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## BITTER MEDICINE

Dave Galanter



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# Chapter

## 1

"I'm reading the Starfleet warning buoy now, sir." Susan Haznedl tabbed at the ops console, then turned back to the bridge's center seat. "And also another warning hail, very weak."

Captain David Gold motioned to the speaker overhead. "Let's hear the other."

Haznedl nodded and worked her console again. "Running it through the translator, sir. There's not much of it, so it might take a few moments."

"I didn't see in the report that there was an original warning," Commander Sonya Gomez said, stepping down to the side of the captain's chair from the upper bridge.

"The Lexington sent the Starfleet buoy from two parsecs out," Haznedl replied. "The signal I'm getting is very weak. I doubt they picked it up."

"Lexington didn't have time to stop," Gold told Gomez, "but two Allurian ships running salvage in this area are missing with all hands, and reported a hazard before contact with them was lost. It was enough for Starfleet to leave the buoy and dispatch us."

Twisting from ops, Haznedl gestured with a roll of her head toward the speaker above. "I have the translation now, sir."

"We issue this extreme warning to avoid our vessel at all costs. There is no hope, there is no cure. Beware."

Cryptic, Gold thought. "Is that all?"

Shrugging slightly, Haznedl's hands ran quickly over her controls. "There's probably a datastream, too. And there might be more audio, sir, but there's almost no power behind the signal."

Gold pursed his lips and continued to wonder just how much danger for his ship and crew was aboard

that alien ship. Starfleet hadn't heard the "no hope, no cure" message they just had. "What did our sensor scan find?"

"A few ion trails, Allurian in signature," Haznedl said. "I'm not sure how far we can track it, but they both head in the same direction: three-one-two, mark one-eight."

"Launch a sensor probe," Gold told Lieutenant Anthony Shabalala at tactical. "Three-twelve, mark eighteen."

"Aye, sir."

Pulling in a long breath, Gold stared for a moment at the alien ship on the forward viewscreen. It wasn't particularly artistic in design. It looked more...efficient, for lack of a better word. "If there's some hazard aboard that ship that spread to two other ships..." he said more to Gomez than anyone.

"I'll brief Dr. Lense," Gomez said, turning immediately toward the turbolift.

"Level-one safety procedures on this one," the captain called after her.

"A shuttle for decon?"

"Only thing I know that spreads death from ship to ship is something contagious or something toxic. The away team can beam to and from the shuttle, but full medical tests are to be completed there before anyone comes back here."

"Yes, sir."

\* \* \*

Dr. Elizabeth Lense had come quickly to the bridge when Commander Gomez told her of the possible away mission. It had been a while since she'd been off ship, and she had to admit to looking forward to an opportunity to get out of sickbay, if only for a few hours.

"I'm not sure we even need an expedition," Captain Gold told her, putting into doubt that she might get the chance. "Closer sensor scans suggest this ship is derelict for a few hundred years at least. Probe telemetry shows the drift pattern."

"I thought the probes were tracking the Allurian ion trails," Gomez said.

The captain rose from his chair and walked to Haznedl's ops station. "They are," he said, pointing to the graphic display of the probe data. "It would seem the Allurians were headed in the direction the derelict came from."

"Something caused those ships to be lost with all hands," Lense said. "I'd like to investigate it, Captain."

"I understand," Gold said, resting one hand on the back of Haznedl's chair and motioning to the ship on the viewer with his other. "I'm considering it. What about life signs on the derelict?" he asked Haznedl. "Lexington said none."

"Indeterminate. There's too much radiation to get a good reading."

“Their engines,” Gomez offered. “Half the ship is irradiated. It’ll definitely need structural repair, if we don’t declare it a hazard and destroy it.”

“All right, then that’s the mission.” Gold pivoted and returned to the command chair. “To determine which, and then make it happen.”

Lense nodded her understanding. “Commander Gomez said the message buoy talks about ‘no cure.’ If the Allurians contracted some disease, then took it away from here, we’ll need to investigate—not destroy—the source of that contagion.”

“That’s a point and a half, Doctor,” Gold said with a sigh and smiled. “Finish readying your team,” he told Gomez as he lowered himself back into his seat. “And make it a small one, until we know what we’re dealing with.”

\* \* \*

“I don’t believe there’ll be a need for security, Commander.” Dr. Lense, having put her EVA suit on before entering the *Vinci* shuttlebay because she didn’t want to bother struggling with it in the close quarters of the shuttle, double-checked her medkit for everything she thought she’d need.

“Commander Gomez’s orders, Doctor.” Lieutenant Commander *Domenica Corsi* attached a holster to her EVA suit and made sure her hand phaser fit snugly inside it. “There might not be any people alive on that ship, but that doesn’t mean there’s no automated security.” She picked up a larger phaser rifle from next to her left boot, checked its safety, and leaned it against one shoulder.

“Okay.” Lense nodded, then turned to Gomez as she entered the hangar deck. Gomez held the top half of her EVA suit under one arm, and was only wearing the bottom half. “I’m sure I don’t have to tell any of you how important it will be to make sure your EVA suits are kept completely intact,” Lense said, “even if there’s ample life support over there. We’ll be using this shuttle to beam over, and if you have an occurrence where you believe your suit is compromised, you’ll beam back to the shuttle. Any questions?”

Gomez smiled and held up the bulky helmet and EVA shirt. “I just didn’t want to pilot out the shuttle in the suit. But yes, we understand. I’ll find engineering on the ship, and check out the engine design. Starfleet wants full specs on it, and it’s in obvious disrepair but I’ll find out the extent. *Domenica*, make your way through the ship as best you can, and see if anyone is still poking around on board. Report every fifteen minutes.”

*Corsi* nodded and the three boarded the Shuttlecraft *Kwolek*.

\* \* \*

Lense never cared for beaming into any place with an EVA suit on. Somehow it seemed more claustrophobic, as if the suit beamed in first, and then she beamed into it. That was why she’d kept her eyes closed until she felt the transport process end. When she opened them, “obvious disrepair” seemed like an understatement.

There were pods along the wall before them, electronics falling from their sides, wires and insulation hanging out from panels here and there and... well, everywhere. There were also a lot of squiggles and symbols on the walls, but it didn’t look so much like art as it looked like graffiti, or at least some kind of writing.

“This is their sickbay.” She realized this as she looked from the writing to the consoles on which they had been scrawled, and the several beds against two of the gray walls.

“It scanned as being the safest from the radiation leaks.” Gomez’s voice came over the EVA’s comm systems as the commander flipped open a tricorder. “Which I guess a sickbay would be, usually. Ours is more shielded, too.”

Lense broke out her own tricorder—a medical one—and opened it a bit more awkwardly than Gomez had. Sonya was used to working in EVA suits from time to time. Lense has trained in them, had to use them sometimes, but generally didn’t get as much practice as the rest of the S.C.E. crew.

“Atmosphere is nitrogen/oxygen mix, but I’m reading a high level of CO<sub>2</sub>, carbon monoxide, and other trace gases,” Gomez said.

“Breathable, but we should stay in the suits.”

“Agreed,” Gomez said. “Domenica, life signs are still indeterminate, so let’s secure this deck first, then I’ll spiral down to engineering and you go up toward what might be a bridge. Once it’s secure, maybe we can get this engine under control.”

Corsi nodded, opened her own tricorder easily, and held her phaser rifle ready in the other hand.

“Elizabeth?” Gomez turned to Lense.

“I can set up shop here. If there is an infectious agent on this vessel, this is the place we’d find it anyway. It’s probably also where the Allurians beamed in.” She glanced down at her tricorder. “Oh!”

“An idea?”

“I can scan for Allurian DNA.” The doctor jabbed at the tricorder for a few moments, reconfiguring the scanning filters. “Traces. They were here. Within the last ten days, I’d say.”

“You okay to go it alone?” Gomez tossed a thumb over her shoulder. “I thought I’d start by seeing if I can find a power relay on this deck and bring you more than lights. Maybe some of these consoles will have data we can access.”

“Sure.”

Corsi soon found a door into what was presumably a corridor. Gomez quickly followed her, and Lense was then alone. With a deep breath, she stiffly walked toward a desk and put her case down on it.

There was something mildly spooky about being on an empty starship. An empty alien starship multiplied that by a factor of ten. Being confined to a space suit focused that foreboding feeling even more.

As she reached for the case at her feet, Lense thought she heard a sound. She cocked her head toward the doorway—fruitless since external sound was delivered via the same speaker system in her helmet that transmitted the voices of the other members of the away team.

“Domenica?” Lense took a step toward the door. “Sonya?”

She heard the noise again, a tinny sort of scraping sound, she thought, but from the opposite direction to

the door, obviously, since she was looking that way and there was nothing there. Using an input pad on the lower sleeve of her suit, she increased the gain of the external microphone. She heard nothing unusual, and thought that perhaps her mind was merely playing the tricks it could when one was alone and in a somewhat spooky setting.

Opening her case, Lense pulled out a scanner that was a bit stronger than a normal medical tricorder, and set it to humming on the tabletop in front of her. Signs of an active virus in the air were beginning to show when she heard the scraping sound again. She wasn't imagining it.

"Lense to Gomez."

