

STAR TREK™

S.C.E.

#16

OATHS



Glenn Hauman

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Star Trek S.C.E. 16

OATHS

by

Glenn Hauman

To Peter, who taught me that anyone can write

and to Harlan, who taught me that anybody who can write, should write.

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~~And finally, my own twin towers, Lisa Sullivan and Brandy Hauman.~~

"It is not the oath that makes us believe the man, but the man the oath."

-Aeschylus

"Healing is a matter of time, but it is sometimes also a matter of opportunity."

-Hippocrates

Chapter 1

Lense focused.

The sickbay of the da Vinci was quiet, with Vance Hawkins the only patient in, being treated for a fractured ulna and torn ligament injury sustained during a security drill. Dr. Elizabeth Lense was ignoring him. She continued to sit in her office and stare at the computer screen on her desk.

Emmett, the Emergency Medical Hologram treating the injury, closed the tricorder. "You are free to go, Mr. Hawkins. Your injury will be fine by the end of the week. May I suggest that you be more careful next time?"

"Sorry. Occupational hazard."

"Yes, well, perhaps a change of occupation might be better for you. You've visited sickbay more than any other member of security. You may wish to consider a less hazardous line of work."

"What? And give up show business?"

"I'm sorry, I don't quite get the reference."

"Never mind. Doctor, is there anything else I should do?"

"No," Emmett said. "Avoid overuse of the arm, and general rest should be fine."

"Doctor?" He looked past Emmett and addressed Dr. Lense.

"Hmm?" Dr. Lense looked up, distracted.

"Is there anything else I should be doing for my arm?"

"No, what Emmett said is just fine."

"Okay. Thanks. And thank you, Emmett."

"You're more than welcome. Always happy to see you. Not happy to see you hurt, of course, but--"

"I know what you meant, you big lug. Don't use too much electricity."

Emmett watched him leave, then said, "Dr. Lense, I've filed a full report. Is there anything else you need me for?"

"No, Emmett. Switch off, but reactivate if anybody else comes in. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Doctor." Emmett vanished.

"Good boy," she said to the empty air.

She went back to her terminal, tapping occasionally at different places on the screen. Eleven minutes later, her communicator beeped. "Gold to Lense."

"Go ahead, Captain."

"Doctor, I'd like to see you in my ready room."

"Certainly. I can be up by the end of the--"

"Now, Doctor, if you don't mind."

Lense hesitated. "All right. I'll be there in five minutes."

"Thank you. Gold out."

Resigned, Dr. Lense got up to leave—abandoning the problem she had been working on and was so close to solving.

She didn't see that by moving the red nine to the black ten, she would free up the ace of clubs.

Captain's Personal Log, Stardate 53661.9.

I've just summoned Dr. Lense to my office. Actually, "ordered" is probably the correct word.

I hate to actually pull rank on my crew. The fact that I have just done so merely indicates to me that my course of action is an appropriate one.

Because of the nature of that action, I am going to record the transcript of our upcoming conversation here. Should it be necessary later, I will transfer it to an official log entry, although it's my hope that can be avoided.

Times like this, I wish Rachel was here. She always reads people better than I do. It was good to see her, Daniel, Esther, and the twins-not to mention Esther's new beau, Khor, son of Lantar. That meeting went off without a-

The doorchime just rang. Starting transcript now.

TRANSCRIPT STARTS

GCome.

LSir.

GCome in, Doctor. Have a seat.

LThank you.

GA drink?

LNothing for me, thanks.

GCongratulations, Doctor. You're the first officer on board the da Vinci I've actually had to call in for a performance review.

LReally, sir.

GYes. And would you like to know why? [pause] It's because I know almost nothing new about you, nothing that isn't already in your official file.

LI see.

GI never see you outside of meetings that I call. I don't see you in the mess hall. I don't see you interacting with the crew, except in a professional capacity-and lately, I've been getting reports you haven't even been doing that. I understand that you've been letting the Emergency Medical Hologram do most of your patient work.

LYes, I have. Emmett's supposed to learn procedure, and there's no other way to do that than to let him do the work, interacting with patients and situations in the field.

GThe specifications on this EMH gave him a huge medical database. Yes, it had the personality of a first-year resident, but that was to make it seem eager and helpful. Not burned out and abrasive.

LWell, that may be what was planned. He's still rough around the edges. I believe he needed real world experience, and I've been giving it to him. And to be fair, you don't have the expertise in the field to make that decision as to his medical skills and expertise.

GWe're digressing, Doctor. This isn't about the EMH. It's about you. I'm beginning to think that you're the one that's burned out.

LI see.

GYou know, I have records here going all the way back to your time in the Academy. I have this glowing recommendation from the then-head of Starfleet Medical, Dr. Crusher. Have you ever seen it?

LNo. I only took one class with her, then she went back to duty on the Enterprise.

GLet me quote "Elizabeth Lense is one of the fastest studies I've ever come across. Brilliant and incisive diagnosis." An outstanding school career, first in your class at the Academy, all of it leading to being appointed CMO of the U.S.S. Lexington right out of Starfleet Medical. Unprecedented Starfleet history in peacetime. A truly great honor... and then you end up here.

LHere? Captain Gold, the da Vinci is a fine ship-
GA damn fine ship, and thank you for the compliment. But after serving on the Lexington, with a crew complement of hundreds, this is a bit of a reduction of duties, wouldn't you say? Going down to a ship with only forty crewmembers? A ship so small you go from a suite of your own to sharing a room? A ship so small that it doesn't even have a ship's counselor.

LPardon me, but could I take you up on that offer for a glass of water?

GCertainly. You don't mind if I continue?

LCould I stop you?

GNot particularly.

LWell. Go ahead, then.

GThank you. Computer, a glass of water, please. [replicator hum] Here you go.

LThank you, sir.

GNow then, back to the matter at hand. Over the past few weeks, you've been less and less engaged with this crew and with your duties. I noted that you've been spending more time eating in sickbay than your quarters or the mess hall. You're in a bad way, Doctor, and it's beginning to seriously affect your work.

LThat's absurd.

GYou don't believe me? Gold to Emergency Medical Hologram.

EMHSickbay, Emmett here. May I help you, Captain?

GEmmett, I need a diagnosis. Would you say that Dr. Lense has been behaving erratically lately? A little off-kilter?

LEmmett-

GPipe down, Doctor. Or else.

ECaptain, is Dr. Lense with you? Does she require medical assistance?

GNo, nothing at the moment. I was merely asking if she'd seemed off-kilter to you.

EDr. Lense has seemed fatigued, lately. Somewhat listless. She has shown markedly diminished interest in almost all activities most of the day. I would suspect a degree of sleep disorder based on observation.

GYour diagnosis?

EHer symptoms are characteristic of a depressive episode. I couldn't attest to state of mind or cause without further examination.

GThank you.

EIs there any other way I can be of assistance, Captain?

GNot at this time. Gold out.

L[unintelligible] observant, I'll give him that.

GWell, Doctor? Do you disagree with your colleague's conclusion?

LHe's not a colleague, he's a database with delusions of grandeur. A mechanic of flesh instead of clockworks.

GSo, wrong that makes him? Doctor, you know he's right. You finagled your way onto a ship that didn't have a counselor. I can't prove it, but you know it and I know it. I can only assume that because you don't want to deal with your problems, and I can respect that up until the point where they become my problems. And a non-functional CMO is my problem.

LSo what are you going to do about it?

