us together,” Nod said suddenly.

This is new, Tavika decided. Ignoring him had been based on the fact that he'd been ignoring her. She wasn't willing to be the one to strike up a conversation. Nevertheless, she didn't feel that her response should be overly friendly just because he'd opened up his mouth. “Indeed,” she said.

“Well, shouldn’t we be working together to try and find a way out of this cell?” Nod asked.

“I’m comfortable enough here,” Tavika replied.

“Lieutenant, I understand that we got off on the wrong foot. I...”

“No,” snapped Tavika. “We didn’t get off on the wrong foot. You revealed yourself to me as a xenophobe, and that isn’t something I need to put up with. To make things worse for you, you’ve never come to me with an apology, nor have we had a single conversation where my heritage didn’t enter into the conversation in some way.”

Nod’s eyes widened. Tavika smiled wryly. Apparently he wasn’t accustomed to being held accountable for his actions. One thing she did inherit from her Romulan parents was a fiery temper.

“Before the Dominion War, I’d never seen a Romulan unless we were staring at each other across the Neutral Zone about ready to blow each other out of the sky,” Nod said. “During the war, they came in as allies, but not until after they’d played both sides while trying to take advantage of the situation.”

“And as we’ve discussed before, none of this has anything to do with me,” Tavika responded.

Nod shook his head and exhaled loudly. “Lieutenant Commander, I’m not trying to make excuses for my behavior, but I want you to understand that the first time I looked at you I didn’t see a fellow officer, I saw a potential threat. I saw the face of the enemy.”

“Individuals aren’t enemies of the Federation. Governments are,” Tavika said coolly. She could appreciate the fact that Nod was making an attempt at amicability, but she wasn’t required to give him immediate credit and allow him to excuse his own behavior. In fact, she had to admit that she was enjoying this exchange.

“Look, I’m not trying to excuse my behavior,” Nod said. “I had an issue, I reacted badly.”

Tavika smirked. “You reacted badly, and yet there’s one simple thing you should have said by now that remains unsaid.”

Nod looked at her blankly. “I’m not sure what you’re getting at.”

“An apology, Ipesh Nod,” she said, keeping her voice an exaggerated whisper. “When you’re a rude asshole to someone for no good reason, you’re supposed to tell them you’re sorry. And then it’s their choice whether or not to accept it. You still haven’t said you’re sorry to me.”

Nod lifted his chin and stared at her, but said nothing.

“Impossible to say the words?” Tavika asked, arching an eyebrow.

“No, it’s not that,” Nod said.

“Then what is it?” Tavika pressed.

“I just... that’s not me. That’s not how I like to do things.”

“You mean you think you’re infallible and can’t admit it when you’re wrong...”

Nod started to say something then stopped. “You’re right. I’m sorry for the way I treated you.”

Tavika’s smirk deepened. “And now I get to decide whether or not to accept it.”

“Well, what’s your decision?”

“I’m not sure,” Tavika said. She knew she was being blatantly obnoxious at this point.

“You’re tooling with me,” Nod said.

“I might be,” Tavika agreed, and she finally allowed a smile to creep onto her face. “Look, we’re Starfleet. We’re more evolved than the pointless bitterness and hatred, and we have to work together.”

“That’s if the ship isn’t destroyed,” Nod said.

“I don’t believe the ship has been destroyed,” Tavika said. “They’ll say anything to keep us demoralized while this is going on.”

“They said they’re going to kill us,” Nod pointed out. “We need a plan to get out of here so we can survive this.”

“Well, we can beat the first person to lower the force field and then make a break for it,” Tavika said.

“Low odds of survival,” Nod said. “That’s assuming they ever lower the force field at all. So far the only ones to do that were the Breen, or whoever they were.”

“I have an idea that could be fun, and even up the odds a bit,” Tavika said. “They’re already on high alert because of the virus plaguing this planet. I fake an illness and you call the guards. They’ll want me quarantined immediately. When they open up the cell and start checking us out, we give them the sense that we’re not going to resist, then I grab one of their weapons while you attack the other one.”

Nod cocked his head slightly. “That might at least give us a fighting chance of escape,” he agreed.

“Timing will be crucial,” Tavika said. “I suggest we wait for things to calm down a bit first.”

“This evening, right before they change the guards. They’ll be more tired then.”

Tavika grinned. “I look forward to our first coordinated effort.”

Adriana Cunha held the device she'd stolen from the Gouran shipyard, which was attached via spliced together data conduits to a scientific tricorder their hosts had been gracious enough to provide for them. She and Kevia Turner had been aboard the hover vehicle, moving throughout the city skyscape for the better part of an hour and were finally nearing the edge of the urban sprawl. They'd still received no word from the *Horizon*, which was adding to Cunha's anxiety.

"Any luck with that thing?" Turner asked from two rows of seats up.

"I've made some progress, but the computer languages are very different," Cunha said with a sigh. "I ran it through the universal translator, which is getting us to within eighty-percent accuracy in establishing communication, but we're still getting basic errors, and I'm having to sort them out, one by one. At this rate, the two devices might be able to do an electronic handshake within an hour or so."

"So even at that point, you're probably going to have to overcome decryption algorithms and other security measures before you get anything useful from that thing."

"Yes, Commander. I didn't expect this would be easy... I just hope we get some information out of it while it's still relevant to the mission."

"Keep at it," Turner said with a reassuring smile. She had wanted Cunha for this mission specifically so that she could gain some actual experience on an away mission. She was a brilliant engineer, but that wasn't especially helpful if the only place she was useful was in the ship's engine room. This challenge was perfect because it represented several engineering challenges, and it was teaching her to improvise. Turner also had to admit that Cunha was far more technically savvy than she herself was. If it took the young engineer a couple hours to hack into that device, it would probably take her three or four

times as long, and that was if she had the technical skills needed to overcome all of the security measures.

“We’re passing out of the city now,” Dorna said from the vehicle’s cockpit.

Turner glanced out the window to see the last city blocks falling away and a dense forest take over. “Aren’t we more likely to draw attention out here than in the city?”

“No, not really,” Dorna replied. “There are fifty thousand people who live outside the greater urban sprawl and out in the countryside and smaller communities. I know they’re not tracking us, so it would be a miracle if they happened to spot us, at least while we’re up here.”

“At least?”

“There’s always the off-chance they’ll locate one of our facilities. We’d be easier to apprehend at those locations.”

“I’m assuming that’s where we’re headed?” Turner asked.