"Gomez here."

"Where are you, if I may ask, Commander?" Lense tried to keep the nerves from her voice.

"I don't have a map. I'm in a corridor heading into what's either their engineering deck, or some other place they have some large radiation leak happening."

"I just meant are you close by. I heard a noise."

"What kind of a noise?"

"Muffled. Like a shuffle or a scrape. Life signs were indeterminate."

"Do you want me to send Domenica back?"

"I...No. It could be a processor glitch in the suit's sensors."

After a brief pause, Gomez said, "I'm sending Corsi."

Lense shook her head and righted a chair that had been on its side on the deck. "Sonya, there's no need. I'm fine."

"Mysterious ship, Elizabeth. Let's play it safe."

"Fine. Lense out." Now she felt stupid. She was a professional. Why was she calling for help after hearing a shuffle? Then again, she didn't call for help. She called for information. And really, being cautious was probably the right way—

Shooof. There it was again. But the EVA suit's speakers were in back of the helmet and didn't really give her a sense of the sound's direction as the human ear would. "I'm not hearing things," she whispered to herself, and switched her tricorder from bio mode to area-scan mode. It wasn't as accurate as a tactical tricorder, but it would do.

She spun around. The tricorder told her there was a life form close by. Radiation was hampering the reading, but it was on this deck. It wasn't human, if the readings were right, so it wasn't Corsi. Then again, the readings may not have been right.

Lense searched the perimeter of the room, and it wasn't long before the proximity of the readings told her behind which panel to look. She considered calling for Corsi or contacting Gomez again. But whoever was with her was hiding...and if worse came to worst, she had her phaser.



She slid the panel away, but nothing lay beyond. At least that she could see. On the cuff of her EVA suit was a light, and Lense tentatively switched it on and pointed it forward into the alcove.

Two eyes reflected back, like a cat's eyes might, and instinctively she shrank away for a moment, pulling the light back. When she shined it back into the wall's recess, just a moment later, the eye reflections were gone.

The being attached to them was not. Eyes scrunched closed, shaking in what Lense hoped was fear rather than a prelude to some attack, the smallish humanoid seemed to be attempting to back itself as far into a crevice as it could.

"Lense to Gomez," the doctor spoke into her comm as she took in the small form's smooth head, slight limbs, and ridged brow. "We have a survivor."

"On my way. Domenica, meet me at the doctor's location, double time."

Other than shaking, despite Lense's now attempting to coax relaxation with soothing tones, the ship's lone inhabitant didn't move until Corsi and Gomez arrived, and then only with a rocking once it heard their voices.

Lense had moved her light beam from directly on the being to slightly above it, so now the...was it a child? It looked like a child. In any case, it was cloaked half in shadow.

"There could be others," Corsi offered, and Lense noticed the woman's tricorder was stowed and the phaser rifle was steadied in both hands.

"Check each deck. Let's be sure," Gomez said. "I think the doctor and I have this handled."

Corsi nodded and left again with an "Aye, Commander."

Her tricorder back from tactical to bio mode, Lense said, "I don't think she, or he, is an adult. Judging by the size of the controls and chairs."

"The universal translator isn't going to work if he doesn't talk," Gomez said.

"Hi there," Lense said into the dark alcove and reflective eyes. When she spoke, those eyes flashed for a moment, then closed shut again.

"I don't think that's working." Gomez went to the nearest computer console and pulled off an access panel to the electronics below. "Let me see if I can get their computer to talk to us. From that, maybe we can get enough for the UT to allow him to understand us."

As Gomez worked, doing whatever it was that engineers did while others waited, Lense couldn't help but wonder what terrified thoughts were behind the child's glowing eyes. If everyone else was dead, what had the poor thing seen? And now aliens had invaded her ship. Did she assume that Lense and Gomez had killed her parents?

Looking away for only a moment to see what Gomez was doing, Lense noticed that the small child took the opportunity to try to shrink even farther back into the recesses of the access way. There was nowhere for her to go. Sometimes such a situation could nearly paralyze Lense's decision-making

process. Different cultures reacted differently than humans. Attempting a soothing tone could be “fighting words” for another race. What one culture would see as a submissive stance, another could see as an overture to attack.

“Got it,” Gomez said finally, and Lense watched the child flinch. The computer panel came to life, and Gomez used a tricorder to access its functions. “This might work.”

A computerized voice began to speak. “Fotanet ba’alest. Dolah pocheeny sot ba touh begh. Sooft dabrah gren co’olat retnala’ag borft plumadal.”

The doctor frowned. “Nothing. Shouldn’t we have enough with what we got off the warning broadcast?”

“It probably wasn’t enough. You know some take longer than others. I’m not even sure the ship’s translator data was beamed into the EVA suits’ version before we left.”

The child, Lense noticed, didn’t particularly like whatever the computer was saying. But maybe she was just reading into the alien’s expressions.

“Pocheeny kahlahct pathelet rathib t’binchekt. Aldasna contaminated sodithbrash throughout. Life dochmaba bar’ut systems cobnida maintained oht-langrah, so it is only pocheeny we fear.”

Gomez smiled. “Getting there.”

The computer continued. “If we survive the next tests, it is my hope that we can determine why Dobrah is immune.”

“That’s the end of the log.”

It was enough. Lense was able to put it easily together. “Dobrah?” she asked the child. “Do you understand me?”

The alien child said nothing. She, or he, sat frightened, and shook in her fear.

“We won’t hurt you,” Lense said, attempting her most soothing voice. As an aside to Gomez she added in a whisper, “We might look less imposing if we weren’t dressed in EVA suits.”

“I’d imagine.”

Lense put her tricorder down and showed her open hands, which skewed the light on her wrist at an odd angle and cast the child in even more shadow. “Dobrah, we’re here to help you.”

“G-go away.” The slight voice was weak, but Lense sensed that wasn’t physical weakness, just insecurity. “Go away go away go away go away go away go away go away go away go away—”

“Back up,” Lense told Gomez. “Let’s give him some room.”

“Him?”

“Just a guess. I don’t know why. Call it intuition.”

“I’m a him,” Dobrah said, still fearful but also sounding a bit insulted. “What are you things? Why are

you here? Go away go away go away go away go away—”

“Don’t be afraid,” Lense said. “Are you alone?”

The boy didn’t answer. He was rocking back and forth, arms holding his knees close to his body.

“We’re humans,” Lense told him, still stepping away, giving him space, but answering his question. “We’re both—” She almost said females, but every culture looked at sex differently and who knew how his would see woman. “We’re both from the Federation.”

“I...I don’t know a planet Federation. I have a ship. My ship. Go away. There are no planets. Go away go away go away—”

“What planet are you from?” Gomez asked, and Lense cast her an annoyed look. She didn’t seem to know how to talk to a scared child.

“Go away!”

“Dobrah, we’re here to help you, but we have to know where you’re from.”

“I’m from Earth! Now go away. Go away go away go away go away—”

Lense and Gomez exchanged a glance. It wouldn’t have been the first time that the universal translator had done that. Many worlds’ own name for their planet was something simple, like “home” or “earth.” They’d have to see if there were star charts on the computer that would tell them where the boy’s home planet was.

“Dobrah, are you alone on this ship?”

He looked up, stopped rocking, and looked at them, perplexed. “You’re here.”

Unable to suppress a chuckle, Lense said, “I meant usually alone.”

“Yes. Others came. I hid.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know who they were. They went away. You should go away!” He was rocking again. Lense considered completely backing away for a while—just remaining in the room until he got more used to them.

But it didn’t seem that necessary. The boy’s intelligence was obvious, and the catch in his voice was more and more slight as time went on. He was becoming less scared and more curious. “Will you sit down?” Lense asked him as she backed up farther and motioned to one of the beds. She then pulled herself onto another of the beds a few feet away.

Dobrah inched slowly out of the alcove and close to the first bed, but didn’t sit. “Why are you here? Are you real? Are you really real?”

“Of course we’re real.” Lense turned to Gomez. “If he’s been here for some time he may be prone to hallucination. He might not know if we’re real.” Then she kneeled down to be more at the boy’s level.

“We’re here to help you, Dobrah. This ship isn’t safe—”

“This is my home,” he interrupted. “This is my ship. You must leave! Leave! Go away!”

He answered so quickly that Lense almost allowed herself to become defensive about whether it was a proper home right now or not. “All right. How long has it been your home?” she asked finally.

Looking away for a long moment, it took Dobrah a while to answer. Something about him suddenly changed. As if he’d decided he wasn’t imagining them and they were really there. “A long time, I think.” He said it softly, and Lense wasn’t sure if that was because he was sad, or just unable to know how long anymore.

“Alone?” Lense asked.

“Some of it.” He was rocking again, not looking at them. “Everyone is gone. You must go! Leave me alone!”

“Did they d—” Gomez began, but Lense cut her off with a look.

With a light movement of one finger to the arm of her EVA suit, she turned off the external speaker so only Gomez would hear her over the comm. “We have to be delicate here. The computer record said he was immune to whatever killed everyone on this vessel. That could leave him with a star-mass of guilt.”

“Sorry,” Gomez said quietly.

Lense turned her speaker back on. “Do you know what happened to everyone?”

