

USS Stonehouse Whoever Brings the Night

By Brother Benny

Prologue

San Francisco

Earth

Stardate 53404.8

Doctor Yerbi Fandau turned onto his left side hoping that it would allow him to sleep, since his right side, chest and back had all proved fruitless in the attempt. The war might have been over for close to six months but his schedule was as full as it had been at the height of the accursed conflict. Dozens of worlds needed medical existence, both inside and outside of the Federation, and his doctors were spread thin. He'd resorted to nurses and medical technicians to fill the gaps and went through every report on a daily basis, hoping that more doctors became available to fill the ever-increasing list of planets, and starships, that needed medical personnel. Since sleep was going to elude him this night, Fandau decided to make an early start on the day. He showered, dressed and headed for the large building that was his almost permanent home, Starfleet Medical.

'Early start, Doc?' the guard on duty smiled, a chipper young man in the dead of night.

'Couldn't sleep,' he replied with a wave.

Inside his office complex, his assistant was already compiling the latest list. 'Good morning, Doctor Fandau,' Ghee P'Trell said, the Caitian smiling with his sharp, uneven teeth.

'Don't you ever sleep?'

'Not these days. There's an urgent communiqué for you, came in almost ten minutes ago. I was about to wake you.'

'They're all urgent. Why is this one so special that you were planning on waking me in the middle of the night?'

'It's from your Cardassian contact, I recognised the subspace coding.'

Fandau's eyes widened and he hurried into his office to activate the recording. This was news he'd been waiting for, for almost three months, and he had almost given up hope.

'Doctor Fandau,' the Cardassian contact spoke in even tones even though his face was badly bruised, and still bleeding the obsidian ichor that passed for blood in that species. 'The situation has grown grim. The people have gone unnoticed by the Federation and the Cardassians, the Klingons and the Romulans since the war ended. They need your help if they are to survive another generation.' He coughed and spat up blood. *'There's something else you need to know. There's something else on this world that lives in the cave system outside what's left of the capital. The people won't go anywhere near it, and I know there was nothing there before the war. Whoever you send has to be able to take care of themselves, no matter what.'*

It dissolved into static after that and he sighed, tapping a control on his desk. 'Ghee, get Cole for me.'

'It's four in the morning.'

'He'll be awake, the old bastard never sleeps.'

'Aye sir, stand by.'

It would take only a moment for the subspace signal to reach Utopia Planitia and the orbital drydock facilities that made a large number of ships for the Federation. Less than two minutes later, the face of an old friend appeared on screen, though he appeared somewhat groggy.

'Did I wake you?' Fandau asked.

'At my age I do actually need more than thirty seconds of shut-eye to keep me going for the day,' Cole replied, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

'What are you now, sixty?'

'I'll be ninety next month, as you well know. To what do I owe this early morning

wake-up call?

'Manek came through for us,' Fandau answered grimly. 'But it may have cost him his life.'

'That bad?' Cole was now wide awake, all trace of fatigue instantly erased. 'What happened? What did he tell you?'

'Extinction in less than a generation if we don't act now. I'm sending you the file now. See if you can clean it up en route. What do you want to do?'

'You know my stance on the subject. I spent two years on the planet, living with the people as the Federation Embassy was built. Say the word.'

Fandau nodded. 'Thank you, Captain. Get your people together and leave as soon as you are able.'

Cole smiled. *'We'll leave within the hour, Doctor.'*

Fandau wrinkled his brow. 'You were going to go anyway?'

'I was going to give it another week.'

'Your crew, they trust you?'

'Most of them don't even know me yet. A lot transferred off at war's end and even more when the ship went in for that little refit. Those that remained behind have helped me run the trials to make sure that she's spaceworthy.'

The Head of Starfleet Medical sighed. 'This isn't something I wanted to entrust to an untested crew, Captain.'

'I have replaced those who transferred off with people of equal or better talents in all required fields, and your new agency has given me the best medical staff I could hope for. I am submitting to you now a full crew manifest along with my reasons for having them aboard. I trust you'll find them satisfactory.'

'I don't really have a choice now, do I?'