“We have a location in mind, yes,” Dorna said.

Turner was about to reply, but was surprised to see the indicator light on the comm system flashing. She set it to only alert her if there was a reply from the *Horizon*. But if they were still up there, why had it taken them so long to answer her hail? She decided it was best not to give too much away in the initial greeting. “This is the Commander,” she said, opting not to identify herself by name.

“This is the U.S.S. *Horizon*, contacting you on the Special Ops frequency.” She could tell immediately that it was Captain Sheppard’s voice, and she immediately felt a surge of relief flow through her. She looked back to Cunha, who was moving her hands to her temples and releasing a heavy sigh.

“Captain, this is Turner,” she said. “What’s your status? They told us the *Horizon* had been destroyed.”

“Oh there was a fight, and we took it on the chin, but there were three of them and one of us, and we took one of them out,” Sheppard replied.

“Captain,” Turner said, “Why did it take so long for you to respond to me? I’ve been sending out a hail for the past hour.”

“They have a damping field up over the entire city,” Sheppard replied. “We didn’t pick you up until after you were outside of it. So tell me, Commander, what’s your status?”

“The Gourans were holding us in a cell in the Municipal Prison. We were broken out by the Resistance. Cunha’s with me. The rest of the away team is still in the prison.” Turner paused. “Captain, can you beam us back to the ship?”

“Not right now,” Sheppard said. “We’re out of transporter range and there are two Breen ships between us and the planet. If you could make it to a shuttle though, we can meet up at our coordinates.”

Turner nodded. “That sounds like a plan... once we can find a transport. Oh captain, there’s one more thing you should know.”

“What’s that?”

“It looks like the cure we brought here didn’t work. Something happened and it unleashed something new... something that’s one-hundred-percent contagious, and one-hundred-percent fatal. People have been told to get home and find a safe airtight place to shelter in place.”

There was a pause on the other end. “That’s unfortunate,” Sheppard said.

“One last thing. Cunha managed to get her hands on what looks like a Breen information storage device. We seem to think we might be able to hack into it and get some information out of it.”

“Very good. Have her continue with those efforts, and then get back here as soon as you can,” Sheppard said.

“Understood sir.”

“*Horizon* out.”

The communication ended, but Turner saw a digital message follow from the ship with a set of coordinates. They now had some idea where to find them once they made it off the planet.

Turner turned to look at Cunha and smiled. “I told you they didn’t blow up that ship.”

They continued on for some time longer. Turner lost track of time as she turned several facts over in her mind. The first thing was simple relief that the *Horizon* was still out there. This was not the first away mission she’d been on where the survival of the ship was in question, but it was the first one where an enemy of the Federation was operating openly on the planet while they were claiming the ship was destroyed.

The second issue on Turner’s mind was the nature of the virus itself. Gour II hadn’t been considering secession until this virus broke out. This wasn’t the first issue the Federation had had with the planet, but it was the catalyst that caused tensions to escalate. It made sense too. Once the virus emerged, the world had gone into quarantine while keeping only essential operations running. While the Federation liked to pride itself in being a money-less society, the truth wasn’t nearly so clean, and a whole-population quarantine still meant that the flow of goods and services would come to a halt and cause major disruptions. It made sense to her that the Breen had used the virus to drive a wedge between Gouran IV and the Federation, and they would then swoop in and bring the world into an alliance with them. But, if the Breen had engineered the virus, it didn’t make any sense that they would somehow transform the virus into one that’s much, much more lethal. That left only two possibilities—that the Breen weren’t responsible and this occurred naturally, or that the Breen were behind this and weren’t trying to simply take the planet, but to sterilize it of sentient life. The latter possibility caused a chill to run down her spine. There had to be something she was missing though...

“Commander,” Cunha said from the seats behind her and Turner leaned back to look at her.

“I’ve got it!” Cunha said excitedly.

“Got what?”

“I’m in,” Cunha said.

“I thought you said it was going to take another hour.”

“Well, I created an algorithm to solve the translation issues. That cut the number of conflicts way down, so then I was able to build some bridging dialog between the tricorder and the device. Once I did that, I thought it was going to take a long time to overcome their data security, but it turns out that they’re very utilitarian in their coding. I could have cut through this as a first year cadet.”

“Great news,” Turner said, feeling that Cunha’s description of what she’d just done was entirely more detailed than it needed to be. “So what’s in that thing?”

“It’s exactly what we thought it would be. It’s a communication device. It has the plans for the single pilot military craft Bashir and I saw at the plant, but it also has a comm system built in that can communicate with any Breen facilities within range.”

“So...” Turner tried to think of something that would provide them with useful information. “You think you might have access to a few answers about what’s going on here?”

Cunha nodded. “I’ll do a search for Gour II and see what comes up. If we’re lucky, I’ll find some communications talking about what their plans are here...” She hit some controls on her tricorder. “Wait a minute... I think I have something here. There’s a reference here to the Sterilization War. It looks like this was fought about a hundred years ago...”

“Which was the same time The Oppressors were driven off Gour II.”

“Right!” said Cunha excitedly. “The Oppressors were bent on establishing a mighty star empire, and they were using this planet to cheaply build weapons to fight the Breen. Well, the Gourans got tired of working for them, so they sabotaged their weapon plants. Without a steady supply of weapons for the front line, the Breen gained the upper hand in the conflict and obliterated The Oppressors.”

“Alright,” Turner said. “That’s an interesting history lesson, but what does that have to do with what’s going on right now?”

“Nobody but the Breen knows...” Cunha said. “The Gourans are exactly the same people as The Oppressors.”

“What?” Turner asked.

“Thousands of years ago, the Gourans and The Oppressors were one people, but they split into two groups. One group wanted to develop technology, have an advanced economy, and explore space. The other group led a very pastoral existence, and they didn’t want that existence to change. Eventually they went their separate ways and the splinter group came to settle a world called Nendia III. A thousand years later, the group that left to become more technologically advanced went to war with the Breen, and it looks like a good part of the space they control had shrunk because of this war.”

“Why did they call it the Sterilization War?” Turner mused. “Unless both sides hated each other so much that it wasn’t going to end until one side had completely destroyed the other.”

“Exactly,” said Cunha. “I’m seeing a number of Breen communications referring to the Gourans as *the last of the great enemy*.”

“So they create the ultimate weapon,” Turner said. “A virus, that’s first used to weaken the bond between Gour II and the Federation. Once they’ve brought that to a crisis point, they have another virus designed to commit genocide on the whole population.”