Sadly, his eyes still cast away, Dobrah’s voice was slight. “Everyone?” he asked. “Everyone’s gone... Everyone.”

## Chapter 2

“Where’s the boy now?” Captain Gold asked, his voice laced with a light thread of static, probably due to the radiation.

“With Dr. Lense. Commander Corsi is sure the ship is otherwise... uninhabited.”

“Why did you hesitate?”

Gomez huffed out a breath. “I almost said abandoned, but that doesn’t really fit, does it?”

“No. Not if they all died. Any bodies?”

“We found one,” she said. “An Allurian. Looked like he was wearing a personal shield belt rather than an EVA-like suit. It failed, and the radiation probably got him.”

“Probably?”

“The tools aren’t here for a proper autopsy, the doctor tells me. It could also be some virus that we believe only the boy is immune to. She’d like some equipment beamed over to the shuttle, which we’ll then bring over here. I’ll need a few things as well. Engineering is locked down with a protective bulkhead. It looks like the Allurians tried to get in, but didn’t have what to do it with. We do.”

“Transmit a list. We’ll get it to you.” There was a pause, then Gold continued. “If the Allurians left that ship with a disease...”

“We’ll try to find out, sir,” Gomez assured him. “Anything from the probe telemetry?”

“We have a course to follow, as soon as you folks are finished over there.”

“I don’t know how long the autopsy will take. And we’re unsure of what to do with the boy. This ship isn’t very stable, and Dr. Lense can’t give me a clear answer as to whether he carries the disease. She hasn’t even isolated it yet. The tools to do that are on that manifest I’ll send.”

“Get to it, then. I want to know what we’re dealing with.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

\* \* \*

In the time it took for Corsi to completely search the rest of the ship, and for Gomez to find engineering and talk with the captain about their equipment needs, Lense had cleaned up the alien sickbay and learned where a lot of things were kept, or were supposed to be kept. It looked as if the Allurians had done some looting.

She’d also been talking with Dobrah a lot as she worked, and the boy had finally decided to sit on one of the beds and watch Lense with tremendous interest and intent. He was doing more and more of the talking, and he sounded more comfortable with her now. In fact, he sounded like he’d not talked to anyone in months and wanted to make up for it.

“What’re you doing now?” he kept asking.

She indulged every question as cheerfully as possible. “Well, I’m using my tricorder—it’s a computer and scanner—to read labels on all these containers and shelves. It looks like a lot is missing.”

“Are you a healer?”

“Yes. A doctor.” She took a box, read the label, and put it away again.

“A doctor or a healer?”

“There’s no difference in my language, really. Well, there can be. But I guess I’m a doctor who is a healer.”

“My mother was a healer,” he said, and she couldn’t tell what was in his voice when he said it.

“I—She was?”

Dobrah leaned forward on the bed and kicked his feet up. “You look like she looked when she was

fixing things and making it all neat in here.”

Lense wanted to ask what happened to her. But she knew. “Was that her voice we heard? On the computer?”

He rolled his head around in what seemed to be like a nod. “I used to listen to it sometimes, when things worked. Because she mentions my name. I don’t want to forget what she sounds like. I do sometimes. Forget. I don’t want to forget.”

“No, of course not.” She tried to imitate the head roll as he did it.

“Gomez to Lense.”

“Lense here.”

“Stand clear of the beam-down point, Elizabeth. Our equipment is on the shuttle. I’m going to have the computer beam it over.”

“Okay.”

“Energizing.”

In the center of the room, several large containers sparkled into existence with a hum and flashes of light.

Dobrah stretched his neck to see it all. “That’s a lot of stuff. What’s it do?”

“Well, some of it I don’t recognize, so that’s for Commander Gomez.” Lense smiled at him and walked toward the crates.

“And the other stuff?”

“It’s medical equipment.”

“Are you going to run tests on me?”

She turned back toward him, feeling her own brow knit. “Why would you ask that? Did...did your mother and other doctors run a lot of tests?”

“Yes.” He seemed unconcerned about the tests, she thought, based on his nonchalant tone.

“Mine won’t hurt,” she told him.

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

\* \* \*

“What did you find, Doctor?” Sliced with more static than before, Captain Gold’s voice sounded far away.

“The Allurian we found died from a plasma bolt, sir. Weapons fire. The energy signature matches what we have on file for Allurian weapons.”

“One of his own people killed him?”

Lense nodded, despite the comm link being audio only. “After he’d already sustained cellular damage from this vessel’s radiation.”

“Maybe to put him out of his misery?”

“Why not treat him?” Gomez asked. Lense had almost forgotten they’d been sharing the comm link to brief the captain.

“They were looting the sickbay,” Lense said. “They may not have had the supplies.”

“Allurians aren’t known for stealing medical technology.” Gomez’s connection was local and sounded stronger, but still crackled with static here and there.

“I know. But my scans indicate there is a contagion here. Viral in nature, and Dobrah is only alive because he’s immune.”

“Would the Allurians’ personal shields have protected them from it?” the captain asked.

“Commander Gomez checked the settings on the shield we found on our dead body. It was attuned to block the radiation on this ship, and nothing else. We found no external air tank.”

“If that was still working, the Allurians would have recovered it,” Gomez added.

“Unless it was airtight, they still would have been infected. There are virions of complex construction in the air, and they’re aerobic. If they were here long enough, I might be able to tell if the Allurians contracted the disease. Lipids are present and are located in the virion envelope. The fatty acid composition of viral lipids and host cell membranes would perhaps be similar, meaning I could tell in what species of host any particular virion was replicated.”

Captain Gold chuckled. “I’m going to assume that means you can breathe in the little devils and you might be able to prove the Allurians did. What kind of virus is it?”

“Level Four, I’m guessing, in whatever the—what did we find out their names are?”

“Dobrah’s people?” Gold asked. “Abramowitz is still going over what you could salvage from the one computer bank you were able to access, but their own word for their race is the Shmoam-ag.”

“Well, the Shmoam-ag created themselves a nasty virus, near one hundred percent fatal.”

“Definitely engineered?”

“I’ve probably only scratched the surface of the morphology, but determining that was the easy part. All the classic signs. Highly advanced, too, with both RNA and DNA coexisting in two separate sections. That’s a virion with more than five-point-six percent nucleic acid combined, with the complete genome coming in almost sixty thousand nucleotides long. While what I’ve managed to decode is minimal, it’s filled with information that’s... well, it couldn’t be considered natural.”

“I see.”

Lense wondered if she'd been too specific, but Gold had long since proven his ability to withstand barrages of technobabble, whether it was Gomez and her people's engineering jargon, Faulwell going on about a language, Abramowitz on a culture, or Lense herself with medicine.

“And one of the rooms off sickbay even has a quantity of the virus in several production stages. I'm not sure why. But it's a viral lab like any we might have—multiple airlocks are used to enter and exit, and one of the signs translates to what we'd call a warning about a 'no-sharps' area—to prevent the puncturing of the biohazard suits that are worn to enter the lab. We found those, too.”

Probably taking all that in, the captain turned his attention to his first officer. “Gomez, what about engineering?”

“I still don't have access to the engine room. I do have access to an auxiliary control area nearby. I've set up radiation shielding in that room, which is allowing me to bring those aux systems back online. With those, I might be able to use an automated system to bring the engines under control for a closer look.”

“How much time would that take?”

“Six, maybe seven hours, if things go well,” Gomez said.

“And what about you, Doctor? It's possible the Shmoam-ag didn't have a cure for themselves, but could there be one for other species?”

“It's a possibility, but too early to know.”

There was silence for a while as Gold perhaps considered his command options. “We need to catch up to the Allurians in case we have to stop them before they infect others. Gomez, use the shuttle's comm array to enhance our ability to communicate at a distance. Would either of you like us to beam over anyone to assist you?”

“Captain, I think it's best if we limit anyone else's exposure for the time being,” Lense warned.

“You three are safe, aren't you?”

“For the time being I'd assume so, but the more people here, the more we risk an accident exposing someone.”

“Understood. We'll be under way within the hour. If you need any additional supplies or equipment before we leave, let us know. Gold out.”

“You assume so?” Gomez asked over the comm, once the captain had left the channel. “Anything I should know?”

“No, but I don't know all we're dealing with. If we go back to the shuttle, I recommend we leave the EVA suits here. Beam right out of them, and back in when we return. Just to make sure nothing goes back with us that the transporter decontamination couldn't handle.”



# Chapter

## 3

“Where do you get your food?” Lense had thought to ask Dobrah this question several times in the nine hours they’d now known each other, but other questions—or sometimes just listening—had taken precedence.

“The canteens. There’s a lot of food. I like most of it.”

Lense nodded and continued hovering over the recently beamed-over equipment she’d set up on one of the sickbay’s beds, but she was sure to make eye contact with the boy often. Gomez was focusing all her efforts on venting the radiation in the engineering compartment, and Corsi was helping her. The doctor was happy to have Dobrah’s company, considering she was claustrophobically confined to her EVA suit. And the way he was talking to her, Dobrah was ecstatic to have the fellowship as well.

“What kinds of food don’t you like?” Lense asked, and noticed she was a bit hungry herself.