GWell, that's another problem. Standard operating procedure would probably be to have you taken off active duty and sent for a psych workup. But that would require us getting you to a counselor who could do that, and probably would entail leaving you at the nearest starbase for a month. Either our scheduled maintenance visit to Sherman's Planet would have to be delayed or I'd have to give you

shuttlecraft, and we only have the two. Either way, I'd be without a chief medical officer for who knows how long, and you'd almost certainly be reassigned, with a nasty mark on your service record. Your career might never recover. I don't want to do that and neither, I suppose, do you. So we're going to try and avoid the whole magilla.

LSir?

GInstead, we're going to have our own little counseling sessions right here. You and me, at least once a week for the foreseeable future, in this office, with all conversations kept out of the official record as long as things go well. And we're going to talk and try to get to the bottom of this.

LYou're no doctor, and you're not a counselor either.

GNo, I'm not. But I'm your commanding officer. And I'm the one you have to convince that you're not just going through the motions, that you really are in shape to serve on board my ship.

LFine. Whatever.

GYou're resenting this.

LI don't have to talk to you.

GActually, yes, you do. Complain all you want, this is what we're going to do.

LI could invoke my Seventh Guarantee rights.

GYou do that and I'll make all this official, and have you transferred off this ship, downchecked from active duty, and sent for an immediate psych exam. Playing this by the book is not the way you want to go, believe me.

LYou realize that I could have you removed from command for medical reasons.

GYou'd have to show cause eventually, Doctor, or face charges of mutiny. And before that, you'd still have to deal with Gomez-I guess you'd have to throw Gomez into the brig too. And then Duffy. And so on. But you know, it doesn't even matter. You'd never even go as far as relieving me of command. I know it and you know it. But I don't think you know why, do you? [pause] It's because you don't want to take the responsibility for making the decision.

LMaybe I'll just be happy getting rid of you.

GOur first session will be tomorrow at 0800. Dismissed.

LI-

GYou're dismissed, Doctor.

TRANSCRIPT ENDS

Well that was fun. I can just imagine how our sessions are going to go.

Chapter 2

Sherman's Planet (so named, according to conflicting stories in the Memory Alpha databanks, either to repay a staggeringly large bar tab, to serve as a warning that a particular obnoxious individual lived there, or to impress a woman) was in an area of space first mapped by Terrans in 2067 by John Burk, the chief astronomer of the Royal Academy of England. There had been a battle in orbit around nearby Donatu V in 2242 between the Federation and the Klingons over settlements in the sector, with inconclusive results which didn't really become clarified until the Organians came along and imposed a sort of unilateral peace between the two sides twenty years later. It was colonized by the Federation under the dictates of the Organian Peace Treaty. There had been a bit of unpleasantness with the Klingon Empire involving espionage, a famine, and a poisoned grain shipment, but it was a minor footnote to the early frontier days of the planet.

The Klingons never got around to that neck of the galaxy after the incident, as they appeared to have developed an aversion to the area-almost as if they were allergic to something.

The planet itself was quite hostile to most Earth plants, with only a few exceptions-fortunately for them, one of the exceptions was the grape. Within a few years of settling, superlative vintages were coming off the planet. Some of the native fauna blended well with the Terran grapes, creating unheard-of varieties of wine. All in all, the colonists were able to eke out a comfortable existence-certainly long enough until replicator technology had advanced enough that a comfortable existence was almost a given for any citizen of the Federation who wanted it.

The human population of the planet had grown rather quickly in the century since, with an estimated three million people living there. Of course, on a planet about the size of Venus, that left a lot of room for people to spread out. It was rare for a family to have less than a few dozen acres of land under their domain-even if that land was still mostly rocks and trees.

With a planetary infrastructure built up after the major power problems of recracking dilithium had been solved, people enjoyed the capacity to spread out. Personal shuttlecrafts and the like made it easy to travel to the next town over, even if that town was three hundred miles away. And with almost every family having their own on-site replicators, there was no real danger of going without anything. There would be no danger of a repeat of the famine that endangered the colony, though it did make for some entertaining stories told by grandparents to their young ones-at least entertaining to the grandparents.

All in all, war and famine seemed like things of the past. Things were safe, things were comfortable. Nobody wanted for much, nobody needed too much. The biggest problem the planet's administrators had was that more and more young people wanted to "transport off of this boring rock" and see the galaxy-a problem endemic throughout most of the Federation's worlds nowadays.

Abe Auerbach had a similar problem-he wanted off this rock too, and he'd just gotten here.

For the fifth time that day, he cursed his mother for deciding to resettle out here. Now he was stuck coming out here from a civilized part of the galaxy to help her with what she called "his inheritance." He called it a great big bunch of hilly land in the boondocks. His taste ran more to beaches-preferably on Risa, with a nice cool drink in hand. But she had decided to move back to Armstrong City, and she had insisted her dutiful son should be the one to settle her affairs on Sherman's Planet, which included closing up and selling the house she'd lived in.

Once he'd gotten out there, Abe discovered his mom had let the place go to seed in her old age, and it was in such a condition that nobody would take it off his hands without some major renovation. Which was what he'd been doing for the last two months.

He'd done most of the home repair that he could in the winter, but now that spring was here, he was finally ready to put in that swimming pool. He'd rented an industrial phaser for the job and had already cleared the trees and brush, now he was using it to disintegrate a hole in the earth. He'd decided on a deep pool, and had excavated about four-and-a-half meters down. Unfortunately, before he could finish, it started to rain, and so he put it aside for another day. He figured it would be good for the rain to tamp down the newly exposed soil, anyway.

The rain and the dirt brought to light (literally) something that hadn't been seen on the surface of Sherman's Planet for about three thousand years.

He never knew about it. He was going to start on lining the pool when the rain stopped, but by then he'd gotten a cold and hadn't really felt up to doing it. He just holed himself up in the house and watched old comedy vids, but switched to dramas after the laughing started provoking several coughing fits.

Captain's Personal Log, Stardate 53663.3.

The da Vinci is oddly quiet. Most of the crew is off the ship, either engaged in various fixer-upper projects on Sherman's Planet or engaging in some much-needed shore leave. Left on the ship, there

only myself, who just had shore leave a week ago; Wong at conn keeping us from falling out of orbit; Stevens, who begged off leave because "somebody had to run the ship here"; Hawkins, because Corbridge insisted on leaving somebody on board, and Hawkins used up his leave time after the incident on the Debutante of Triple-Lined Latinum in any event.

And Dr. Lense.

I was actually of two minds as to keeping Lense up here. On the one hand, shore leave might be good for her. On the other hand, wandering around in a funk during a leave might draw even more attention to her, which I'm studiously trying to avoid. Besides, with the ship pretty much empty, it allows me to conduct a lengthier session with her, without drawing grief from the crew.

I'm keeping a copy of our sessions here in my personal log, to help collate my own thoughts and observations and to have a record I can hand to Starfleet Medical, if necessary. I'm hoping it won't come to that-but after today's session, I think I begin to realize just how damaged she might be. The following quotes should illustrate.

TRANSCRIPT STARTS

LHello, Captain.

GHello, Doctor. Good to see you.

LIf you say so.

GHave a seat. Water?

LYes. You've almost gotten this down to a routine, haven't you?

GI hope so. My grandmother told me good manners should always be routine.

LHow sweet. What was her opinion on prying into someone's personal life?

GShe wholeheartedly practiced it.

LOf course she did.

GI nudzh. It's an ethnic thing. If you prefer, I'm invoking captain's privilege. You don't like it, find another counselor. Shall we get started?

LSure, why not.

GSo.

LSo.

GWhere would you like to start?

LI wouldn't.

GNo, no, no. Not an option.

LOf course not. Pick a point, then. I have no idea.

GAll right. Why do you call the EMH "Emmett"?