“If everything you just said is true,” said Dorna, “They’re never going to believe it.”

“No, of course they wouldn’t want to believe that their new allies are trying to wipe them out. What we need is some kind of evidence they can’t refute,” said Turner. “Can you get us to a shuttlecraft?”

Dorna nodded. “We keep a few hidden away, and we usually wouldn’t just loan them out to people, but given what’s at stake, I think getting you back to your ship is more important.”

Bashir sat down on a chair next to his medical equipment and took a sip of the raktajino he has synthesized an hour ago. It was starting to get cold. He drank it anyway, because his eyes were growing red and tired.

It was very clear that the second virus was delivered by the destruction of the first. Viruses weren't truly alive. They were composed of RNA sequences that would go into the cell of a living host and hijack it to reproduce the virus. The virus they had gone to Gour II to handle was a carefully designed trap. One did not truly kill a virus since it wasn't alive in the first place. Rather, when the retroviral made the host cell incompatible with the virus, the RNA was broken up into smaller pieces by the host's immune system. From there, the cells would simply dispose of the pieces, like a janitor sweeping up so much dirt.

This particular virus had been designed so that when it was attacked, it would break into several pieces, with one particular section that was reinforced so it would remain together. That piece just happened to be a piece that had been brought back from the Gamma Quadrant and re-engineered so it was compatible with the Gouran physiology. This virus had wiped out an entire planet before, and Bashir was less than confident that he could do anything about it here.

He tapped his comm badge. "Yellite, I think I have some answers."

"Good to hear, "I'll be right over."

A few moments later Bashir heard the locks to his lab open and the female Gouran stepped in. Her demeanor was cool, and even condescending, which amused Bashir. He assumed they weren't familiar with his entire medical history if they thought they held any sort of advantage over him.

"You say you have some answers?"

Bashir walked her through the structure of the virus they originally acquired, the fact that it hid a smaller virus within it,

and that it was a modification of one that he had encountered on the other side of the Bajoran wormhole. He finished up by giving her the bad news. “The problem is that this was genetically engineered by the Dominion, and because they really knew what they were doing, there was no cure.”

“Doctor Bashir,” said Yellite. “I’m not sure I can buy into your version of the events. The Dominion War has been over for years. This virus is newer than that, and if they had tried to do any of what you’re accusing them of, it would have been such a violation of the treaty with the Federation that the war would have come roaring back to life.”

“I don’t think the Dominion did this,” Bashir said. He honestly wasn’t sure how much information he should give her at this juncture. If he told her something that disagreed with her ideologically she wouldn’t believe it. In fact, she’d likely outright dismiss it as a lie. On the other hand, if he dressed it up with some other explanation, his deception could be uncovered, and that could also play against him.

“Then who did this to our world? The Federation? You said yourself that you’ve seen this virus before.”

Bashir decided that politics be damned, he was telling her the truth. “Doctor, has it occurred to you that one of the Dominion’s allies is in very close proximity to your world? In fact, has it occurred to you that they might have had access to the virus, and have had three years to put this together?”

Yellite’s reaction disappointed him, and it was exactly what he expected. “My dear Doctor, I appreciate the tale you are telling, but the Breen are our allies. Why in the world would our allies have brought a plague here that could destroy us? There’s another simple explanation. Starfleet has encountered this before, so how do I know you didn’t bring it back from the Gamma Quadrant and unleash it on our world to destroy us?”

“Because that wouldn’t make sense,” Bashir protested. “First of all, the Federation has no desire to harm Gour II. You’ve been a good and trusted ally up until this point. Second,

biological warfare is a crime in the Federation, punishable by life in prison. What you're suggesting is against everything we believe in, and you should know that as a part of the Federation!"

Yellite was silent for a moment. Her eyes studied Bashir closely, who was staring her in the eye as he spoke. He hoped she could see that he wasn't faking his sincerity. "Very well, we'll put that up as a *possible* scientific explanation for what is going on. That leaves one more matter. How in the hell are we going to save the people of this planet from it?"

Bashir sighed and took a long drink of his lukewarm raktajino. "That's where we have a serious problem. As I said earlier, this virus has over an eighty percent similarity to one that wiped out an entire planet in the Gamma Quadrant. It is one of the most efficient killing machines I have ever encountered in my medical career, and when I saw it before, I couldn't come up with any strategies for dealing with it."

"So you're telling me that my world is doomed?"

Bashir was silent for a moment, knowing that his next words could spell his doom. If the answer he gave her sounded completely hopeless then they had no reason to keep him and the rest of the away team alive. If he gave them too much hope then disappointment along the way could meet with the same result.

"What I'm saying is that this is not going to be an easy problem to solve. I want to help save your people. I'd do anything in my power to make this go away for you, and not just because you've imprisoned me and my crewmates here."

"Doctor Bashir, I'm going to ask you for the most straightforward answer you can give me. If you're lying, I'll know, and the consequences will not be pleasant. Do you understand?"

Bashir swallowed and felt his mouth go a bit dry. "I do."

“Good, because it’s a very simple question. Do you think you can devise a way to deal with this virus before it wipes out my entire planet?”

Bashir looked her in the eye and gave her the most honest answer he could. “I will work on it and I will choose to stay on this world until we’ve found a way to beat it. I took an oath as a doctor to treat the sick, heal the wounded, and comfort the dying, above any other considerations. Yes, I will beat this thing, one way or another.”

Yellite nodded, and for a moment she allowed her pretenses to slip. “I hope you can deliver on that promise, Doctor.”

“Commander, it’s good to see you aboard again,” Sheppard said, regarding his first officer and chief engineer, who stood in front of what looked like a cramped civilian shuttlecraft. What it lacked in size, it appeared to make up for in style. It was low and sleek, with red-tipped wings, a fin in the back that served no practical purpose Sheppard could fathom, and the front-facing windows were all dark-tinted, again for no reason that seemed practical to him. “Ever since the war ended, shipbuilders have been going back to a design aesthetic that hasn’t been popular for three hundred years...”

“I rather like it. Why do starships have to be so utilitarian?” Turner asked. “Why can’t they be art?”

“Captain, if it’s all the same to you, I’d like to return to Engineering,” Cunha said.

“You’re excused, Lieutenant. Go light a fire under your team and get that engine room back in shape,” Sheppard said quickly. As the red-haired engineer walked out of the landing bay and into the corridor beyond, he raised an eyebrow and asked, “How’d she do down there?”