“Oh, all the crumbly stuff. Tobah sticks and sanbell butter. Things like that.”

A smile turning up the corners of her lips, Lense couldn’t help but notice that the universal translator was especially good with duplicating the tone of Dobrah’s age. His speech was more...informal. As time went on, and the translator “knew” him better, Lense supposed it sounded more like he would really sound to her if she knew his language.

“I don’t like things with seeds,” she told him. “Sesame seed rolls or poppy bread.”

Dobrah wrinkled his nose in sympathetic distaste and slid down from his seat on the far bed. He slowly made his way closer to Lense as he looked over her array of scanners and computers with mild interest. “Are you going to cure me?” he asked after a few minutes of silence.

Pushing out a long breath, Lense took a step back from her work. “You’re not sick.”

“I’m the only one who isn’t.”

For the first time it occurred to Lense that the boy might know quite a lot about his situation. It was obvious by what little of the sickbay logs she’d been able to salvage—most were not on the one console they’d gotten to work—that extensive tests had attempted to figure out why he was immune.

“Do you know a lot about this disease?”

He paused for a moment, perhaps not unsure what to say but more to gather his thoughts. He moved his head from shoulder to shoulder in a motion Lense had discovered was rather like a shrug. “I know I can’t get it, but I have it like everyone else.”

“You’re a carrier.”

“Yes. I wasn’t really that scared of you when I saw you. I was more scared you’d catch the Pocheeny.”

“That’s what it’s called?”

“Yes.”

“Why did you think we’d get...Pochieny?”

“Pocheeny.”

“Why did you think we’d be infected if we were in these containment suits?”

“My mother used to wear one, too. She died of it. I killed her.”

The words sliced into Lense and she took his shoulders in her arms and kneeled down. “No. Dobrah, it’s not your fault.”

“I can never leave this ship,” he told her, rolling his head in a Shmoam-ag nod. “I kill people.”

“Then we’re just going to have to cure you,” Lense told him, and as soon as the words left her lips she felt they were a mistake. And yet, she continued. “And then you won’t have to worry about it anymore, okay?”

“I like you,” he said, his thin lips flattening into an innocent smile. “You remind me of my mother.” Quickly the smile turned into a terrible frown. “I—I don’t want to kill you, too.”

She pulled him close, embracing him, and he hugged his arms around her neck very, very strongly. She hadn’t known him long, but she wanted to cure him now—to make sure he didn’t live in fear of killing others, and more important...alone.

\* \* \*

“He knows he’s a carrier,” Lense told Gomez and Corsi as they took a meal break back on the Kwolek. Lense took a bite from her turkey sandwich. It was the first she’d eaten in over twelve hours, and she needed the energy. She was also glad to be out of the EVA suit, and even though it had given her complete mobility, she felt the need to stretch as if she finally had room to do so.

“You told him, or he already knew?”

“He knew.” Lense chuckled as she gulped a little juice. “He said he was hiding from us to protect us.”

“Do you believe that?”

“I think he was hiding to protect himself and us both, actually. But it’s sweet that he wants to be protective. He’s such a boy.”

“You sound like you really know him,” Corsi said. “We’ve only been here a day.”

“We’ve talked nonstop. It’s actually been a bit hard to concentrate on my work sometimes, but I have found out more about this virus.”

Gomez gulped some Earl Grey tea from a mug. “Anything we need to report to the captain?”

“Not yet. I think I’d have trouble explaining it to someone who isn’t a biologist at this point. It’s all data,

not a conclusion.” Lense looked under the bread. She’d forgotten mustard. Oh well. “How about you?”

“We’ve vented enough radiation to enter main engineering. If we don’t determine where the radiation is coming from soon, it will build up again—with us inside. I wish we had some detailed schematics, but the computer core is too close to engineering and there’s nothing stored locally on any console we’ve found. You wouldn’t have been able to bring up anything in sickbay if there weren’t personal files stored there and not yet dumped to the central core.”

“That explains why there’s only a few days’ worth of files,” Lense said more to herself than the others. “Once I’m done mapping the entire viral genome, I’ll probably need that core data from Dobrah’s mother’s research if I’m going to cure him.”

Gomez looked up from her bowl of noodles. “Cure him?”

“There must be a cure. No one engineers something this complex without there being a cure coded in somewhere.”

Since Corsi didn’t usually involve herself in the scientific discussions, Lense was surprised to hear her pipe in: “You’ve never known a designed virus to not have a cure?”

“Of course. Bastards like T’sart who worked for the Romulan Empire, or the Cardassian Crell Moset...”

“Then how do you know—”

“I’m going to cure him. I’m going to find a way.” She said it again, and the words clattered to the deck like a dropped dinner plate.

“Okay,” Gomez said slowly, but Lense had turned away and couldn’t see her expression.

“I need to get back.”

\* \* \*

Beaming directly into an EVA suit seemed as if it would be tricky, though Lense knew it was not. Still, she felt uneasy until the process was finished and she was able to step away from the beam-down point. Dobrah appeared from nowhere to greet her.

“You are back!”

“Yes,” she smiled through her transparent visor. “We had dinner. Did you eat?”

“Not yet.”

“Well, why don’t you go get something and bring it back? Keep me company while I work?” She patted her gloved hand on the top of his smooth head.

“Sure!” He ran off and was back quickly, before Lense really had time to set up her next experiment. She decided to talk while he ate, and so she only monitored the continuing viral genome-mapping the computer was performing.

Dobrah talked and talked, and when Corsi and Gomez beamed back down he said hello to them cheerfully and then continued. Lense worked on, listening happily if not completely.

At some point into the night, Dobrah fell asleep and Lense was able to work uninterrupted. She didn't know if this was normally the room in which he made his bed, but it likely was. Their sickbay was relatively shielded from the radiation pouring from the ship's engines, and the boy was perhaps smart enough to—

No. That wasn't why. This was where his mother had worked. No wonder it was here he'd spent most of his time.

His mother...where was she? Why were there no bodies of the crew, of his family?

Perhaps they were somewhere.

Grabbing a tricorder and setting it to scan for Shmoam-ag DNA, Lense followed a path out into the corridor after telling the device to ignore Dobrah's life sign.

As she walked, vectoring this way and that as the halls would allow, she homed in on the DNA signatures without life, and wondered if she was fooling herself into thinking she could cure Dobrah. She didn't think so, but she instinctively knew it had been a mistake to promise it. In mentioning it to Gomez and Corsi, she'd been hoping their reaction would be mild and unconcerned, in an attempt to make herself feel better about having said it. Their reaction was anything but. She tried to think positively, however. The Sherman's Planet plague had seemed impossible at the start as well. There was a confidence in her now that hadn't been there since before the war. Confidence alone didn't bring results...but it helped.

\* \* \*

"I'm not so sure I can do this," Corsi said in complaint.

Gomez didn't have time to argue the point. "You're all I have, Domenica. This is far more complicated than I thought. This engine design is—"

Corsi smiled. "Totally alien?"

Laughing briefly, Gomez asked, "Did you just make a joke?"

"It's been known to happen." Corsi attempted to hold in place the tubing Gomez needed as the engineer laser-soldered it into place. "What exactly are we doing, anyway?"

"You're holding a conduit in place against a valve so I can seal it. Then we're going to attempt to reroute plasma to an area where their cooling units still work."

"And you know how all this works just from the schematic on the back of the panel we pried off?"

"Partly." Gomez grunted as she struggled to get her hand where it needed to be in the cramped space.

"Only partly?"

"The other part is guessing."

Corsi felt her brow wrinkle. “Uh... I don’t like the sound of guessing.”

“Give me some credit, here,” Gomez said as she fired the hand laser and melted the rim of the conduit onto the valve. “It’s educated guessing.”

“Am I going to blow up?” Corsi asked, feeling some of the laser’s heat find its way up to her hand.

“Not on your own,” Gomez said dryly.

“That’s not funny at all.” Pressing her lips into a thin line, Corsi took her hand away from the now attached conduit when Gomez motioned for her to.

“Relax. The danger here is that we’ll have worse radiation leaks.” She got up as Corsi did, and they both slid the access panel back into place. “Okay, I’m done with this one.”

“This one?” Corsi asked. “How many more are there?”

“Nineteen.”

“You know why I like my job better than yours?” Corsi asked as she picked up the tool kit to her left as Gomez did the same to the one at her right.

“Why?”

“Because if we do blow up, at least I won’t know it’s about to happen.”

## Chapter 4

“Wong, hold us out here at twenty thousand kilometers. Match the Allurian vessel’s drift rate.” Captain Gold studied the ship on the main viewscreen. It was a ramshackle design, he thought, more for function than form. And even function wasn’t that great. The Allurians were often scavengers, and their ships could look like mishmashed, makeshift afterthoughts.

“Aye, sir. Matching.”

“Shabalala?” Gold turned toward tactical.

“Scanning, sir,” Shabalala reported. “Minimal power output. Reactors are online but engines are at null thrust.”

“Their drift vector suggests inertia from last plotted course,” Wong said.

Shabalala nodded his agreement. “There are no weapons charged, and their shields are down. Deflector is on—probably automatic.”

“Haznedl? Any response to our hails?” Gold stepped down from his command chair and rubbed his left palm against his side to stifle an itch.