L[laughs] You don't know? I thought it was obvious.

GI'm slow to understand sometimes. Why don't you enlighten me?

LHe's an Emergency Medical Technician. An EMT. You know, E-M-T. "Emmett." Get it?

GOh, of course. I should have realized. Okay, new topic. When did you first decide you wanted to be a doctor?

LI don't know I was maybe thirteen or so. The competition for ballerinas was too intense.

GSurely competition didn't bot her you?

LNo, it didn't. I was kidding. Okay it was something I was good at. I picked it up like that. It was easy to envision how a body was all put together, and how making a few changes here and there could affect so many things, make so many things happen.

GAnd from all accounts, you were excellent at it.

LYes, a true idiot savant.

GOh, now come on. Aren't you being needlessly hard on yourself?

LMaybe. But I am a good doctor. I'm supposed to be able to make these brilliant diagnoses.

GAnd yet, we agree your performance has been off its peak recently. When do you think it started?

LA little surprise happened about three years ago, when I was on the Lexington. It turned out that the salutatorian of my class, Julian Bashir, was genetically enhanced.

GI've heard of him. He's still the chief medical officer of Deep Space 9, correct?

LYes. I understand his father pled guilty to the illegal genetic engineering charges and was sent to prison. Since it happened to him as a child and he was shown to be perfectly capable of functioning in normal society, he was allowed to keep his license and commission.

GThat was my understanding as well. So what does all this have to do with you? Was he a friend?

LJulian? I didn't even know he existed in med school. Until we met on DS9 a few years after we got out, I thought he was someone else entirely-an Andorian, in fact. And considering what he's done since then, well, he didn't do it, directly.

GI'm not following.

LCaptain, I outperformed a genetically enhanced human. That's like beating a Gorn at arm wrestling. It's unheard of.

GAnd yet you kept up with him. That's impressive work.

LYes. Starfleet thought so too. That's why I was investigated.

GInvestigated? There's none of this in your files.

LThere damn well better not be. I made sure that it was all taken out. It was a baseless accusation. But it still made a mess out of my life. Here we were, in the middle of the war, and we get a request to dock at Starbase 314. Captain Eberling called me into his ready room, and there were two security officers there from the starbase. He said, "These are Lieutenants Cioffi and Shvak. They need to bring you onto the starbase and ask some questions." And I was carried off to a lovely little suite inside the station where I had everything but a way to open the door. The starbase commander was a Phil Selden and I stayed a month in the Selden Arms while they tried to prove that I was also genetically enhanced.

I wasn't even told about Julian for the first two weeks, I had no idea what they were digging for. My family history was investigated eight ways from Sunday, I found out later that my mother had been detained and investigated as well. They were convinced I was covering up. They talked about sending me away to the Institute where they keep all the other people who were genetically enhanced-they alternated that with threats of criminal proceedings. It took a month of combing over my back history before they would let me go back to active duty. And of course, the Lexington was long gone.

GThey left you behind.

LThey were ordered to the front lines.

GThey still left you behind.

LIt was orders. There was a war on. Surely, Captain, you understand.

GYes. But I can't imagine you liked it.

LBy the time I could catch up with the Lexington, two-thirds of the crew had been killed in battle or rotated off the ship, including Captain Eberling-he died in one of the first skirmishes of the war. So I never got a chance an apology from him.

GWhat did he owe you an apology for?

LFor not supporting one of his officers. For jumping to conclusions.

GI see. Sorry for interrupting.

LI never got to say goodbye to any of them. Gaines, Leff, Bowdren, Twistekey-gone. When I came back, I didn't know who half the crew was on the ship. They didn't know me, either, they thought I was some rookie freshly promoted. Commander-sorry, Captain Anderson was promoted to the center chair from XO, and she and I never got along well. She kept insisting I call her "Heather".

GDid you feel like you let them down?

LWhat do you mean?

GI mean, do you feel that if you were still there on the ship, you would have been able to keep the crew members alive?

LI-Maybe. I don't know.

GYour staff was, I assume, more than competent, I doubt you would have accepted less. You couldn't have done more if you were there.

LYou don't know that. I don't know that.

GYes, you do, Elizabeth.

LDo you know what the hell of it is? He flubbed the question.

GI'm sorry, what question?

LA question during the oral section of the finals. If Bashir hadn't mistaken a pre-ganglionic fiber for a post-ganglionic nerve, he would've been valedictorian instead of me.

GYou didn't crack, and he-

LYou're missing the point. Pre-ganglionic fibers and post-ganglionic nerves aren't anything alike. Any first-year medical student can tell them apart. He purposely gave the wrong answer. He flubbed it.

GOh.

LNow do you see?

GWhy do you think he did it?

LWell, I can't imagine it was the pressure of the exams. I think he was trying to hide that he was genetically enhanced. He was lying. And I was caught up in his lie. I'm sorry, I'd like to stop now. That isn't doing me any good. May I be dismissed, sir?

GYes. But I'd still like to hear about your experiences on the Lexington after you resumed your position there. May we try to continue this tomorrow?

LMake it the day after tomorrow.

GTwo days then. Dismissed.

TRANSCRIPT ENDS

For what it's worth, I think I see a trend-there's a certain theme of guilt over unearned rewards. She feels she didn't deserve to be valedictorian, and she feels she didn't deserve to live when so many others on her ship didn't.

Of course, this doesn't give me any idea what to do about it.

I'm not sure how much more I can do here, other than just listen to her vent. She either has to make changes on her own, or with the help of people much more qualified than myself. And doing that may only make things worse.

Chapter 3

"Jubilee, you are a bad influence."

"Coming from you, Doctor, that is a compliment. Don't tell me you've never slipped a patient sweet before."

"Yes, but I keep it to one a patient. You spoil them. Just because 'Candy Striper' is a term for volunteers doesn't mean you have to go overboard."

"Well, the kids look so cute when they sniffle. I can't help myself."

"At this rate, we're going to run out of candy."

"Dr. Tyler, that's not because I'm handing out too much candy per child."

"I know. Have we gotten any of the lab results back?"

"They should be done by now. Let me finish my tea and I'll check."

"Never mind, Jube. I'll get it. How's your throat?"

"Getting sorer. I don't know what I caught from those kids, but it's a dilly."

"You could take an extra hour off and get a nap, you know."

"No, you're shorthanded enough as it is. This bug has already laid up half the medical staff, and you're getting more people checking in. This is a bad one, whatever it is."

"I hear you. Well, we do what we-"

"Attention. All available staff personnel please report to the operating amphitheater at once."

"Any ideas, Doctor?"

"Not a one."

Dr. Ambrose stood in the operating theater, looking up at the half-full gallery. He noted ruefully that the number of people in the room wasn't going to get any larger-it's only going to get smaller from here, he thought to himself.

He addressed the room. "Thank you all for coming. Ladies and gentlemen, we have a dire emergency on our hands."

A picture flashed on the screen. "This was Abraham Auerbach. He came to Sherman's about two months back from Earth, according to customs. He was brought into the hospital three days ago complaining of severe chest pains, stomach cramping, coughing, and vomiting blood. He'd been suffering from what he thought was a very bad cold for the last three weeks. He died twenty-three hours ago of severe sepsis with multi-organ failure, primarily in the lungs. Our autopsy revealed many of the organs were necrotic." Dr. Ambrose flicked to images of the organs. A quiet rumble could be heard from the upper decks.