'Not really,' Cole replied with a hard cast to his face. 'We'll these people get back on their feet, and if the Cardassians think we'll let them waltz back in they have another thing coming. The Stonehouse is more than able to defend itself'

against a Galor or two.'

'The Cardassian Republic is concentrating on maintaining the territory they have, and electing a new leader. I doubt very much that they will want anything to do with what they consider to be a backwater world.'

'The Jem'Hadar didn't see it that way,' Cole said, almost growling. 'And I'm sure there are a few rogue Cardassians still seeking to make a name for themselves.'

'Perhaps so,' Fandau replied, thinking of the haunted look in the Cardassian's eyes. 'When you see the file, you'll notice that he mentions a haunted cave system outside the capital. I want you to exorcise it.'

'My pleasure. I aim to get them back to where they were before the Enterprise stumbled onto them at the very least. But their culture has been irrecoverably changed by us and by the war.'

'Do the best you can, Captain.'

'I intend to, Cole out.'

Fandau leaned back in his chair and prayed that Cole was really as good as he said he was.

Chapter One

USS Stonehouse

En route to Starbase 129

Stardate 53407.7

It had been a little over a day since Captain Cole had pulled the ship off space trials and headed toward the edge of Cardassian space, specifically the area now administrated by the Federation in the wake of the Treaty of Bajor. He had not informed anyone of the mission, only that it was going to be long-term and that they were going to be filling their cargo bays with as much as the ship could hold once they reached Starbase 129. Commander Jane da Silva was aware that Command had decided to give her the fourth pip and this command; then the Diplomatic Corps had stepped in with their Council-mandated Special Executive and pulled six ships off the line to refit for “special use” so instead of getting a command of her own she was playing second fiddle to a man who’d been a Starfleet officer forty years ago and spent the rest of that time as a diplomat before having his commission reactivated during the war.

The bridge of the *Ambassador*-class starship had been redesigned several times over the last seventy years and this particular redesign, made just after the war, had situated the tactical station along the rear rail of the bridge, like the *Galaxy*-class design, moved the conn and operations consoles forward to where the original forward console had been, and given the executive officer a chair and console two metres in front of the command chair. It was not the most efficient bridge design but she liked it since she didn’t have to look at her commanding officer much of the time, finding him a condescending and arrogant man.

‘Captain, we’re receiving a hail from the Palais,’ tactical officer Shalmara Deth informed Cole in a sibilant hiss.

‘I’ll take it in my ready room,’ Cole replied. ‘Commander da Silva, with me. Lieutenant Commander Deth, you have the conn.’

‘Aye sir, I have the conn.’

Cole sat down at his desk and gestured for da Silva to stand just behind him. She did as she was asked, wondering what everything was about. ‘Computer, seal this room, authorisation Cole-Diablo-three-three-six.’

'Room sealed,' the computer replied.

'Open channel from the Palais.'

'Captain Cole, Commander da Silva, I am Timothy Fox, former Federation Ambassador to the Cardassian Union. What I am about to tell you is classified well above your security clearance and you are to speak of it to no one. Your official mission to Lyshan is to help the Lyshani get back on their feet after the damage the Cardassians and Dominion did to them. Unofficially, we have received unconfirmed reports of a Jem'Hadar breeding facility on the surface. You will have backup from Starbase 129 should you need it, but this is a top priority.'

'Ambassador Fox, you know that I respect you,' Cole began, 'but this crew was not chosen to go on a covert security mission.'

'They're Starfleet officers and should be quite capable. As are you, or should the Executive find another vessel?'

'We'll find your Jem'Hadar, Ambassador,' da Silva replied before Cole could. 'And we'll have their Vorta leader returned to Command for questioning.'

Fox raised an eyebrow. 'We were led to believe it was a Founder, do you know differently?'

'I do, as it happens. The Founders leave the business of growing Jem'Hadar to the Vorta. Most of those barbaric creatures never even meet their gods.'

Fox nodded, turning his attention back to Cole. 'You know what the Lyshani are like, Morpheus, I hope you can help them.'

Cole frowned. 'We only made them a protectorate because of their strategic location near Cardassian territory. Now that it is Federation territory, we should repair what damage we can and leave them to mature on their own.'