“None, sir.”

“Life signs?”

“None, sir.”

A knot was beginning to form on Gold’s neck. They were not finding any helpful information so far, and it made him uneasy. “There were two Allurian ships. Scan the area. See if we can find the second one.” He made his way back to the center seat. “And let’s put out a warning buoy on this one. Just in case.”

\* \* \*

“This ship needs more than one person can do.” Frustrated, Gomez tossed her hyperspanner back into the tool kit and twisted her neck back and forth, without a decent way to massage it within the EVA suit.

“What am I, an overstuffed chair?” Corsi asked.

“You’re a help, Domenica, but you’re not an engineer. We’ve been at this for four and a half days now, and moved maybe an inch in shoring up these weaknesses.” Gomez pulled herself toward the tool kit and reached for the spanner again, deciding to give it another try. “We really need Pattie on this one. This ship is a structural nightmare. It’s an ion engine system, very complex, and at least three hundred years old. It doesn’t look like it’s had maintenance in half that time.”

“Are you saying it’s a lost cause?”

Gomez sighed. “I don’t know. It is if I’m the only one working on it. Maybe if I had the full team...”

“For now all you have is me.”

Gomez smiled. “Is this a pep talk?”

“Yes.”

“Well, we might just keep this engine from exploding.” Gomez pulled in a deep breath. “Back to work?”

Gesturing to the panel in which they’d been toiling, Corsi said, “Lead the way.”

\* \* \*

He was sleeping so soundly, looking so peaceful, Lense didn’t want to have to wake him. She wondered how often his sleep was this serene. He’d slept in the sickbay as she worked every night for the last three nights. When they first found Dobrah, he had all the signs of an emotionally disturbed, lonely, abandoned child—rocking himself, repeating to them that they must leave him alone. His turnaround was almost instant. That suggested to Lense that the boy was still very disturbed, but in a period of relief due to his first companionship in...how long?

She hadn’t yet been able to figure that out, but had a better idea once she’d toured the ship looking for Shmoam-ag DNA. But that had only given her a guess. A more in-depth look into his biological makeup would pin it down, and that was why she needed to wake him. She’d lost track, however, of how long he’d been asleep. She leaned down, almost but not quite caressing his smooth forehead, from his thick brow back across his scalp. She’d promised him a cure. What if she had to settle for his relocation to

some Starfleet Medical isolation ward? He'd have company at least, but...what kind of a life would that be?

"Dobrah," she called softly, "wake up."

The boy stirred lightly, groaning a bit, thick with sleep.

"Dobrah?" She shook him just a bit, pushing into his arm with her protected hand.

His unfocusing eyes looked up glassily, reflecting in the light. "Mama?"

Innocent and sweet, the word cut right through her heart.

"No, honey. It's Elizabeth."

"E-liz," he said groggily. "You're still real."

She nodded. "I need to run a test on you. Can you lie straight for me and not move?"

"I can do that." He straightened, lie back, and seemed to go right back to sleep.

"Good," she told him, and patted his stomach. "Sit tight."

Retreating to one of her large scanners, Lense pointed the main sensor at the boy and began her intensive scan. The results poured in, flooding her screen. After several minutes the scan was done. She ran it again. And then again. Dobrah slept, and she ran it a last time. The results did not change.

Dobrah wasn't just a carrier. He was a virus factory. And he had been that for a very long time. But there was something else that worried Lense, and the next scan would have to be on herself.

Repositioning the scanner to the next bed over, Lense laid herself down and gave the computer a command to begin the scan remotely.

The scanner would have trouble getting through the EVA suit, but for her purposes that was just fine.

After what seemed like too long a time, the computer bleeped that it had finished, and Lense swooped toward the display screen.

She ignored the data on her own body after a cursory glance confirmed she was not infected, and focused on information about her EVA suit. She then went back to the finished genome map of the virus, and all the reports on different lipid profiles from selected virions. It was all as she suspected, and horribly so. She compared it with the data on Dobrah's clothes...and knew she needed to contact Captain Gold.

"Lense to Gomez."

"Gomez here. Go ahead."

"Can you spare Corsi up here for a while?"

"Problem, Doctor?"

“No. Well, possib—” She wasn’t even sure where to begin about the problems this could cause, for them and especially for Dobrah. “No. I just need to—Why don’t you and I talk to the captain while Domenica stays with Dobrah?”

There was a long pause, and Lense imagined Gomez was exchanging a worried glance with Corsi.

“On our way. Gomez out.”

Lense pushed out a breath, and the slightest amount of condensation formed in front of her mouth on the EVA suit’s visor window. It was a long wait, at least for her, until her crewmates arrived in sickbay.

First through the door, Gomez immediately asked, “What’s wrong?”

Waving off the concern with both hands, Lense assured her nothing desperate had happened. “It’s not a crisis,” she admitted. “But it is. . .there’s something about this virus that is different than most. And we need to let the captain know.” She looked at Corsi and motioned to Dobrah. “In case he wakes up, will you stay here with him? Let him know we’ll be back?”

Corsi nodded as Gomez ordered the computer to beam them out of their EVA suits and back to the shuttle.

As soon as she’d materialized from the transporter beam, Lense grabbed the nearest tricorder and began scanning for the Pocheeny virus.

“What?” Gomez asked as Lense ran the tricorder’s scanner over both of them. “What’s wrong?”

Closing the tricorder with a snap, Lense let out a sigh of relief. “Nothing. Thank God.”

“Okay, Elizabeth, why don’t you tell me what this is all about?”

“It will save time if I tell you and the captain at the same time.”

Gomez nodded, and they took seats in the front cabin to open a channel to the *Vinci*.

## Chapter 5

“Oy vay iz mir.” Captain Gold shook his head somberly and sank into the *Vinci*’s command chair. He turned to ops again. “Are you sure, Haznedl?”

“No life signs on the planet, sir.” The ensign sounded crestfallen.

“Shabalala?”

“Confirmed, sir. Signs of major cities, but no power output.”

“I read the technology, Captain,” Haznedl said. “Just no activity. The second Allurian ship is on the planet. Crashed. By the spread of the debris field I’d say their orbit decayed.”



“When?” Gold asked.

Haznedl shook her head. “A week ago, perhaps?” She stabbed at her console and peered at the scanning data. “There are satellites around the planet, sir. Some for communication, some possibly for defense.”

This was interesting, Gold thought. “Any working?”

“A few of them.”

“See if we can pull data from any computers aboard them. Get Soloman on it ASAP. We’re not risking an away team.”

Haznedl twisted toward the command chair. “Captain, Commander Gomez is hailing us.”

“Put her on.”

On the forward viewscreen, the image of the planet washed away, replaced by Gomez and Lense looking back at the Vinci bridge crew.

“Captain,” Lense began, but Gold cut her off.

“We found the Shmoam-ag homeworld, Doctor. Followed the second Allurian vessel’s ion trail all the way here. We’ve not scanned for it yet, but I’d bet my socks that your virus has been here.”

“No life?” Lense asked.

“None.”

“I’m not surprised.”

The captain’s jaw tightened and he felt his nostrils flare. So much death. . .it unnerved him. “Explain.”

“I’ve found two very disturbing things. One about this virus, and another about Dobrah,” Lense said. “I was looking at virion lipid profiles to determine if any of the Allurians who’d been on board had showed signs of infection. For this to happen, the virus would have had to become contagious via the Allurians. Viral lipids with this Pocheeny virus are present and located in the envelope of the virions. We can know what race was spreading the virus by looking at the fatty acid composition of the viral lipids, because they are similar to host cell membranes. Generally, these fatty acids are of host origin, derived from plasma membranes.”

The captain shifted in his chair. “Where is this going, Doctor? You’re about to give me a cough.”

“I’m sorry for the viral biology lesson, Captain, but this is important. Lipid profiles on the virions I studied did suggest Allurians were infected—”

“We know that. We’ve found their two ships: one derelict, the other now a crater on the Shmoam-ag homeworld.”

“There shouldn’t have been time for the spread of as many virions with Allurian lipids as I found.”

“Maybe the Allurians were aboard longer than we thought.”

“Dobrah says otherwise and has no reason to lie,” Lense explained. “He said they were there twice. The second ship was probably looking for a cure for the crew of the first. But this time the virus knew how to hurt them, and when the Allurian we found began showing symptoms quickly, I think his comrades killed him and left him behind. But he could have been remembering wrong, so I checked it out anyway. I thought to compare the rate at which Dobrah’s body creates the virus. I found fatty acids that came from Allurian hosts.”

“I don’t understand. Are you saying that Dobrah is related—no, you’re not saying that.” Gold leaned forward and looked into Lense’s eyes with intent. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that Dobrah isn’t just a carrier of this virus, he’s a living colony. Or rather, because he is immune to the disease itself, it uses him as... a home base, for lack of a better phrase.”

Staggered by the thought, Gold noticed Gomez was looking at Lense with the same expression he must be wearing: disbelief. “Is that... I’ve never heard of such a virus.”

“There isn’t one. Not a natural one. It’s why the genetic code for this virus is so large. The virus is instructed to infect one being and then return to its home colony.”

“To what end?”