“She was nervous and worried, especially after they told us the Breen had destroyed the ship, but she held it together, performed her duty, and she came up with that weird Breen communication device. All in all, I’d give her good marks,” Turner said.

“Good to hear,” Sheppard said. Now that the pleasantries had been dispensed with, they needed to get down to business quickly. Turner had filled him in on the part of the puzzle she was familiar with during their journey to the *Horizon*, but that still left a host of other questions. “Commander, I know you’ve pieced together what’s going on here, but I don’t think the Gourans are going to buy the story based on the data we’ve recovered.”

“I agree,” Turner said. “Their leaders seem stubborn, irritable, and a bit self-absorbed.”

“It’s a wonder they were accepted into the Federation in the first place,” Sheppard mused. He started out of the landing bay and into the corridor beyond.

“On the other hand, it might be important, not only for keeping them in the Federation, but also for their own survival, to expose the Breen.”

“I was thinking about that,” said Sheppard. “You said that The Oppressors came from a world called Nendia III? I think we should go there. The Breen called it the Sterilization War. I’m assuming that means we’re going to find an entire population murdered there, and that means there should be evidence of the conflict, as well as genetic material we can salvage to convince them that the Breen are out to destroy them.”

“What kind of shape is the ship in right now?” Turner asked as they reached the turbolift. The doors opened and they entered the smaller space. Overall, to her, it seemed that things were in some semblance of working order.

“We just got the mains back online,” Sheppard said. “Beyond that, we’re still repairing half a dozen systems, including weapons and shields, but we shouldn’t need those if we’re taking a quick jaunt of... how far did you say the Nendia system was from here?”

“Twelve light years, and inside what is now Breen space,” Turner said.

Sheppard nodded. “This is one of those times I really wish we were allowed to have a cloak. If this weren’t a mission in hostile space, I’d keep the *Horizon* closer to Gour II and send a runabout to check it out.”

“I agree, that would be too dangerous for whoever we sent,” Turner said. “Well, we can always use the old trick of matching the warp signature of Breen ships. As long as they don’t get a visual on us, we might slip through.”

Sheppard nodded. “Computer, stop the lift.” The turbolift responded by coming to a halt. “Commander, what we’re about to do is potentially suicidal. On top of that, I’m willing to bet that Admiral Jellico would pull us from this planet rather than put our butts on the line to try and save Gour II. If we’re going to make an unsanctioned trip into Breen space, we need to keep Starfleet in the dark... No log entries will be made, and we need to keep as much of the crew from knowing what’s going on as possible. If we get caught, both our careers are over.” He looked into Turner’s deep brown eyes. “Or we don’t have to do this at all. Are you with me?”

“Captain, how many people down on that planet will die if we don’t do this? I don’t see that I have a choice.”

That was the answer he had hoped for. Had she said no, then there would have been an issue of trust between them, and the last thing he wanted was a second in command who didn’t share the same ideals... Irrational orders he might issue could be a valid source of conflict, but doing the right thing should never be. “Computer, resume lift.” As he felt the car begin moving again, he said, “Commander, clear the bridge of all non-essential personnel when we get there.”

“Aye, sir,” Turner said.

* * *

Tavika lay on the floor, making the most convincing choking sounds she could muster.

“Guards!” Nod shouted. “Guards, there’s something wrong with her!”

Tavika lifted her head and sprayed a mouthful of frothy saliva onto the floor, then rolled onto her back and rolled her eyes as far back into her head as she could muster. She hoped her performance was convincing.

“Guards!” Nod yelled again.

As expected, a pair of guards burst into the detention area and approached their cell. Nod stood up. “There’s something wrong with her. Get her away from me! I don’t want to get sick!”

“Stand back,” the first guard on the scene said.

Tavika began convulsing her entire body and she spat another mouthful of saliva at Nod’s feet.

“Hurry!” Nod said.

Nod backed away from the force field, and one of the guards put his key into the control panel, dropping the shield.

“Don’t make any moves or we’ll use these on you,” the guard said, brandishing a phaser.

The other guard approached Tavika. She began convulsing as hard as she could, fighting the guard off without making it look as though she was trying to do so. The guard leaned in, pushing his weight on her. He put his hands down on her shoulders, forcing her to the ground.

Tavika glanced at Nod quickly, and was met with a minor dip of his head indicating that he knew it was time to make their move. She gathered a mouthful of spit, and then deposited it in the guard’s face, hitting him in the eye.

The guard reeled back. The other guard started moving in when Tavika slipped her hand to belt, grabbed the phaser and pulled it out. The other guard’s hands were already on his phaser when Tavika stepped forward and fired. She hadn’t had time to check the weapon’s setting, and she was somewhat surprised when the other guard disintegrated in front of her. They’d had their weapons set to kill.

Nod stepped toward the guard Tavika had just disarmed and brought his big hand into the guard’s face. He swung his hand a couple more times, bloodying the guard. Tavika adjusted the setting on the phaser to stun, then fired. The guard slumped to the ground.

“I can’t believe they had those set to kill,” Nod said. “I bet the rest of the facility does too.”

Tavika knelt by the unconscious guard and gathered up the key they'd used to lower the force field. She then ran over to Cruz's cell, inserted the key, and hit the button to drop hers as well. "I'm guessing you want out of here too," she said.

Cruz stepped out of the cell. "No, I thought I'd wait for a diplomatic solution to all this. I'd feel safer if I had a phaser though."

"Sorry, we only have two," Tavika said. "Just stay behind me."

"Do I have to remind you who the security officer is?" Cruz asked.

"That would be me," Nod said. "Let the Lieutenant keep the weapon. Stay back and we'll protect you on the way out."

Nod took the lead on the way out the door and into the corridor beyond. Tavika was surprised that there weren't armed guards waiting for them outside. Perhaps they were at minimal staff due to the virus she'd heard them telling Bashir about earlier.

"Where is everybody?" Nod asked as they made their way past the intake area and past the office.

When they arrived at the main door, they had their answer. Four dead Gouran bodies lay on the floor, their exposed skin etched with veins. They were lined up neatly along the walls. She looked over and noticed that a red light flashed behind them. "They're dead," she said, stating the obvious.

"Someone must have opened the door and exposed the room to the outside air," Cruz said.

"Which means those were the last two of the guards," Tavika said, "and this virus kills its victims quick."

"Wait," said Cruz, "do we even know if this virus can be transmitted to us?"