"There is no immediately apparent explanation for this. He had a clean bill of health when he came here. There have been twenty-seven additional cases from all over the world admitted into the system with similar symptoms two days ago. We have had an additional one hundred and fifty-seven cases admitted today. We-" and he started to cough, a dry, hacking cough that exhausted him. The audience looked on, ashen-faced. "We have no idea precisely what this is. It doesn't match anything on file. None of the patients are developing any antibodies.

"Auerbach is currently being designated as the Index Case, our Patient Zero, although that may change as other reports come in. But the real problem is-it's already spread. The new reported cases aren't centered geographically around Auerbach. We have no hard data on how it's spreading nor on its ability to spread-although, to be fair, there's enough transporter traffic that if it got into there and the biofilters don't catch it, it could be all over Sherman's."

Dr. Tyler called out from the gallery. "There's another 'but' there, John. I can hear it in your voice."

Ambrose looked up at the gallery. "Yes. Look around you, all of you. How many of your colleagues called in sick today? How many of you know people outside the hospital who are under the weather? How many of you are feeling it, too?"

A murmur went around the gallery.

"Yes. It's not just here. There's a twenty percent absenteeism from schools today. I assume there are similar numbers in the workplace. Ladies and gentlemen, it is quite possible that we are all infected. Every last man, woman, and child on the planet."

Captain's Log, Stardate 53663.8.

I have invoked a planetary quarantine. No ship-nothing is getting on or off Sherman's Planet.

The planet's population has been overcome by a malady which Dr. Lense has taken to calling "Sherman's Plague." It is wildly contagious, and right now it appears that at least seventy percent of the planet is showing early symptoms of exposure. Five hundred and thirty-two people have shown

advanced signs. We have reason to believe that it's quite possible that every human on the planet has been infected by it. It's not impossible that it's spread to every mammal. We honestly don't know yet. What we do know is that things are chaotic on the planet surface. Many essential services were beginning to become short-staffed due to the illness, and now panic is beginning to set in. Doctors and nurses are beginning to leave hospitals. Local militias have been called up from reserves, a state of martial law has been declared by Planetary Administrator Orosz. All schools and businesses have been closed, transporter usage has been forbidden, people have been told to stay in their homes and rely on replicators. Most of our crew down on the planet has taken over running power stations, maintaining communications, computer systems, and security logistics, because so far they haven't been afflicted with symptoms. They're rising to the challenge, but I don't know how long thirty-five people can keep a colony of three-and-a-half million people running.

Particularly hard hit has been the medical infrastructure of the planet. Due to the nature of the disease, the doctors and hospitals were at the front line treating the early cases, and so became very quickly infected themselves. People went to hospitals with the early symptoms, and the disease spread by proximity at an exponential rate. Nobody was expecting this, and according to Dr. Lense the incubation period must have been long enough that by the time people noticed they were sick, everybody had it. There's almost nobody on the planet who can do anything. The front line of defense has been knocked out. And in any event, nobody is ever prepared for the entire population getting sick at the same time.

A few people have tried leaving the planet and running for help. Luckily, all of the folks who have tried have been in unarmed ships, and we've been able to keep them corralled. It's kept Wong on his toes, flying after the strays and bring them home. In some cases Hawkins has had to disable the ships first-with tractor beams mostly. In one case we actually had to open fire.

In a way, I've been somewhat lucky. Since Dr. Lense is still up here with me, she can still do work on the contagion. She's been getting as much information sent up to her as possible, and she's conducting all of the research on the problem via remote telemetry. She's somewhat limited as to what can be done, but she's doing the best she can. Her biggest problem is that sooner or later anybody on the planet who's acting on her behalf will themselves be too ill to help her. I've got some of the crew trying to set up EMHs in the hospitals, and Nurse Wetzell and Medtech Copper are helping where they can as well.

Which leads to the personal aspect of the problem every member of my crew down there is almost probably infected-certainly all the humans. They've got about a two-week lag behind everybody else on the planet, but they too will succumb to the disease if we can't find a solution to the problem. Even if they survive, if we can't find a way to disinfect them, I may be forced to keep them down there for the rest of their lives. Surrounded by corpses. And we have no idea what effect, if any, the disease will have on a Nasat or a Bynar or a Bolian or a Bajoran or on any of the other alien species represented on the da Vinci.

I'm off to sickbay to check in with Dr. Lense. She's said that she should have some results by now, so that we'll have some idea what we're up against here.

Chapter 4

"Okay, what do we know so far?" Gold asked. He was seated in one of the two guest chairs in Lense's tiny office in sickbay. Fabian Stevens sat in the chair next to her.

"It's a viral hemorrhagic fever, Captain," the doctor said. "It's a severe multi-system syndrome, like yellow fever, ebola, or Vulcan bebonea, but this is one we've never seen before."

Lense tapped on her padd, and a picture popped up on the screen behind her of an enlarged virus, along with chemical formulations.

"As near as I can determine, this is the pathogen."

Gold couldn't make heads nor tails of the image, but commanding engineers for so long, he had grown accustomed to technobabble and the need to prompt specialists into using lay language. "Tell us how it works, what it does."

"Okay. It's spread as an aerosol. It's incredibly small, anything small enough to filter it out would make it impossible to breathe through. It appears to be robust enough to survive outside a human body for hours. It's prolific-apparently it's sticking very well to pollen and dust in the air and using that as a distribution aid. Contaminated clothing or bed linens could also spread the virus. The damn thing is more virulent than smallpox was. It attacks every cell in the body, except for brain tissue-and only because it kills the host before it can get that far. It appears to be causing a hemorrhaging in the lungs, making people drown in their own bodily fluids. Since it's also respired, it's exhaled into the open air and spreads quickly from there. The virus appears to first target rapidly reproducing cells, like the lining of the trachea.

Why the trachea? asked Stevens.

Because it's constantly irritated by breathing, coughing, what have you. In fact, that makes it worse because the coughing helps make it airborne and contributes to the speed of spread. It also does a lot of damage to the stomach lining." She pulled up an image of an outline of a body, and pointed at the throat. "Gravity and eating just pull it along. It can incorporate into the DNA of those cells and live there, becoming part of every cell that forms when that cell and its progeny divide-

"Exponential growth."

"Yes, Captain. Once there's enough of a viral load, it spreads to the rest of the body.

"How long does it take to work?" Gold asked.

"The incubation period appears to be about three weeks, then non-pulmonary symptoms start to show up. Before that, all you'll see is a cough and a sore throat. Our people showed up at the tail end of the incubation period-pure bad timing."

"Could've been worse," Stevens interjected. "A few days earlier, and we could've been out of here, carrying the infection to the entire galaxy. A week later, and we might not have been able to help at all."

Gold shrugged. "How does the timing affect our people on the ground?"

"At this point, they've had the disease incubating for about three days. It'll be two weeks before symptoms become evident. I can try vaccinating our crew and that might lessen the effect, but that's a long shot. Making the assumption that I can come up with a vaccine that will work. They're probably a week or ten days after the initial spread. In a few days, they might be the only people on the planet who can stand. And, of course, that's only the humans-I can't even begin to guess how to treat the non-humans."

"How did it spread?"

"Not a clue. Because of the speed of spread, I think we just got a random mutation that developed. I honestly don't know. There are probably other non-sentient species that may be carrying it as well, though I don't have the resources to tell which yet. At least it doesn't seem to jump to plants."

"Where did it come from?" Stevens asked.

"I don't know, and I don't really have the time to find out. It might have been something old, though, or it could've been brought on a cargo ship by accident or a combination."

Gold nodded. "We're already checking on all ships that have been to Sherman's Planet in the last month-luckily, it's not that many. They're being kept in quarantine, and some of them are heading back here. So far, no one on them has shown symptoms."