'You'll find that it won't be that easy, Fox out.'

'I think I have Robert Fox Syndrome,' Cole muttered.

Da Silva smiled. 'It runs in the family.'

'That it does, Commander,' he said as she took a seat opposite him. 'Why all

the secrecy surrounding our mission to Lyshan? Are you expecting trouble before we reach the Starbase?’

‘As a diplomat I learned a lot of things, many of which I didn’t want to know. Chief among them was that almost every local empire has spies in every other. Even with my connections, I’m not sure I was able to get a clean ship.’

‘Do you really think we have foreign operatives on board?’

‘Do you know anything about the Cardassian Intelligence Bureau?’

‘The successor to the Obsidian Order? Not much, except it was Gul Dukat’s pet project and they operate just as deviously as the former agency.’

‘The Bureau is trying to monitor everything that happens in former Cardassian territory and while we have given back some of what we administrated, we’ve refused to hand back the Lyshan system because they annexed it from us during the war.’

‘And they’re saying it was the Dominion, not Cardassia?’

‘Something like that.’

‘If you ask me, the Cardassians deserved what they got.’

Cole leaned back. ‘Go on.’

She was committed now. ‘They have been annexing systems and bleeding them dry for half a century and they were too proud to ask for help so in order to rebuild, they give a deadly enemy a foothold and find themselves on the wrong end of a conquering force.’

‘So they deserved to be erased from existence?’ Cole asked quietly.

Da Silva swallowed. ‘I think they needed a kick in the behind, sir. Perhaps they will remember what their arrogance cost them.’

‘It will take a long time to erase that trait from their history, if at all,’ the former diplomat told her. ‘But there are still plenty of the old school who want to make Cardassia strong again, to bring the Union back to the way it was a hundred years ago.’

‘And they might still be in league with the Dominion, after what happened?’

‘Anything is possible.’

‘We should tell the rest of the senior officers about the mission.’

‘A full briefing will be given at Starbase 129, when the official diplomatic officer arrives on board.’

Chapter Two

USS *Stonehouse*
Starbase 129
Stardate 53414.3

The new diplomatic officer materialised on the transporter platform as Captain Cole and Commander da Silva entered the room. Cole raised his eyebrows in surprise when transport was complete and the stranger identified. Da Silva just stood and watched.

'Permission to come aboard?'

'Permission granted, Doctor,' Cole answered. 'I must say that I am surprised to see you here.'

'No more than I am, old friend. I take it that you heard of my exploits aboard the Enterprise?'

'I did, and I thought you were in New Zealand?'

'I thought I recognised the name,' da Silva interjected. 'You were convicted of attempted murder, conspiracy and violations of the Prime Directive.'

Carter Greyhorse turned to face the first officer as they walked toward the turbolift. 'Yes I was. However, I never actually made it to New Zealand.'

'This I have to hear,' Cole stated.

'I was asked by Starfleet Intelligence to investigate Morgen and the Daa'V delegation, and since they knew of my clandestine relationship with a former member of the *Stargazer* crew, they thought I would be the perfect man for the job. Someone else got there first and I needed to cover my tracks, so I planted the evidence and made it look like I was out for revenge.'

'That doesn't explain why you didn't make it to New Zealand,' da Silva interrupted.

'I was transferred to the custody of Starfleet Intelligence at Starbase 81. Since then I have done extensive intelligence work along the Cardassian border and I know how to handle them.'

'Are you here as part of an SI mission or as a member of my crew with experience in dealing with Cardassians?'

'I do not work for SI anymore, which is why I am allowed to tell you the story. The mission was declassified now that Daa'V is a member of the Federation.'

'When did they join?'

'2368, the year after Captain Morgen was crowned.'

'Since that issue is settled, I think you should get some rest before the briefing.'

'Rest can wait, Captain. I suggest we get underway immediately.'

Cole smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. 'Lieutenant Commander Greyhorse, as a member of my crew you will obey my orders. We are transferring personnel and materiel to and from the starbase at the moment and this will not be completed until tomorrow morning. You may rest if you require or we can begin the briefing immediately.'