“Virions with Allurian fatty acids that didn’t make it back to Dobrah’s body have one genome profile,” Lense said, speaking quickly and moving her hands a bit. “Virions that did make it back to his body have a slightly different genome profile—a larger one. I believe this virus is programmed to learn the genetic code of those it infects, and return that information, if it can, back to its host. The goal? So that it can infect others of that species better, and faster, by adding the newly infected’s genetic weaknesses to the virus’s very genome.”

Gold bit his lower lip, thought for a moment, then said, “You said there were two disturbing things you’ve learned. Please tell me that this was the more disturbing of the two.”

“I wish I could.” The doctor hesitated, then seemed to try to push through with what she wanted to say. “Dobrah... his clothes...”

“Spit it out, Lense.”

“His clothes have the virus throughout. Bonded to, in an inert state, every fiber. Waiting for someone to infect. I tested my EVA suit as well. The same inert virions are working their way through the material, on a molecular level. Friction against the air is enough to agitate them through.”

Gold stood and took a step toward the viewscreen. “My God—you’re not infected—”

“No. No, we’re not. But another week in the same EVA suits... we would be.”

“Where’s Corsi?”

“With Dobrah,” Gomez answered the captain.

“Why?”

“He...he’s sleeping,” Lense explained. “I didn’t want him to wake up and wonder where I’d gone.”

“I see. Gomez, what’s the engineering situation?”

Gomez frowned. “That ship is being held together with hope and flossweat, sir.”

“Can you get it stable enough until we return?”

“Yes, sir. Corsi and I stopped most of the radiation leakage, and shielded the rest.”

“Long term?”

“I’d need my full team for at least a week.”

“Return to the Shmoam-ag vessel. I’d like to have a word in private with Dr. Lense.” Gold pushed himself from the command chair. “Transfer to my office,” he told Haznedl, and marched off the bridge.

\* \* \*

Seconds ticked by like centuries, and Gold reappeared on the shuttle’s comm screen just as Gomez was beaming out. Lense wasn’t completely sure what the captain wanted to speak privately with her about, but she was pretty sure and she wasn’t looking forward to it.

“Captain?”

“Two nights ago, a progress report from Commander Gomez voiced her concern that you’d made a promise you don’t know that you can keep. And I wasn’t going to let it concern me until you just told us what you’d learned about this damned virus.”

“Captain, I—”

“You were irresponsible, Doctor!” the captain barked, eyes wide with anger. “That boy might actually think you can cure him. He’s a child, an orphan, who’s been alone on that ship for—for God knows how long!”

“Probably a hundred and seventy or a hundred and eighty years.”

Caught off guard, Gold paused in his dressing down of the doctor. “Do you want to explain that, Lense?”

“I suspected it when I saw where he got his food. Children don’t clean up after themselves well, especially without adults around. There were empty food containers, not for months or years, but for decades. I’m almost surprised there was enough food to last, but this is a large ship and held a lot of people. I also wondered where all the dead bodies were—of his parents, and the crew.” She looked up, saw the captain was listening intently and the anger had left his expression, at least a little, and so she continued. “Dead bodies on a space ship without life support last forever. Dead bodies that decay on a space ship with modern filtration systems are mostly filtered and scrubbed by the ship’s systems, given enough time, until only bones are left. I took a walk one night, late, looking for remnants of Shmoam-ag DNA. Throughout the ship, mostly in what seem to be crew quarters, there are bones. A lot of very old bones. This ship has been not just his home, but a drifting graveyard.”

Gold nodded his understanding, but his voice still held an indignant edge. “It’s admittedly a tragedy. But if anything, it makes it that much worse if you’ve given this boy false hope.”

“With the resources of Starfleet—”

“Do you expect me to take him aboard, even in isolation? Do you expect Starfleet to build a base out here dedicated to curing him? How long before doing that leaked out to people who might want just such a disease to use on their enemies and would do anything to use that boy as a weapon? You tell me, Doctor, what would happen if that boy found his way to an inhabited world?”

Unsure of what she expected from the captain, Lense didn’t really know how to answer his questions either. “We can’t just leave him alone here,” she finally told him.

“I don’t know what we can and can’t do yet, but one thing’s for damned sure—we can’t take him with us. Unless you can tell me he’s cured. Can you cure him?”

She knew it wasn’t more than a question to make a point. He knew she couldn’t, not in the time she’d thought she could before. Now, perhaps not ever. “I don’t know. With time—”

“How much time did you say before you caught the disease? A week?”

“With a new EVA suit, and the right precautions, sir...”

“And you want me to just leave you on that ship with him? Alone? For how long?”

“As long as it takes.”

“Listen to yourself, Doctor.” He let out a breath, then spoke in a quieter tone. “Back on Sherman’s Planet, when we had our little chats, I joked that I was your substitute counselor. If I really had that position, I’d be wondering if you’re bipolar right about now. If you’re not sure you can do your job, you’re thinking you can cure in a few weeks a disease you’ve only known the specifics of for a matter of hours? Is that fair to that boy?”

“I...No. It’s not.”

Gold leaned across his desk and seemed to be peering into the shuttle cabin. “What are you going to tell this boy when we have to leave him, without a cure, and maybe now without hope?”

“I don’t know.” She shook her head and cast her eyes away from the captain. “I don’t even know.”

\* \* \*

“Where did you go?” Dobrah asked.

Lense patted the boy on the shoulder and then the top of his head. “Did you wake up?”

“Domenica was here,” he said with his rolling head nod.

“Sonya and I had to talk to our captain,” Lense told him as explanation, and she realized she’d never lied to the boy. Except when she told him she’d cure him.

“Sonya came back.”

“I know. I stayed to talk a little longer.”

“Are you healthy?” It might have been an odd question for him to ask, but Lense knew that in the context of his life, where he’d seen everyone around him die, it wasn’t.

She nodded, trying to make her tone sound not so sad. “I’m fine. I need to work as hard as I can right now. I have about four more days before my ship returns, and I’ll need your help. Can you help me?”

Dobrah smiled, and his eyes seemed to reflect more light when he did so. “Sure. I used to help my mother.”

Pulling her own lips into what she hoped wasn’t a sad smile, Lense gave him a quick hug. “Well, you’ll help me, too, just as good.”

They worked, long into the next day. Dobrah left for food twice, at Lense’s insistence, but she decided to labor nonstop. She wasn’t exactly sure what she was looking for, but had hoped there was some sequence in the virus’s genome that would turn it off. It wouldn’t cure anyone who had the disease, if any such individual were still alive, but it might turn the virus inert and ineffective, and allow the boy to live a normal life.

At a certain point Lense remembered asking Gomez if it would be possible to get the sickbay computer running. If she could use its calculation and simulation power, going through the genome would be faster. Gomez replied something about barely keeping the ship together and being there as soon as she could, but hours later she’d not shown up.

“Shouldn’t you sleep?” Dobrah asked at some point.

Lense thought it had been perhaps forty hours since she’d last done so and while she was extremely tired, she knew time was limited. Before leaving the shuttle, she’d made sure to take some vitamin and energy supplements, however, and she believed those would last her. “I’m fine,” she told him, and continued to hover over the computer console in front of her. “But you should sleep if you’re tired—”

He’d moved without her realizing and was now next to her, pulling her arm toward one of the beds. “Get sleep,” he demanded, looking up with bright wide eyes that reflected the glow of the lights above. “Stay healthy.” He was pleading. “Don’t get sick.”

Allowing him to tug her away from the computer, and she was so tired that she might not have been able to stand her ground if she’d tried, Lense moved toward the closest bed. “Okay, okay,” she assured him as she slid up onto the bed. “I’ll rest here a little while, don’t worry.” She knew she wouldn’t be able to sleep, lying on such a bed, in an EVA suit. There was just no way to get comfortable in one, but she lay on her side and closed her eyes just for him.

She was asleep in seconds.

\* \* \*

“Elizabeth?” Gomez shook Lense’s EVA suit lightly.

Stirring to wakefulness, and a bit startled by Corsi and Gomez standing there, Lense sleepily asked, “How long did I sleep?”

“I don’t know,” Corsi said dryly. “When did you fall asleep?”

Pulling herself up to a sitting position, Lense checked the chronometer on her suit sleeve. “Four hours,” she mumbled. “Where’s Dobrah?”

“We just got here,” Gomez said, helping the doctor to her feet. “I think you should go back to the shuttle for some real rest. I don’t see how you can sleep in that thing.”

“I can’t go back now. I’ve slept enough.” She scrambled toward the bed on which Dobrah usually slept. “Maybe he went for food—”

“Domenica’s going to take a break. I’m going to get power to the diagnostic computers in here, like you asked. You’re going to go back to the shuttle and rest.”

“No, I—”

Determined, Gomez’s lips were pursed and her mind obviously set. “That wasn’t a request, Elizabeth.”

“Sonya...”

“This is how it is: Domenica will join you, Dobrah probably went for food, it will take a few hours to get this working.” Gomez motioned to the console of Shmoam-ag computers against one wall. “That’s an order, Doctor.”

“All right. Two hours.” Lense finally relented.

“We’ll wake you in three.”

“If I wake up in two—”

Gomez pointed to the beam-down point. “Go!”