"Fine. My first priorities are managing patients infected or suspected of being infected, and developing diagnostic tools."

"Agreed. So what can we do about it?"

"Right now, we're limited to supportive therapies-balancing the patient's fluids and electrolytes, maintaining their oxygen status and blood pressure, treating them for any complicating infections we can. You've already declared a quarantine, so that stops any interplanetary spread."

Gold exhaled long and hard and asked the question he didn't want to ask but needed some kind of answer for. "What's the mortality rate?"

"No way to tell, sir. So far, we've had a large number of people die from this thing but I have no way to be absolutely sure until I see how many people actually can recover from it."

"How many do you expect?"

"Based on what I've seen so far, and the computer models I've run-I don't know if anybody is going to be able to survive at all."

The room was silent except for the usual background hum of the da Vinci's impulse engines. Gold recovered first. "All right, Doctor, what can we do to help?"

"Do you know anything about molecular biology?"

"Um no."

"Diagnostics? Clinical medicine, epidemiology, proteomics, immunology, pathogenesis, comparative biology, ecology, public health practices? Either of you?"

Stevens looked at Gold, then back at Lense sheepishly. "I can fake some of it. Maybe."

"Then there's damn little you can do. You don't fake this. I get to do it all."

"No, you don't. Doctor, you've been running at warp eleven on all this. Go back to your quarters for several hours and take a break."

"There's no time, Captain. Forget it."

"Four hours."

"One hour."

"Two. That's an order."

She glared and took a deep breath. "All right. Two hours. Let me get Fabian up to speed and then I'll go. In the meantime, you keep on the horn and see what you can do about getting any other help here. I'm already transmitting what data I can to Starfleet Medical, but the lag time is way too long, so they're useless."

"Fine. In the meantime, I'll see what I can do about keeping the ship running with a single op."

"Don't try and one-up me, Captain, I'm not in the mood."

Gold shot Lense a look. "I'm not, Doctor-and I don't appreciate your tone or your assumption. Clear?" Not waiting for an answer, Gold left the sickbay. Lense leaned back in her chair.

Stevens turned and looked at Lense. "Okaaaay now what can I do?"

Lense called out. "Emmett!"

The EMH materialized five feet in front of her. "Good morning, Doctor."

"We've got us a doozy, Emmett. Synch with my files and notes from the last forty-eight hours."

"Synching-oh."

"It's an epidemic. No, scratch that, it's a pandemic. We've just identified the pathogen, we're running tests to see what we can do to kill it. Keep an eye on the tests that are still running. He-" she pointed at Stevens "-is your extra set of hands. I'm going to get some rest, I've been told I need it."

The door opened to the cabin Lense shared with Domenica Corsi. Like the rest of the ship, it was quiet and empty. No noise in the hall, no chatter, just the constant background hum of the engines.

"Lights, one quarter." The room dimmed to a point that Lense could tolerate. The silence, however, would get to her. "Computer, play Vivaldi's Four Seasons."

The sounds of a string quartet filled the room and Lense collapsed into a chair. She massaged her temples, trying to relieve some of the eyestrain.

The computer beeped. "You have a message from Lt. Commander Corsi."

A message? That's not like her, Lense thought. She opened her eyes-there was no music. She must have fallen asleep in her chair and slept through the entire piece. "Computer, time?"

"The time is now fourteen hundred hours, twelve minutes."

She did some quick math in her head-she'd been asleep a little over two hours. "Tea, semi-hot, extra sugar, lemon, and caffeine." The replicator hummed and she took the suddenly appearing mug in her hands and sipped. "Play the message." She turned to the viewscreen on the wall, but there was no picture, just audio.

"Hey, roomie. I know we're both incredibly busy, with me trying to keep things running smoothly down here and you playing with your test tubes. I'm down here at the spaceport-we're keeping the line on here. There are a lot of people who are trying to get in here and find a way off the planet, and I'm keeping my hands full keeping the ships grounded. I don't want to distract you, so you'll get the message when you get it. No rush-if you get it and it's necessary, there'll be plenty of time.

"From what I understand, there's a chance that I may be stuck on this planet for a very long time-either living out the rest of my days here or just taking up a good two meters of it. I'm not worried about it. I know you're doing your damndest up there, but we've all gotta go sometime. But there's one important thing you've gotta do for me.

"If I don't make it off this planet, I want to make sure that my little brother gets the axe. It's a family heirloom, been in the family for years and years and years. He always complained that I got it. I hid it under my bed-I never found a good way to hang it on the wall. He's on Cestus III, living in Pike City under his name's Roberto. You'll find-Get back here, you!" Lense heard a sudden scuffle of background noise and wondered just what was going on down there.

"Got to get back to the situation at hand. You have to get the axe to Bobby, or I'll haunt you from one end of the galaxy to the other. And don't worry about me. If I had to, I'd have commandeered a shuttlecraft to get down here and do my job. This is what I'm supposed to be doing, just like you're doing what you have to do. Corsi out."

Terrific, thought Lense. Somebody else haunting me. Just what I needed.

She thought about Domenica Corsi, a woman that she'd shared a cabin with for a year and knew almost nothing about. Yes, but nobody knows anything about her. Except maybe Fabian.

Her eyes drifted to the drawers under Corsi's bed. The axe? What was that all about? Knowing Cori's a Breach, it's probably some old Klingon cleaver, designed to slay seven targets with one blow.

She got down and knelt in front of Corsi's bed, then opened the drawers.

She didn't see it at first-then she saw a wooden case about a meter long, in the back under some civilian clothes. She emptied the drawer so she could get at it, and took it out.

It was wood, but it had been sealed with a fixative; she couldn't feel the wood grain. It had a clear top and through it she could see the axe.

It wasn't a Klingon axe at all. It looked like it was human made, and apparently very old-the handle was made of wood and it was beginning to show signs of age. The axe head rested on what looked like a triangular pillow, a deep blue with white stars on it, and showed wear on the red paint. This was not a ceremonial weapon, it had been used.

And down at the bottom of the case on the glass, there was a brass plaque. The inscription read

A firefighter performs only one act of bravery in his life,
and that's when he takes the oath.

Everything he does after that is merely in the line of duty.

In Memoriam-September 11, 2001

Lense knew the date, and realized what she had to be holding.
She reverently placed the box down on Corsi's unmade bed, then turned and left to go back to sickbay.

Captain's Personal Log, Stardate 53665.1.

Things are not going well here. The number of advanced cases on the planet has cracked two thousand. The death toll is a hundred and thirteen. Dr. Lense is getting more and more frustrated and tense. I went to visit her in the sickbay, and I saw her sitting at her desk working, while Emmett was running around from table to table, with numerous test tubes in his hands.

She's getting heavily stressed.

I realize this is a crucible issue for Dr. Lense-she's being placed in yet another life-or-death situation where she is the last, best hope to save the lives of thousands upon thousands of people. Again. She had to do it during the war and failed-or rather, she didn't live up to her and everybody else's superhuman expectations-and now she's in a situation where the number of potential corpses could increase by three orders of magnitude from the last time.

And I don't have any way to take any of the burden off of her. Deep Space Station K-7 is the closest help, and it's a week away. She's on her own.

I wonder what I'm actually going to put in the official log about all this.

Chapter 5

The doors to sickbay opened, and Fabian poked his head in. He saw that Dr. Lense was running between tables and screens and cultures, with Emmett following behind trying to keep up, but moving slowly and jerkily, like an internal motor was misfiring. "Hi, Doc. Can I play through, or is this a bad time?"

"Is there any way in which this could be construed as a good time, Fabian?"

"Hey, you've still got your health" Fabian winced at his own stupid comment.