Nod shrugged. "If we can catch it, it'll kill us. If not, we'll be fine."

"Maybe one of us should go outside ahead of the others," Cruz said.

Tavika stopped for a second. There were bodies lying in this room that had already presumably been killed by the virus.

“We’re safe,” she said.

“How do you know?” Nod asked.

“Because there are dead bodies right here. We’ve already been exposed to it and we’re not dying,” Tavika said.

“Are you sure?” Cruz asked.

“Unless it mutates to affect humans and Romulans, I think we’re fine.”

“Then let’s get going,” Nod said.

Sheppard was on the bridge as the *Horizon* dropped out of warp. So far they had managed to make it this far without encountering any Breen patrol ships, which meant there was still a chance that things might go their way.

“We’ve arrived at Nendia III,” Hernandez said from the conn station.

“Passive scans only. Are there any Breen ships in the area?” Turner asked.

“Passive scans only, I can only say for certain that there aren’t any within three-hundred-thousand kilometers,” Ch’qahrok said from the science console.

“That’ll have to be good enough,” Sheppard said. “Scan for life forms and signs of civilization on the surface,” Sheppard said.

Ch’qahrok tapped several buttons on his LCARS display. A moment later he said, “There are no signs of humanoid life on the surface, although it appears that animal and plant life are abundant. There are signs of numerous large cities on the surface, though they all appear to be in ruins.”

“Well, that confirms the information Cunha pulled out of that Breen device,” Sheppard said. “We need to go down there. Ch’qahrok, you’re with me.” He looked to Turner and said, “Have a couple of security officers meet us in the shuttle bay, and have them ready a Danube Class runabout.”

“You’re not transporting?” Turner asked.

“No,” Sheppard replied.

“Can I ask you why, sir?”

“Because if the Breen show up while I’m down there, your orders are to get this ship out of their space as fast as possible. I’ll find my own way back.”

“Understood,” said Turner. “I’d like to remind the captain that according to Starfleet Regulations Section Twelve, the captain is to remain with the ship and allow the first officer to lead away missions.”

Sheppard scowled at Turner. “I think you’ve had enough excitement for a while, don’t you?”

“Understood, sir,” Turner replied with a shrug.

“Commander, the ship is yours until I get back.”

Sheppard and Ch’qahrok stepped into the turbolift, and a couple moments later found themselves within a short walk of the shuttle bay. “Sir, what are we looking for down there?” the Andorian asked.

“Signs of war. Gouran DNA. Breen bodies. Anything that proves what happened here a hundred years ago,” Sheppard replied.

The security guards were already prepping the runabout *Erebus* when they arrived. Sheppard wasted no time running into the vehicle’s open gangway and sat at the ship’s controls. Ch’qahrok took a seat next to him in the cockpit while the two security officers sat in the rear seats. He watched the control panel, which indicated that the outside doors were open and he was ready for departure. He tapped his comm badge. “Commander Turner, this is Sheppard. Are we clear for departure?”

“Aye, sir. And no signs of trouble.”

“Very well. We’ll be right back. Sheppard out.” He looked over to the Andorian seated next to him with a frown. “You do know how to fly one of these, right? Just in case something happens to me and you have to get them back to the ship.”

“Yes, sir. I’ve been fully trained to pilot and navigate any Federation vessel.”

“Just checking. We haven’t known each other very long.”

Sheppard piloted them out the rear-facing shuttle bay and out into space. The planet below was blue, though the clouds had an ominous brown tinge to them. The scars of war had not faded in a hundred years.

He wasted no time taking the ship into the atmosphere and toward the city they had chosen. As he neared the ground he looked around. The devastation was complete. He saw a landscape full of crumbling buildings, city streets that had been fractured, with pieces of them jutting out at odd angles, and all about were the ancient bodies of the dead. He landed the runabout in a reasonably flat area and opened the hatch.

They stepped out onto the street where the destruction felt even more present. The smell of smoke hung in the air, even though the last battle had been fought here over a hundred years ago.

“Is it actually safe for us to be out here?” Sheppard asked.

Ch’qahrok consulted his tricorder while the two security officers trailed behind them. “The radiation level is slightly elevated, but it doesn’t pose a danger to us in this location.”

“Good.” Sheppard looked around, glancing at the bodies on the street. He could identify the fallen Breen by their helmets. Odds were that their ammonia-based bodies had long since evaporated once the cooling units in their suits had failed. “I hope we don’t get jumped by mutants while we’re digging around out here.”

“My scans were thorough,” Ch’qahrok said. “If there were dangerous mutants, I would have detected them.”

“That was a joke,” Sheppard said.

“Sir?”

“Never mind. Make sure you get plenty of scans and footage of this. Make it as detailed as possible. I don’t want there to be

anything the Gourans can point at to cast doubt on its authenticity.”

“Aye, sir,” Ch’qahrok said.

Sheppard walked up to one of the bodies. It was still clothed in some sort of body armor, but the individual in it was nothing but bones. He brought his own tricorder to the remains and ran a scan. A moment later, his suspicions were confirmed. “It’s a genetic match to the Gourans. The Oppressors were definitely the same species as the Gourans.”

“I suggest we bring back a few remains, just so they can scan them for themselves,” Ch’qahrok said.

Sheppard nodded. “An excellent idea.” He looked to the security guards. “Go back to the runabout and grab a couple body bags so we can bring them back with us.”

A short time later, Sheppard walked back to Ch’qahrok. “I think we have what we came for.”

“I concur,” said the Andorian. “If they still reject the evidence in front of them, it won’t be our fault.”

“Very well, let’s load up,” Sheppard said.

It took them little time to load the bodies into the runabout’s cargo area, then they boarded the craft. Sheppard powered up all the systems and took one last look at this world through the viewport in front of him. This was a stark warning of what could be to come for Gour II if he failed in this mission. With that, he engaged the engines, departed surface, and breathed a sigh of relief. There was something about that planet that unsettled him... more than he’d like to admit. It might have had something to do with being on the scene of a complete planetary genocide, or it might have had something to do with the foreboding nature of the blasted landscape and somber skies.

“Sir, I don’t think we’re out of this yet,” Ch’qahrok said.

“What do you mean?” Sheppard asked.

“I just detected a ship enter the system.”

Sheppard's blood ran cold as he checked the scanner. "Just what we needed," he said. "And I can't tell what kind of ship that is." He pulled up the communications menu on the LCARS display and signaled the ship. "Turner, we just detected a ship. Tell me something."