Corsi pulled Lense lightly to the place where they always left their EVA suits, and ordered the shuttle computer to energize the transporter. With a sparkle and a flash, only the suits remained.

## Chapter

# 6

Before she fully awoke, Lense was aware of the world around her: the feel of the thin blanket against her cheek, the dimmed light from above, the mildly uncomfortable bunk beneath her, and the sound of Corsi lightly snoring across the cabin from her. She made a sleepy mental note to mention it to Corsi again, and that she could cure it. Of course, Corsi would deny that she snored, just like she did every other time Lense had brought it up since they were first assigned to be cabinmates on the *Vinci* shortly after the end of the Dominion War.

Cure. With her mind wrapped around that word, Lense was suddenly completely awake. “Computer,

time,” she croaked through a dry throat.

“Current sector adjusted time is sixteen forty-three hours and twelve seconds.”

Feeling like she’d been asleep for a month, Lense then asked the date.

“Stardate 54101.9.”

Lense grunted an acknowledgment as she squeezed on her boots, took a quick drink of water, and readied herself for beaming back to the Shmoam-ag ship.

“It’s not three hours,” Corsi said as Lense ran her fingers quickly through her curly black hair.

“I thought you were sleeping.”

“I sleep very lightly.”

“You snore,” Lense said. “I can fix that.”

Corsi rolled her eyes the way she always did. “I do not snore.”

“I heard you snoring.”

“Must be a clogged thruster that’s keeping us from drifting.”

“Must be. Well, I can fix it if you want.”

Sitting straight up, Corsi repeated herself. “I donot snore.”

“Sure.”

“You’re trying to annoy me so I won’t stop you from beaming back early,” Corsi said, slipping her boots on.

“You can’t.”

The security officer shook her head. “What is it with you?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“You’re killing yourself working nonstop.”

“It’s the only way to find a cure. I’ve done it before—on Sherman’s Planet, remember? I can do it again.”

“That wasn’t as bad a disease as this one. What if there isn’t a cure?”

For too long a moment, Lense said nothing. She felt she might cry and tried to subdue the feeling. “There has to be a cure,” she whispered.

“Why?” Corsi asked softly, in a tone Lense hadn’t often heard from her. It was sympathetic. “Because

you want there to be one? That's not very scientific."

"No," she said, more to herself than to Corsi. "It's not."

\* \* \*

Lense materialized into the EVA suit, which took a little extra time than a normal beamdown because the computer checked to make sure the suit was upright, hadn't been compromised, and so on. It didn't give her extra time to think, because of the nature of transporting, and yet stuck in her mind was Corsi's accusation that she'd not been very scientific of late. And on a personal level, it was true. She'd allowed herself to get involved with her patient, and he wasn't even supposed to be a patient. Her mission was to find out what had happened to the Allurians, not to cure a disease in a week that had destroyed two ships and an entire planet.

She was a doctor, however, and her urge to cure this poor boy had been too strong, and in ignoring her better judgment and promising what she couldn't deliver, she'd perhaps broken the cardinal rule of medicine: do no harm.

Did she believe, when she told Dobrah that she would cure him, that she actually could? After all, she was Elizabeth Lense, valedictorian of her class in Starfleet Medical, beating out the legendary genetically enhanced Julian Bashir, and savior of Sherman's Planet.

Was it confidence? Or worse, overconfidence? Or was it just shallow compassion, as when a doctor must sometimes hold dying patients' hands and assure them everything will be fine.

Really, it didn't matter what was in her head. She'd done it, and Corsi and the captain and her own con-science were all right that she'd made a very big mistake.

Once she took a step, having fully materialized, Dobrah turned away from where he was watching Gomez and ran to her.

"You are healthy?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied, kneeling down to him as best she could. "I'm healthy. I got some rest. Where did you go? To eat?"

"No, I sometimes walk the ship. I visit..." His voice trailed off.

"Where, Dobrah?"

"I visit my mother."

"I understand." His mother had died, probably in whatever room she'd kept quarters. It made sense that Dobrah sometimes visited her and had long ago gotten used to the idea that the bones left were nothing to be afraid of. "Why don't you go eat? I've got some work to do, okay?"

"Can I bring it back here and eat with you?" the boy asked.

It was interesting that after so many years alone, Dobrah had quickly slipped back into needing and seeking the authority of an adult. Of a parent figure. "Sure."



Once he'd moved off in a way that could probably be described as a scamper, Gomez looked after him, then turned toward Lense. "He adores you."

"I've spent more time with him than anyone has in over a hundred and fifty years. He'd adore you, too, if you'd done the same."

"Maybe. But he doesn't stop talking about you."

Lense wasn't surprised, but hearing it wasn't making the truth of the circumstances any easier. "Are you done?"

"I've been done. It's just off to preserve power. I can bring it back online when you're ready."

"You've linked in the universal translator?"

"Of course," Gomez said.

"Let's go, then."

With a few stabs at a control console, Gomez lit up a series of monitors above them. Alien symbols were replaced by familiar letters and words as Gomez input a translator algorithm. "You're online."

Nervous tension tightened Lense's shoulders. She hoped against odds that whatever data had sat dormant for decades on the computer banks before her would lead to an answer, for her... or Dobrah. In the moments it took to learn the logical system of the computer interface, Lense had managed to talk part of herself into the idea that all the Shmoam-ag had been missing was some little piece of medical knowledge. Some small shred that she possessed but Dobrah's people had missed. Something that would fall into place and allow her to find a cure.

Dobrah had returned with his dinner and fallen asleep by the time she found answers to all her questions. Placing an isolinear storage chip into an access port of her tricorder, Lense collected the log entries of Dobrah's mother and father—the two lead scientists who'd studied the Pocheeny and tried to cure it.

Tears welled in her eyes, and one rolled down her left cheek, but the EVA suit kept her from wiping it away. Lense now understood whom the Shmoam-ag were trying to save... and it had not been Dobrah.

\* \* \*

"Is this data correct?" Captain Gold asked. "Are we sure?"

"Soloman said it's probably a spy satellite, sir," Carol Abramowitz said as she snugged a strand of hair behind her ear. With her other hand she gestured to the screen to her left and leaned back into the science station chair so the captain had a better view. "The databanks were shielded and there's little degradation. It collected media and government broadcasts from all the various Shmoam-ag nations. And when the governments were gone, and the media broadcasts stopped, it continued to collect visual and scanner data."

"So they created this virus themselves?"

"One of the nations did," Abramowitz said somberly. "But it spread quickly, possibly before it could even be used as a weapon. The translation isn't clear on that, and it will take further investigation."

“Only the children were left?” Gold shook his head with disbelief.

“All carriers. I assume by design. Dr. Lense will be able to confirm, I’m sure.”

Lense was a sore subject with the captain, and his neck knotted with the mention of her name. He wasn’t sure what to do with her yet—the second time in a year he’d been in that position with her. At least this time, she’d broken no regulations, but she’d acted irresponsibly and it didn’t sit well with him.

“And after the adults were gone?”

“That’s when the broadcasts end, but sensor data that was collected suggests widespread violence, probably other disease, too. What if our children were left to run a highly technical society? How would they survive?”

Gold shook his head. “They wouldn’t.”

## Chapter

# 7

When Lense got the call that the *Vinci* had returned to the area, she’d actually been finished with her final report and calculations for over two hours. With the computer restored, Dobrah was showing her a game he used to play with his father, and sometimes his mother, but he was very clear that mothers didn’t often play it. Lense had slipped into being a mother figure to him, and she knew that, but wished he wouldn’t keep making it so clear.

Nonetheless, watching him have fun was contagious and lightened her heart, even if she knew their time together was now limited and soon she’d have to leave him.

When Gomez hailed her to let her know they were ready to beam back to the ship, Lense promised she’d be back after a while, and she and Dobrah would have to have a long talk.

“About what?”

“The future,” she said quietly.

He rolled his head in his nodlike way and said he understood as he continued to play his game.

Lense beamed out, once again leaving her empty EVA suit behind with Dobrah.

When back on the shuttle, she did several scans that confirmed there were no stray virions that had contaminated any of them, or the shuttle itself, and it was safe to return to the *Vinci* hangar bay. When they would need to beam back to the *Shmoam-ag* ship, they could do so from the main transporter room.

After an additional decon and a quick change of clothes, Lense was meeting with Gold and Gomez in the captain’s ready room. Those ice-blue eyes of his bore down on her.

She didn’t even know where to begin. How could she explain getting so lost in this one particular

patient? And how could she keep herself from slipping back into the emotional pit that she'd felt herself falling into?

"Doctor? Gomez says you've learned a lot. So have we. I don't suppose you've found a cure for your young friend."

"No, sir. He'll cure himself." She handed him the padd with her full report and findings. "Dobrah's mother understood, and logged in her journal, that the Pocheeny virus uses children as incubators and homes for viral colonies."

"We found the same—evidence that the adults on the boy's homeworld all died, leaving the children to fend for themselves. They were either unable to, or the virus killed them when they reached adulthood."