"Shut up. What do you need?"

"I need to put monitoring taps on Emmett's program. I'm worried about the load on his system, with his database being accessed by a thousand different people. The degradation could get bad."

"Yes, I've noticed a lag in his performance too. Isn't there anything that can be done about that?"

"Not yet. The problem is the constant file synching, and Emmett just wasn't designed for it. In theory the main computers on the planet are better equipped, but they're short-handed-"

"Yes, yes. Do whatever you have to. Take processing power from all the other systems, we're the only ones up here and what we're doing is more important." She went back to staring at the screen, glancing over at flasks that Fabian could only conjecture about.

But it wasn't his concern. His was getting Emmett's program to scale upwards so he could surpass his design specs by a thousandfold. He didn't want to tell her that he'd already cut back on every drain of excess CPU cycles he could think of. The da Vinci was practically running on a hamster on a wheel at this point.

"How goes the battle?" he asked.

"Badly. This thing is brutal. It'd be tough to design a more perfect pathogen against any humanoid race."

That bad?

Worse. This thing attacks any organism that uses a nucleic acid as its genetic basis. Doesn't matter if it's DNA, RNA, or some of the more exotic forms, this virus has proteins that integrate into them all. And our vain hope that Pattie, Soloman, and the other non-humans would be immune is fading. They're probably all just as vulnerable.

Fabian smiled wryly. Wow. The holy grail of computing.

Pardon me?

Sorry. Old computer problem, how to integrate data between non-standard systems.

How do computer engineers solve the problem?

Wait two years and upgrade the entire system.

We don't have two years to wait here.

Well, computer viruses don't give you the option either.

Whatever. Lense went back to her monitor. She started muttering, probably to herself, though Fabian couldn't help overhear. "The hell of it is, I know that the virus would probably burn itself out in a week if it didn't have a live host-but that's every human on the planet."

Fabian piped up. "Shouldn't the transporter biofilters be taking the viruses out?"

Lense just kept staring at the screen and tapping. Fabian was sure he heard a growl.

"No, I guess not," Fabian said, after thinking about it a moment. "We could take out the airborne viruses, I suppose, but we couldn't do anything for the viruses already in the person's- wait a minute."

Why can't we use the biofilters to take out the viruses in people's blood?"

"Because it's getting into the DNA of cells, including blood cells. That's what viruses do. We might be able to reduce the viral load of some patients, but it's a stopgap measure at best that would have to be applied to the entire population, and that's tough with three and a half million people."

"Damn. And it sounded so good."

Lense sighed. "Welcome to my life."

"Okay, we couldn't do anything for the viruses already in the person's DNA, and they'd just stay sick. And they'd keep pumping out the virus. And even if we could, the air on the planet is so saturated that they'd just get re-infected again. We couldn't keep them all up here while we clean up the planet, and we couldn't make an oxygen tent the size of a city."

"Mmm." Lense had gotten up and was looking at another batch of lab equipment. There'd been little indication that she'd heard a word he said.

Fabian continued talking out loud. I guess fixing a computer virus is much like a human virus.

I doubt that. She spoke without looking up.

No, I don't think they're that dissimilar. Correct me if I'm wrong, but when we fix the damage from an infected computer system, we have to go in and cut out the virus coding, repair the damaged files and data, and then program the system to recognize the virus in the future and not let it infect the system again.

Yes. But the problem remains, what do you do when the data is so horribly corrupted that no recovery is possible?

Hope that you've made a backup recently.

That's my problem. The virus has pretty much totaled every biological backup, all the places where there would be an uninfected strand of DNA to work with.

"Oh."

She looked at the screen. And this thing just eats up cells. The human immune system isn't designed to handle viruses, it primarily targets proteins. It certainly isn't set up to handle this sort of thing.

Yep. Sounds like it's time for a systems upgrade.

If only-say that again.

Say what again?

It's time for a systems upgrade.

It's time for a systems upgrade. What about it?

Lense stayed very still for ten seconds. Then she almost attacked her combadge. "Lense to Gold."

"Gold here. What is it?"

"Get down to sickbay. We have a solution!"

Captain's Personal Log, Stardate 53665.8.

Dr. Lense had just called me from sickbay, claiming she had worked out a cure to Sherman's Plague. I went down there to be briefed.

TRANSCRIPT BEGINS

GDoctor?

LCome in, come in! I've got it. It came to me in a flash, I'm working out the details of it now.

GWhere's Stevens off to? I just passed him in the hall.

LI sent him ahead to start the work on the transporters. He's going to have to keep them running for probably at least thirty-six hours straight to handle the load, he wants to make sure they're ready as soon as I have it ready.

GFor what?

LFor the cure to work. It's going to take a couple of engineering tricks to get everything going, but-

GWhoa, whoa, slow down. From the beginning, and with the small words?

LWe've got a way around it. Sherman's Plague just cuts through the human immune system like it wasn't there. It was never designed to handle something like this. So we're building a new immune system. I'm writing the DNA sequences now. Thank heaven the planet is almost entirely human stock. I don't to think about the time it would take to write multiple versions of the enzymes. Good thing the last organ affected is the brain-if not, even when we fixed the virus you'd lose memory and learned behavior, because those cells would be destroyed

GWait a minute. Explain to me what you're doing.

LOkay, it's something like this. I've developed a few potential cures here, all variations on the same theme. First is DNA that we'll append directly to the cells of the infected-not too hard. The new sequences will go in and respond directly to Sherman's Plague, preventing it from causing any more damage.

We have a series of steps. Step one we've already done, figuring out what's causing this and how it works. Step two identify the viral DNA sequences in every infected cell in a body. Step three remove those sequences and rejoin the human DNA, making repairs and restoring to the original as closely as possible. Step four cause the immune system to recognize the virus and prevent it from re-infecting the cells. Step five repair the damage on a tissue level rather than cellular, restoring organ function and what have you. Step six eliminating the virus from the environment, so this plague never happens again. Step one is already done. Step two and three go together. We need an enzyme complex-

GPardon?

LThink natural nanotech.

GGot it.

LThe enzyme complex needs to be able to read the DNA of the chromosomes and recognize the viral sequences. Luckily, the virus doesn't change its own DNA sequences-if it did, the problem would be almost unsolvable. Once it finds a viral sequence, it needs to excise it and degrade it, then it needs to rejoin the organism's own DNA which was interrupted by the virus. Fortunately, we don't have to design this enzyme complex from scratch, we're going to use off-the-shelf parts.

GWhat parts?

LThe basic structure is a ribosome, which is a normal part of a cell that turns RNA into proteins. We're recoding it to recognize this particular viral sequence.

GGo on.

LThen we're going to attach a DNA endonuclease, which is part of the normal DNA repair machinery that prevents mutations by removing pieces of DNA. And then we add a ligase, which will glue the

two ends back together.

GStep four?

LStep four the virus is designed-

GDesigned? This was deliberate?

LSorry. Bad choice of terms. The virus protects itself by turning off the ability of the immune system to recognize and destroy it, like most viruses. Adenovirus does it all the time.

GNever heard of it.

LThe common cold.

GWe cured that, didnt we?

LStop interrupting, please. We need to duplicate an immune system, with modifications so that the virus is unable to shut it off.

GA non-trivial problem.

LYes. But again, were working with off-the-shelf parts and building on them.

GStep five, we already know how to do.

LOnce the virus is removed so no further damage is caused, yes. Simple, if we can do it in time. Our factors are time and the sheer number of patients that have to be treated, were going to tap every available resource to pull that off.

GAnd step six?