"Captain, we've gone to red alert," Turner replied. "The good news is that it's a small patrol craft, and its weapon systems wouldn't be a match for us."

"The bad news is that they know we're here," Sheppard said.

"Well sir, actually the bad news is that they're still powerful enough to take out your runabout," Turner said.

"How much time until it's on top of us?"

"You have about a minute until it has a clear shot at you."

"And that's about how much time it'll take us to reach the *Horizon*. Commander, ignore the order I gave you before. Put the *Horizon* in between us and that craft, and turn so we can land without exposing us to them. Whatever happens, do not fire on that ship."

"What if they fire on us?" Turner asked.

"Let the shields take it. If we fire back, we're committing an act of war."

"Understood, sir."

"Now, open up the shuttle bay and prepare for an emergency landing. I'm going to hit the warp drive for just a moment... should close the distance real fast," Sheppard said.

"Sir, Starfleet specifically prohibits that maneuver. It doesn't usually end well," Turner said.

"Noted. Make sure you add that to the log that so they can include it in my court martial," Sheppard said.

He watched as the ship slowly changed facing, and the bay doors slid open.

"We have a minute and a half," Ch'qahrok said.

"Can you calculate a warp jump that will get us close?"

"It'll be accurate to within a fraction of a kilometer."

“That’s enough margin of error to put the runabout through the ship and into the warp core.”

“Aye, sir,” Ch’qahrok confirmed.

“Can’t you bring us up a bit short?”

“Sir, that’s trying to bring us up a bit short.”

Sheppard altered course slightly. He didn’t have to point directly at the *Horizon*, and that would buy him some margin for error. He’d have to scramble to get into the docking bay, but at least if Ch’qahrok’s calculations were a little off, he wouldn’t destroy both ships.

In the distance, he could see the effects of the disruptor fire illuminating the elliptical field of the *Horizon’s* shields. “This is our shot. Engage the warp drive.”

Sheppard watched as the stars began to streak for a fraction of a second. And then, just as quickly as it began, the ship returned to relativistic speeds. A disruptor beam flashed directly in front of the ship ahead. He checked the sensors and the *Horizon* was just three kilometers off to the runabout’s bow.

The Breen patrol craft was approximately a third the size of the *Horizon*. It was dark in color, much like other Breen ships he’d seen, and it was roughly shaped like a double-headed axe; there was a control center at the top of a central section that ended in a point in the front, and it had wing-like structures on either side,

“Turner, drop the *Horizon’s* shields, aft only.”

“Aye, sir,” came Turner’s reply.

He watched the display in front of him until he saw the rear shield drop. He hit the controls to start moving them in.

And that was when the runabout was rocked by a massive disruptor blast. Sheppard grabbed onto his seat, and barely avoided being flung to the floor. He could feel the engines power down. “Ch’qahrok, can you get the engines back?”

“Sorry, sir. They’re unresponsive.”

“Turner, tractor beam us in. We’re dead in space.”

“What about that patrol craft?”

Sheppard thought about it for a moment. If they fired their weapons, it would be an act of war. They weren't even supposed to be in Breen space to begin with. On the other hand, if they didn't get back with the data they had collected, the entire planet of Gour II was as good as dead. If the calculus had to be between his career and billions dead, he would have to accept the responsibility for his actions so long as they served the greater good. "Commander, target that ship's weapons and disable them!"

He watched as the *Horizon's* phasers lanced out, striking the smaller patrol craft. He saw a small structure at the front of its hull explode into space, and the shooting stopped.

"Sir, the patrol craft is no longer capable of firing at us," Ch'qahrok said.

"Turner, bring us in!"

Tavika, Nod, and Cruz stood between a statue of a regally dressed Gouran and an outside wall of the capitol building. They had carefully made their way through the city to this point, and they'd been holding their position, waiting for someone to emerge from the door.

As expected, a Gouran in a bio-suit emerged from the building. Nod fired his phaser. His aim was true, and the figure crumpled to the ground, stunned. As Nod fired, Tavika moved forward and caught the door before it could close and held it. As the trio walked in, a sterilization field moved over them, eliminating any bacteria or viruses that might have been on their clothing.

Nod stepped through the door and into a dimly lit corridor. Seeing that the way was clear, he signaled for them to follow him. Ten meters to his left, he saw a square wooden stairway leading up. It had been clear from the outside that there were only two levels on this building, and he was willing to bet that they'd find Tarim in an office, or in his private chambers up there. He was also likely to be protected by security, which they would need to overcome.

Down the hallway, he saw a pair of individuals round the corner. Nod immediately sprang into action and crouched to the left side of the hallway. Behind him, Tavika and Cruz followed his lead. They all fired their phasers in unison, scoring a pair of hits, and the Gourans crumpled to the floor stunned.

Nod jumped to his feet, phaser at the ready, and ran, taking the stairs two at a time. He knew they would need to be fast, because their opponents would be shooting to kill. Reaching the top, he found himself in another hallway, this one originating at their present location. There was nobody in sight, but it smelled strongly of cooked food.

He had no map of this building, so he was navigating based on what he had seen from the outside. They had entered

through a side door, so hopefully they'd be able to bypass any areas where a large security team might be clustered. Nod pushed through a door on the left side of the hallway, finding a room roughly five meters to a side with a dais and a podium at the end, and a number of chairs sitting out in the middle of the hallway. The only other exit was on the opposite side of the room from which they entered. This was obviously a press room, and it was thankfully empty. "Nobody wants to walk far to get to the press room. I'd bet we're close to his office," Nod muttered.

"Well, let's keep looking," Tavika said. "I'll watch your back."

Nod moved to the other exit and peeked around the corner, finding the primary corridor that ran from one of the top level to the other. Three doors down, he spotted a pair of bored looking security guards in the hallway. Nod ducked back into the room. "I think we found him. Two guards, down the hallway."

Tavika and Cruz nodded their understanding.

Nod burst into the corridor, firing his phaser as he did so. Tavika and Cruz followed suit, all shots barely missing their targets.

Nod dropped to the floor as the other two returned fire. Behind him, a decorative vase on a short curio cabinet exploded, showering the area in ceramic shards and dust. He fired again, catching one of the guards in the leg. It was enough to drop the Gouran male, but it was not enough to render him unconscious. He fired again, but the other guard ducked into the room they were protecting.