"It wouldn't have killed them. Upon reaching puberty, the virus would have died off. It rewrites the child's DNA to allow it to survive, and then rewrites its own to die upon production of certain enzymes and glandular secretions. It's a very sophisticated virus, meant to destroy an entire world of people, but leave their children so that anyone prepubescent could be saved, educated, and taught not to hate their enemy."

"An enemy that would have killed their parents?" Gold asked.

"Secreted onto an enemy planet, how would anyone have known what happened until it was too late? And what would children understand except that all the adults are dead, and these new adults have arrived to help?" The doctor shook her head at not just the waste, but the perverse morality. "The problem was, the virus was incomplete before it got out of containment. Dobrah's parents never knew exactly which of their planet's governments meant to use it on any of a number of enemies, but they saw where the genome was supposed to be coded to not infect any animal with Shmoam-ag DNA, but could have been coded only to affect one person with a very specific DNA. They perfected the latter, and not the former."

The captain nodded and sank a bit into his office chair. "Why were they on the ship?"

"The crew and scientists lived on the ship—they were the equivalent of our Starfleet, from the way it looks, and I got the impression that other ships in their fleet had been infected already." Lense gestured out the captain's office window and toward the Shmoam-ag ship visible nearby. "This vessel was their last hope—no infection. Dobrah was the only child aboard, and... it's not really mentioned, but I got the impression that his parents infected him once they knew he would survive eventually. They isolated him in their sickbay and only came into contact with him in suits like ours. They didn't understand that eventually the virus would work its way in anyway."

Gold rose, looked out the port window, and still turned away from Gomez and Lense, asked, "How long before he reaches puberty?"

"From the medical texts in the database, the Shmoam-ag have an average lifespan of over two thousand years. Dobrah is a little over two hundred years old, I believe. He'll no longer be a carrier of the virus at perhaps three hundred years old, maybe three hundred fifty."

"And then?"

"Soon after the viral colony dies, the virions that surround him won't have anyplace to return, and it will die out. By now, the Shmoam-ag homeworld, if no one is still alive there, is probably safe."

“Gomez?” Gold turned and looked at his first officer. “Can that ship last another hundred and fifty years?”

She nodded confidently. “With my full team, and another week or so of work, it can. So long as regular maintenance is done.”

He gazed at Lense. “They’ll be safe?”

“So long as EVA suits are changed out every week, and always left on that ship.”

“See to it,” Gold told Gomez. “Dismissed.”

Both began to leave, but the captain motioned Lense back to her seat. “Not so fast, Lense. You don’t get off that easy.”

Of course not, Lense thought glumly. Nor should I. “Aye, sir.”

“I’ve cooled down some since we last talked.”

Lense had nothing to say to that, so she merely nodded.

“My concern was that you thought you could cure this disease, and blithely told him so. Maybe you were just trying to comfort him. But if you put the idea in his head that he can leave that ship now...”

“I didn’t. At least, I hope I didn’t. But we’ve not talked about it.”

“Gomez tells me that he looks up to you. If you’re thinking of staying, you’d have to resign your commission. And eventually you’d run out of EVA suits on your own.”

“I know that, sir. I wasn’t planning on resigning. I wish I could stay. It might be possible to find a cure, still. Certainly Dobrah’s mother thought so.”

Suddenly Gold’s tone of voice shifted from annoyance to something softer. Maybe it was pity. “First you beat yourself up because you couldn’t heal and cure everything. Then you thought—after a run of admitted successes—that you maybe could. Now you realize you can’t again.”

“You’re playing counselor again.”

“In a way. It takes a certain amount of ego to do what you and I both do—make life or death decisions. It’s not a sin to believe in yourself.”

Lense cast her gaze downward. “And what if I convince someone else to believe in me as well, and I’m wrong?”

“It’s not a sin to be wrong, either.” The captain knocked on the table and she looked back up at him. “It’s not.”

“Begging the captain’s pardon, that’s not how it feels.”

“Well, part of that may have been the talking-to I gave you. Part of it is that the bottom fell out of your

dream.”

“This job...this ship...” She shrugged, unsure how she could express her disappointment—both in herself and in life in general. “We overcome so much, and always come out on top. On Sherman’s Planet, they were talking about building a statue to me. I guess I figured I’d always find the answer.”

“You did find the answer, Doctor, it just wasn’t what you wanted. Life’s like that sometimes.”

“I didn’t want to lose this one.” She felt another one of those tears coming, but only a bit, and it probably just moistened her eye rather than rolled down her cheek.

“You didn’t. He’ll be cured, someday.”

“Years after we’re dead,” she said somberly.

“You lose patients sometimes. It happens. This one will outlive you. Certainly there’s some comfort in that.”

“He’ll be all alone.”

Gesturing toward his door, Lense rose as Gold continued to reassure her. “Well, I think we can manage to stop back from time to time, when we’re passing by this way. And I have no doubt you won’t be giving up your search for a cure, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And...I have an idea about what we can do regarding the boy’s loneliness.”

She stopped, turned and looked at her captain. “Sir?”

“Let’s go have a talk with some of our illustrious corps of engineers.”

\* \* \*

Dobrah’s mother smiled down at her son, dropped to one knee, and embraced him so tightly that the boy made a happy grunt. She took his head in her hands and put it under her chin in what Dobrah had told Soloman she’d often done.

Lense couldn’t help but take the Bynar’s arm and give it a squeeze through their EVA suits. “I can’t believe you did this all in two weeks.”

“The holo-emitters are only in this room. It should be...sufficient for now.”

“It’s fantastic.” Lense felt her face tighten with a wide grin.

Dobrah pulled the hologram of his mother toward the two Starfleeters. “Mother, this is E-liz. She’s a doctor like you. And this is Soloman. He looks a little like Uncle Lintemuth, doesn’t he?”

Switching the external speakers off, Lense asked Soloman privately, “He does understand this is a hologram, yes?”

“He does,” Soloman replied discreetly, then put his externals back on. “Pleased to meet you. I have heard much about you.”

Dobrah pulled his mother back to the computer console where they’d been playing, and Soloman turned completely to Lense. “He’s just pretending. He said he enjoys how interactive it is.”

“To get such a good representation of her, I guess there was a lot of data in her computer?”

Soloman nodded. “Yes. Personal logs, physical profiles because of her work. For the father, too.”

“He played a game with his father already,” Lense said, and had to try not to beam so much—the smile was beginning to hurt her cheeks. “I got to ‘meet’ him, too. Right now I think he’s pretending his father is fixing the engine.”

“It’s good to see we’ve made him so happy.”

“What if it breaks down?”

Soloman seemed unconcerned. “We will be notified of any ship’s problems via subspace alert. And there will be frequent visits by other science or engineering vessels.”

“I told him he’ll eventually be cured,” Lense said, continuing to watch Dobrah interact with the hologram. “That someday, when he’s older, he’ll be able to leave this place. When he’s closer to being an adult.”

“How did he react?”

“It’s hard to tell. I think, being so long-lived, he might even sense time differently. Our visit here for the last three weeks might be a blink of an eye in his lifetime.”

“If I may... I think some of us have made an emotional impact.” Soloman could sometimes be cryptic, and so Lense didn’t ask him how he knew that or what he meant. She just assumed Dobrah had said nice things about his Doctor “E-liz.”

“He’s very happy with the holograms of his parents,” she said.

“We asked him exactly what holograms he’d like, and how they should act,” Soloman told her. “I am not surprised he is happy.”

“It makes me happy as well.”

“Do you want to say good-bye to him?” Soloman asked.

She thought a moment about getting a second good-bye, but it might be too emotional for him. Or for her. “We said our good-byes once. I think I’d just like to beam out watching him this happy, with family.”

“Very well.” Soloman led the way the few steps to the transport point.

“Lense toda Vinci. Two to beam out.” She kept focused on Dobrah for a last moment, wished him a silent good-bye, and then closed her eyes. “Energize.”

Once the transporter effect had faded, all that remained were two EVA suits.

\* \* \*

Dobrah looked back to them and frowned for a quick moment before smiling and running to the computer console he'd been taught how to operate by one of the nice Starfleet people.

He pushed the panel as he'd been shown, and confidently spoke to the computer. "Run program 'E-liz.'"

To one side of the image of his mother appeared a hologram of Dr. Elizabeth Lense.

Taking her hand, and his mother's hand, Dobrah pulled them both toward his computer game on the opposite wall. "You play, too," he told the Lense hologram. "Until you come back from being away."

## About the Author

DAVE GALANTER has authored various Star Trek projects, among these the Voyager novel *Battle Lines*, the Next Generation duology *Maximum Warp*, a previous S.C.E. book called *Ambush*, and most recently a short story in the *Tales of the Dominion War* anthology, entitled "Eleven Hours Out." His not-so-secret *Fortress of Solitude* is in Michigan, from where he pretends to have a hand in managing the message board Web sites he co-owns: *ComicBoards.com* and *TVShowBoards.com*. He also edits and is the main contributor to his own Web site, *SnarkBait.com*. Dave spends his non-day-job time with family and friends, or burying himself in other writing projects that at some point might actually see the light of day if he ever gets off his duff. He enjoys feedback on his writing, positive or negative, and would appreciate seeing any comments you have on his work. Feel free to email him at [dave@comicboards.com](mailto:dave@comicboards.com).

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