LWiping it out in the ecosystem. Getting the population immune will be a large help in that on its own, as the virus will have no place to live. My guess is that it will burn out on its own in about two months, but we can improve on those numbers by releasing disassemblers into the air to break down the airborne pathogen. Search and destroy. We may also have to consider a controlled destruction of livestock, once we have an idea of what other species this infects, if any.

GGood. So when can we take the next steps?

LVery soon. I'm working on the precise identifiers now. So to do all this, were going to have to add the forty-seventh chromosome.

GWhat?

LNo way around it. Its a gigantic amount of data and this is the only way to do it. What we'll have set up is a sort of triage. First, we're going to have to run the most critical cases through the mass transporter and add the chromosome directly to their DNA when we rematerialize them. At the same time, we're going to be using the cargo transporters as long distance replicators, seeding the atmosphere of the planet with an artificial virus as widely as possible, which implants the chromosome. We hook it to helper cells, which will allow the virus to quickly reproduce, with limitations so that it cant reproduce without the helper cells. Once they get into the air, they should multiply and spread, infecting the rest of the population with the cure, which should propagate through the body in the next forty-eight hours or so. We're going to have to get all of our people into environmental suits as they're still early enough in the stages that a full genetic rewrite probably won't be necessary for them for another few days, so that should give us enough time. At least I hope not, I'm not positive yet if I'll be able to pull this off on the non-humans. We'll have to beam them up to the ship so they can eat and the like, but we can do that-somebody's going to have to spell Fabian at the transporters after a while anyway.

GAnd this is all that you've got?

LWhat do you mean, "this is all that you've got?" It'll work. It's our best shot.

GI see. Doctor, I'm afraid I have to say no. You can't do it. You can't perform the procedure. Federation law is very clear on this point.

LExcuse me?

GDNA re-sequencing and genetic tampering is strictly forbidden, except in cases of serious birth

defects. Find another way.

LThere is no other way, Captain. This is it.

GThere has to be an alternative to genetically reengineering the entire population of a planet. Cant v genetically modify the virus itself?

LWe could have if wed gotten here early enough, but its already in everybodys system. The damage already being done.

GWhat about having the transporter remove the virus itself?

LNot an option either. It would take far too long to have the computers go through and check for the damage from the virus, and it might introduce errors into the rematerialization. It's much easier to access the chromosome, and then have it do the necessary work. Besides, your version is genetic modification as well.

GWhat does Emmett say?

LHe has no valid opinion.

GHow can he have no valid opinion? How can you say that?

LHe has no valid opinion. His programming won't account for it, there's nothing in there about proscribed procedures. It seems to be unable to even consider it. We tried running it past him and he said he was unable to perform the procedure.

GThat settles it. It's not being done.

LNo, Captain. You don't have a valid medical opinion either.

GI beg your pardon?

LYou have no idea as to what can or can't be done, what should or should not be done. The only thing you're willing to put faith in is what people in a little office on the other side of the galaxy are dictating to you.

GNo negotiation, Doctor. This is what you have to do. Do it by the book.

LYou're an idiot. I can't believe I'm hearing this. You're being a fool.

GYou're not a free agent in this. You're lucky that you are getting to practice medicine at all right now.

LOh, really?

GYes. I'm sorry, but-

LComputer. Voice ID, Doctor Elizabeth Lense.

CVoice ID confirmed.

LCaptain David Gold is becoming agitated and overwrought, and is showing signs of clear cognitive difficulties. Under Starfleet Medical Regulation 121, Section A, I am preparing to relieve him of command.

GWHAT?!

LEmmett, activate. Wake up.

EMHGood afternoon, Doctor.

GDoctor-

LThe captain is becoming very agitated. Prepare a sedative-two cc's of damitol.

GWhat do you think you're doing?

LI may need your assistance in restraining him, Emmett. Don't hurt him, he's obviously confused. Possibly delusional.

GDear God, you're serious.

LSerious as a mass grave. Which is what I'm going to have if I don't get back to work here.

GDon't be a putz, Doctor. I can't let you do this.

LLet me put it to you in simple, easy-to-understand words, Captain. There is a plague ravaging the population of the planet below us. I am the closest thing to a functioning medical authority within

light year, which makes every person down there my patient. I have prescribed a regimen of treatment which, according to my ability and judgment, I consider for the best benefit of my patients. And I have a person up here who is attempting to prevent me from saving their lives. I want their lives saved, too, but you're mutating them!

LYou see? You don't even know what I'm doing. You have no idea. All you can do is help me do this or get out of my way. You can't do it by yourself.

GDoctor, I would be very careful if I were you. This is mutiny. Comput-

LShush shush shush. Understand me, Captain. You need me right now a lot more than I need you. Because I guarantee you, if you don't let me do this, your career will be over. I will report to the board of inquiry that you overrode the advice of your ship's medical officer, and as a result, allowed millions of sentient beings to die needlessly. Your career-no, your life will be over. I can do it with or without you, Captain, and frankly at this point I don't care which. You can't do it without me. I can save lives here, Captain, and by God I will not let you or some silly law prevent me from doing that. Now, are you going to take responsibility for what's going to happen, or am I?

Captain, it's going to take me at least an hour before I can start applications, I have to finish designing the re-sequencing enzymes and run them through computer modeling, and Fabian has to finish rewiring the transporters. I have work to do either way, so you have an hour to make up your mind. With or without you, Captain. In the meantime, get out of my sickbay and let me work.

TRANSCRIPT ENDS

What else could I do? I left.

To be honest, arguing wasn't going to do anything but escalate the situation, and she might make good on her threat. And in any case, it would have wasted valuable time.

I believe her threat is not an idle one. There's only a few people on the ship now. She could certainly claim medical authority to have me removed from command, even temporarily, leaving her free to do whatever she was going to do anyway.

She has given me an hour to make a decision. But if this decision is going to be made, it's going to be made by rational people thinking it through, not because one stressed-out person blackmailed another into it. I do not cave in to blackmail.

I dislike having to essentially hand over command to a member of my crew because they have more relevant knowledge of the issue at hand than I do. Does that give them the right to usurp the captain's chair whenever they feel like it?

On the other hand, someone's got to drive. Shouldn't it be the best driver?

Ordinarily, yes. But what if you know that the driver is going to break laws?

Honestly, I'm less concerned about the laws being broken as I am about Lense being broken. Because like it or not, she's the only option I have. And so I have to be extra careful about using her without breaking her.

So does that mean that I'm going along and indulging her power trip, even for a few minutes?

No. I want to save the population here as well. But the principles of the Prime Directive apply here. The Prime Directive says, basically, that we shouldn't tamper. Internally, the same concept guides our thinking on tampering with ourselves. The original impetus was in reaction to the Eugenics Wars, but the point is we do not have the right to alter our biology to such a radical extent that it gives such a huge evolutionary advantage. And that's what Dr. Lense is proposing here. To be given more than what we've been born with. If the laws regarding genetic enhancement were as inconsequential as she tries to make them out to be, she wouldn't have spent two months on Starbase 314 having her life poured over.

I can hear Rachel telling me, "God never gives anybody more than they can handle."

Actually, that's not what I'm hearing. The voice is not from the shul, it's from the kitchen. She was with our youngest granddaughter, Emily, visiting from Florida when she was seven. I came upon them in the kitchen, praying for snow. Emily had never seen the white stuff except for the holovids, and was looking to frolic. Rachel, even more so, to play with a granddaughter in the snow, she was even more excited than a seven-year old. The only problem was it was the beginning of December, and I knew that time of year the odds of getting snow in New York was almost non-existent. And I told them so and that praying for snow was a dumb idea.

Rachel looked at me, then Emily. And she said, "What could it hurt?"