As he scrambled to his feet, he could see the guard he had dropped aiming his phaser. Nod couldn't move fast enough to get another shot off.

He heard the whine of a phaser behind him as Cruz took a shot. This time the beam caught him square in the back as he

fired a shot at Nod, which was just wide enough to miss striking him in the face.

Nod lunged forward, arriving at the entrance to Tarim's office. He fired once, catching the remaining security guard in the chest. As the Gouran dropped, he saw Tarim, wide-eyed, lounging on a couch inside the room.

The trio moved into the room, phasers aimed at the Gouran leader. Tavika stepped forward. "I think it's time to renegotiate the terms of our stay on your world."

* * *

The tunnel of streaking stars resolved into silver points of light as the blue-green orb of Gour II rapidly grew to fill the viewscreen. Sheppard stood behind his chair on the bridge, anticipating the battle he expected would come next. "Scan the area. Are the Breen ships still present?"

Turner, taking her turn at ops in the absence of Tavika spoke up. "They're still here captain."

"Breen warships have detected us. They're powering their engines and raising shields," Ch'qahrok said from the science console.

"Shields up, red alert." Sheppard said calmly. "Open a channel to High Chancellor Tarim."

"Channel open," Ch'qahrok confirmed.

"High Chancellor Tarim, this is the *Horizon*. I am attempting to prevent a tragedy on a worldwide scale. Please respond."

He waited for a moment before a verbal response came in the form of a very agitated male voice he was certain he recognized. "Captain, this is Ipesh Nod. We are currently... *negotiating*... with Tarim."

Sheppard raised his eyebrows. "Nod, is everything alright down there?"

“Let’s just say that things aren’t completely under control just yet, but I think you’ll find the High Chancellor is going to be much more agreeable at this point.”

“Captain, the Breen ships will be in disruptor range in thirty seconds. Also, I’m reading approximately four hundred small, heavily armed craft, leaving Gouran II’s atmosphere,” Turner said.

“Nod, it’s vitally important that I speak with Tarim now. Put him on please.”

“Yes, sir,” Nod said.

A moment later, he heard the Gouran High Chancellor’s voice. “Captain Sheppard... I’m relieved to hear that the *Horizon* is still intact.”

“Well, it won’t be much longer if that fleet of ships you launched and the Breen warships all attack us. But you need to understand something. We are not your enemy. Starfleet is not your enemy.”

Sheppard heard a small laugh come from the comm.

“Captain, the Federation’s inaction has resulted in the same thing as enmity. Our people are dying because you neglected us for so long amidst this outbreak.”

“Yes, and I’ve heard that the cure we delivered actually made things worse. Look, there’s some information you need. We aren’t your enemy. The Breen are.”

“I’d expect you to say that,” Tarim replied. “Please, explain the situation, as you understand it.”

Sheppard chewed the inside of his cheek. Perhaps he was overconfident in his ability to reason with these people. “Your ancient enemies were The Oppressors. They took you from an agrarian society to a warp capable culture practically overnight while they were using you to build weapons for them. What you probably don’t know is that The Oppressors were genetically identical to your people. The Breen fought a war with them that lasted several years, and during that time, their confederacy lost a lot of ground. The war ended when The Oppressors ran out

of resources, mainly because your people stopped making their weapons for them. The Breen completely exterminated them. They want to exterminate you too, because they see you as just as big a threat as The Oppressors were. They planted that virus on your world with the intention of doing to you what they did to The Oppressors.”

“Captain, do you know how desperate and far-fetched that sounds?” Tarim asked.

“I thought you might think that,” Sheppard replied calmly. “That’s why we went to their world and we collected a bunch of scientific readings, data, and a couple bodies, all of which we will turn over to you. Once we’ve done that, we’ll collect our crew members and leave your space, if that’s what you want.”

“Captain, Breen ships coming into disruptor range,” Turner shouted from the Ops console. “They’re firing on us.”

The *Horizon* shook as the Breen found their target. “Hernandez, evasive maneuvers. Turner, fire at will.”

Turner’s hands flew over the controls and several phaser shots lanced out, striking the nearest Breen vessel. She then fired a barrage of photon torpedoes, all of which impacted on the enemy ship’s shields.

“Sir, we’re getting a communication from the surface. It’s Doctor Bashir,” Ch’qahrok said.

“Put him on,” Sheppard said.

“Captain, it’s vitally important that the Gourans understand something. I’ve analyzed the virus and it’s something I’ve personally seen before. This was originally a weaponized virus that was developed by the Dominion. I saw the results of it... an entire planet dead. As allies of the Dominion, the Breen would have had access to the virus. Starfleet medical missed it because it was hidden within the RNA of the virus we were trying to treat.”

“Tarim, did you hear all that?” Sheppard asked as the ship rocked from another volley of disruptor fire.

“I did, Captain.”

“Tarim, we’re not your enemy. But I can keep the *Horizon* here while Bashir works out a cure.” He paused. Further communication was not forthcoming from the High Chancellor.

“Captain, that fleet of ships from the surface is getting close,” Turner said.

Here we go, Sheppard thought wryly. Those ships, combined with two Breen ships, posed a serious threat to his ship. Individually they weren’t a great threat. That meant that he had to make the decision to have Turner destroy them as fast as she could shoot, or he was going to have to try and ignore them. “Turner, let me know the moment they start firing on us.” He then turned his attention back to the High Chancellor. “Tarim, things are about to get really ugly up here. I need a decision from you.” He still heard nothing. “Tarim!”

As the silence stretched out, Sheppard motioned to Ch’qahrok. “Cut communication with the surface. Turner, target as many of those small ships as you can.”

“Aye sir,” Turner replied.

Sheppard watched the approaching ships on the viewscreen. They must have been single pilot vessels. They packed a punch, but they wouldn’t be able to stand up to a direct assault from the *Horizon*. Then he saw them light up with phaser fire, but it wasn’t coming from the *Horizon*, and it wasn’t aimed at them.

“Captain, the ships from the surface are attacking the Breen!” Turner said.

“Hernandez, move the *Horizon* in to support the Gouran ships. Turner, keep right on firing at those Breen ships. Ch’qahrok, open a channel to the Breen vessels.”

The bridge rocked again as another substantial blow struck the ship.

“Shields down to fifty percent,” Turner reported.

“Channel open,” Ch’qahrok said.

“Breen vessels, the jig is up. We know what you’ve been doing here. We know why you’ve been doing it. You are now

committing an act of war against the Federation. Break off your attack and withdraw from Gouran space, or I can guarantee you that we'll repeat that asskicking you got in the Dominion war"

"No response," Ch'qahrok said.

"They're still shooting at us," Turner said as the ship rocked again as disruptor fire found its mark.

"How are the smaller ships doing against the Breen?" Sheppard asked.

"They're swarming. So far the Breen have destroyed six ships," Turner replied.

"How much damage as the Breen taken?"

"The Gourans are focusing their attacks on just one of the Breen ships. Their shields are down to twenty percent, and their hull is showing signs of buckling," Turner said.

"Target that ship's weapons and fire a full barrage of photon torpedoes," Sheppard said. Perhaps he could defuse their persistence in this battle.

"Aye, sir," Turner said.

The Breen ship she had targeted rocked as the torpedoes exploded on its hull. When the explosions faded, he could see several sections of the Breen ship's hull had been ripped away and the interior was exposed to the vacuum of space.

"I'm giving you this one chance to withdraw," Sheppard said into the comm. "If you fail to take my suggestion, we will destroy what's left of that garbage scow, and we'll make short work of your other ship. The choice of yours, but I'm pretty sure the Breen Confederacy will not appreciate you dragging them into a war now that your mission has failed."

There was silence for a moment, then he heard an electronic shriek over the comm system, but no direct communications followed.

"They're powering down weapons and putting distance between us," Turner said.

Sheppard breathed a heavy sigh of relief, then walked over to the Captain's chair. "Damage report."

“Shields are at forty percent. There are minor injuries throughout the ship, and they’re being moved to sickbay for treatment. No casualties.”

Sheppard nodded. That could have very easily gone the other way. “Open up a channel to Tarim.”

“Captain Sheppard, this is Tarim.”

“High Chancellor, I think we have a lot to talk about in the coming days. I hope this time we can do it under more pleasant circumstances.”

“That would be agreeable,” Tarim said.

“Please lower your disruption field so we can beam my crewmembers back aboard the ship. I’ll get with Bashir to see what we can do to end the threat of the virus on your planet.”

“Agreed, Captain.”

Epilogue

Captain's log Stardate 55082.9. All is well. Doctor Bashir has finished synthesizing a vaccination for the virus we unwittingly loosed on the planet. Casualties in Gour II's capitol city were heavy, with thirty thousand fatalities over the course of two days, but we have managed to stop it in its tracks. The government of Gour II has realized that they were duped by the Breen, and they have reconsidered their decision to leave the Federation. With our mission at a close, it's time to deal with a matter that has been open since this ship left spacedock.

Captain Sheppard sat at a table in the *Horizon's* lounge, surrounded by his senior officers. Out the large windows set into the forward hull, they could see the blue orb of Gour II below. They would be departing the system in another day, and Sheppard wanted to take this opportunity to relax with his staff before moving on to their next mission.

He looked around the circular table. Ipesch Nod sat to his right, then Julian Bashir, and Adriana Cunha. Kevia Turner sat opposite him, with Sass Ch'qahrok to her right, Tavika, and then Julian Bashir was to Sheppard's left. Sheppard could see the exhaustion in their eyes. Once the Breen had been driven off, the real work had begun. Bashir had spent two weeks tirelessly working on a vaccine, something that would have taken years in the antiquated lab they had provided for him on the planet. With the virus neutralized, one of the things they were doing before they left was replicating modern medical equipment, and providing them with the latest replicators that would allow them to produce their own equipment as they saw fit.

"I'd like to make a toast," Sheppard said. "To a successful, if difficult mission, to the saving of the population of an entire planet, and to an amazing crew that I intend to work with for years to come. Cheers!" Sheppard raised his glass and took a drink of the synthehol vodka as the others raised their drinks.

“And now, we have a matter to discuss. What should we name the ship’s lounge?”

“Why not go with the standard Ten Forward?” Cunha asked.

“Too boring,” Sheppard replied. “Even the Enterprise doesn’t use that name anymore. They now call theirs the Happy Bottom Riding Club.”

“That sounds like something Commander Riker would have come up with,” Bashir said.

“Oh, I wasn’t aware you knew the Commander,” Sheppard said.

“I don’t,” Bashir said. “But I spent some time with his transporter clone, Thomas, aboard *Deep Space Nine*.”

“That was the incident where he stole the *Defiant* and was taken into custody by the Cardassians, right?” Nod asked.

“It was, yes,” Bashir said.

“And last we heard, he’s still there, right?” Nod asked.

“Gentlemen, I’m sure the fate of Thomas Riker is fascinating, but we have a matter to settle, so focus,” said Sheppard.

“I thought we were off-duty,” Tavika said with a wry grin.

“Perhaps a simple description of the lounge’s function would be appropriate, such as ‘The Watering hole,’” Ch’qahrok said.

“That’s very scientific,” Turner commented.

Ch’qahrok sniffed in faux indignation.

“Maybe we should all throw a word out there, and then we can narrow them down and arrange them into something coherent,” Tavika suggested.

Bashir laughed. “Then we’d end up with a name that makes no sense, like *Myth Coffin Resting Title*.”

“Actually those words almost make sense together,” Sheppard commented.

“But you see my point!” Bashir said.

“Yeah, I see it,” Sheppard admitted.

“How about *The Flying Tiger*?” Turner asked.

“Now we’re getting somewhere!” Sheppard said.

“*The Gallow’s Pole*?” Nod suggested.

“The Federation doesn’t hang people,” Sheppard said.

“*The Captain’s Cabin*?” Cunha said.

“I wouldn’t want to confuse guests... or have them show up unexpectedly in my quarters thinking it’s the lounge,” Sheppard said.

“Alright sir, what do you want to call it?” Turner asked.

“That’s not the game we’re playing,” Sheppard said.

“McGinty’s?” Ch’qahrok said.

“I think I’ve heard that one before somewhere,” Turner said.

“How about the *Stem Bolt Factory*?” Bashir asked.

“The regular kind or the self-sealing kind?” Sheppard asked.

A silence fell over the table, and Sheppard had to admit that none of the ideas floated so far sounded exactly perfect.

“I’ve got something,” Turner said.

“Well let’s hear it,” Sheppard said.

“*The Twilight Lounge*,” Turner replied.

Sheppard thought about it for a moment. Twilight occurred on a planet when its sun reached the horizon, which matched up nicely with the ship’s name. He also thought it sounded catchy. He nodded slowly and smiled. “Yeah, I like that.”

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