Okay. We're out of all other options to save the people down there. Lense can't or won't deliver another option. The death toll is rising. Lense knows the consequences to herself of her actions, and she's determined to go ahead and do it anyway.

What could it hurt?

All right, we've established that we'll go ahead and do it. Now how can I help Dr. Lense? Play manager here, David. She's determined to go through with her plan. My question is, how can I help her? How can I make it easier for her? Heck, how can I help her avoid prison time?

Chapter 6

Dr. Lense was running among three different terminals, checking the progress of the sims. She had set up simulations of the modified DNA sequences, and was now testing them against DNA records of various human genotypes to determine if they would actually work in the field.

The first set of results had not been encouraging, and had forced Lense to lose a half-hour, time she was acutely aware of. She knew that the deaths would plot out over time like a bell curve, and knew that with every minute wasted she was beginning to ascend the curve. She imagined a grisly pile of corpses, piling up higher and higher in the shape of a bell curve

"Gold to sickbay."

The interruption snapped her out of her reverie. "Whatever it is, make it quick. I'm busy."

"Doctor, I need a quick medical opinion. Would you concur that not being able to survive in the ecosystem one was born in would be considered a severe birth defect in the individual?"

Lense blinked, then answered slowly. "Yes. Yes, it would."

"Then I must concede that you are acting to correct a severe and widespread birth defect in the population of Sherman's Planet. I will so note in the official log and all reports I make to Starfleet of this matter."

Lense almost fumbled the petri dish in her hand.

"Congratulations, Doctor. You have my blessing for a go-ahead. I'm on board with you-we'll deal with the legal ramifications later."

"If it helps, I've set up the forty-seventh chromosome with their own marker tags. We'll probably be able to flush them out of people's systems later, after we've determined that the plague is out of the atmosphere."

"Probably, she says."

"Medicine isn't an exact science, Captain."

"You're not doing a very good job of reassuring me, Doctor. How soon can your crazy plan be implemented?"

"Give me another ten minutes. The initial sequences didn't work out, I'm running simulations on the latest batch now. You can start checking in on the rest of the crew up here, see if they're going to be ready to go when I am."

"Will do. Gold out."

Lense exhaled. She didn't realize how much of her breath she had been holding. "Sickbay to Stevens."

"Go ahead, Doc."

"How soon are you going to be ready?"

"Cargo transporters are done. I'm finishing final tweaks on the mains. Diego's been consulting over the comms and whimpering a lot, but we're actually ahead of schedule here."

"Good. Get ready, I'm going to have specs for you in a bit." She turned to Emmett. "How are you doing on the airborne antivirus?"

"I believe we have it completed and ready for testing."

"Now we're cooking. Upload them to Stevens. Fabian!"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"You've got a file coming to you from Emmett. Feed that into the cargo transporters and go!"

"Reading the file-got it. And it's loaded into the transporter buffers. And now, with a wave of my little magic wa-"

"Just run it! I've got too many other things to do!"

"You take all the fun out of things. Energizing!"

"Stevens to bridge. Captain, you should be seeing the first transports now on the big board, if you want. I'm headed to the main transporter room now."

"Let's take a look. Wong, put it up on screen. Zoom in."

"Aye, sir." A picture of the planet's surface directly below the ship appeared on the bridge's main viewscreen, about a hundred square kilometers worth. In the atmosphere of the planet, a transporter twinkle started appearing on the planet in a grid pattern-barely seen from high above, it was a thousand points of light blinking in and out, flickering all over the place.

"Okay," said Gold, "it's a start."

"Okay," said Lense, "it's a start. Now comes the hard part. Fabian, how's your part going?"

"Not too bad. Just waiting to hear from-"

"Duffy to Stevens," said the new voice over the com channel.

"Stevens here. How's it going down there, Duff?"

"The pattern enhancers are in place around the worst cases down here, Fabe."

"Cases? Plural?"

"Yeah, Docto-oh, damn. We can't do it that way? The genetic patterns will get mixed up?"

"No, it should work when we're doing it en masse, we should be able to do six at a time. But for my initial tests, I need one."

"Then we can calibrate off of that," Fabian added.

"Okay, hang on." There was a pause, then a beep. "I just placed my communicator on a patient here. Can you get a lock on her?"

"Scanning-got it."

"Make sure you've got all the medical equipment with her."

"Tha-a-a-ank you, Duff, I knew that. We're ready to energize. Doctor?"

Lense stood in sickbay, not moving for five seconds. Had she forgotten anything? She was sure she covered everything, and she had to test it somewhere. "Wait, Fabian. I want to be there and see the patient," she said as she walked toward the door.

"You won't be able to interact with her. She'll be behind a force field, to prevent contamination."

She had already reached the turbolift. "I know. But I want to see her for myself. Deck five."

"All right. We're holding here."

"Thank you. Be there in a few seconds. Lense out."

Lense sprinted from the turbolift down the corridor to the main transporter room. Stevens was at the

console when she came in, and a shimmering force field wall had been erected in front of the transporter platform.

"Ready to go?" Stevens asked.

She took out a tricorder. "Ready. Let's do it."

Fabian nodded. "All right, here we go. Energizing."

He moved his hands across the console, and the familiar hum started. On the platform, a woman appeared on a sickbed. Lense looked at the woman, and she was already beginning to fade-Fabian had programmed the transporter to immediately cycle back and forth. The patient was elderly, Lense estimated her age at around one hundred twenty from what she could see, but the years had not diminished her stare. She caught Lense's eye just before she completely winked out.

"She's back here," Duffy said over the comm.

"Confirmed," Stevens said.

"Are they in her?" Lense asked.

"Yup, no problems. The extra chromosome has been systematically added to every cell in her body."

"Are we going to wait and see how she took it?"

"No time. I wish there was, but-"

"Right, I understand."

Stevens nodded. "I think we can start going for multiple transports, then. Duff, how you set up down there?"

"Ready to roll, Fabe. We're tagging the worst cases and transmitting their frequencies to you."

"Great. Executing transporter cycling program Stevens-9 now." Fabian's hands flashed over the console, and the transporter platform filled with six patients and sickbeds-then they disappeared, to be replaced by another six. Here, then not, here, then not, over and over again in a slow motion strobing effect. It was entrancing.

Lense looked over at Stevens, who was concentrating on the console and muttering under his breath. She got closer to listen, and heard him saying, "Yes, happy to see you here no waiting, we'll be right with you just leave your payments up front take two of these and call us in the morning"

Lense reached over tentatively and touched his arm. Stevens half-glanced down where she touched him, but went on with his tasks and mutterings. "Yes, turn your head and cough Feeling run down? E what?"

She hugged him then.

Stevens didn't notice, he just kept on working.

She let go and turned to leave, and saw Captain Gold standing quietly in the back of the room. She missed him entirely-had he been there when she rushed in, or did he come in during all the excitement? She started to speak, but Gold held a finger to his lips, then pointed to the door.

The two of them walked out together.

Captain's Personal Log, Stardate 53670.1.

The worst of it all has past.

It's been two weeks since we released the antiviral regimen. We've been able to halt the spread of Sherman's Plague. No new cases have been reported in the last ten days. We repaired much of the damage to the population. Fatalities have been, all things considered, very small-we couldn't save about a half a percent of the population, they were too far gone. We also had to destroy a portion of the animal population, much to our regret. Luckily, this is a planet that remembers famines, and had prepared for it. And none of the grains were poisoned, so that's a help.

The real problems have been the secondary effects from lack of services, but Gomez, Corsi, and Duffy have been working long and hard to get them back up to snuff.

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