'I would prefer to begin the briefing as soon as possible, Captain, to give the crew as much preparation as possible before we arrive on scene.'

Cole nodded and turned his attention to his XO. 'Commander, see to it that the senior staff are in the conference lounge in ten minutes. I will personally escort Carter to his quarters.'

'Aye sir,' da Silva replied and walked to another turbolift down the corridor.

As soon as she was out of earshot, Cole asked: 'It was Section 31 wasn't it? The ones who got there first?'

Greyhorse refused to answer directly. 'That is still classified.'

'That's what I thought. You were lucky to survive. I've known several good friends to fall at their hands and I swore never to let it happen again. I assume that you worked for a particular former communications officer?'

Greyhorse nodded.

'At least we're on the same team,' Cole replied and clapped a hand on the

diplomatic officer's shoulder. 'Have we been able to find Manek yet?'

Greyhorse removed the offending hand politely. 'Not as yet, no. You'll receive the full details in the briefing.'

Eleven minutes later all senior staff were seated in the conference lounge directly behind the bridge waiting for Greyhorse to begin. The diplomatic officer stood up and walked over to the screen in the corner of the room.

'This is Lyshan, a world which seven years ago was in unclaimed space near the Federation-Cardassian border. While involved in a classified operation, Commander Riker detected life on the fourth planet in the system and sent a probe to investigate.' While he was talking the screen changed to show the location of the system and its proximity to Cardassian territory and changed again to show what a Lyshani citizen looked like. 'The Lyshani are a sentient feline species with technology approximately that of late twenty-first-century Earth, though they do have warp drive which is used solely for unmanned missions.

'Their society is feudal, with different clans controlling different areas of the planet. The only joint venture they have is a lunar colony on the second moon. Those are the basics but the full information will be available to the entire crew at the conclusion of this meeting. The Lyshani were made a Federation protectorate in 2370 because of their proximity to Cardassian space but the Cardassians left them alone. The Dominion did not, using the world as a training base for the Alpha Jem'Hadar. The lunar colony was almost completely destroyed but it is just about habitable. The Lyshani have lost over a quarter of their population because of the Jem'Hadar and some clans have been absorbed into others.

'There's been a lot of in-fighting with the clans having taken in the stragglers to strengthen their own numbers and the government, such as it is, is essentially a puppet regime to the largest clans, leaving the smaller clans to suffer with no help. Thankfully, due in no small part to the collapse of the Cardassian Union, the Lyshani Premier has asked for Federation assistance and while Starfleet cannot commit extensive resources to aiding this planet, the Diplomatic Corps' Special Executive pulled some strings to have a ship of the line dedicated to help rebuild Lyshan for a minimum period of six months, possibly longer, depending on what we actually find when we get there.

'There was a Cardassian helping us. Gul Manek, formerly of the Fifth Order, risked his life to provide us with the information we now have. He is missing,

and we need to find him as he has more to give us. I now turn this briefing over to Captain Cole for the classified portion.'

Chapter Three

USS Stonehouse **En route to Lyshan IV** **Stardate 53420.6**

Jirana stood in the corner of the recreation lounge, called the Pool Table because of the green carpet, and looked out at the stars streaking past. She was so wrapped up in her musings she didn't notice the ship's tactical officer walk up to her until she felt an unusual presence by her shoulder. She turned round and saw that the red-hued woman had a concerned look on her face. Jirana smiled at the newcomer and they took a table together.

'I was wondering if you'd forgotten,' the El Aurian said and ordered a drink from the table's replicator.

'Sorry, the Captain wanted to make sure that the security teams were ready for when we arrive in a few days time.'

'Why isn't Grait handling that?'

'He is, I just needed to give his people a special briefing. Anyway, work is over and I'm looking forward to our holodeck time. So what program did you have in mind today?'

Jirana smiled. 'I was thinking of using a special program a friend of mine made up for me. It's a sports game called Squash, or Racquets.'

'Another one of your games that died out centuries ago?'

'Yes, but since I was alive at the time, I remember it being played. There are still worlds where the game evolved independently of Earth and is still being played. The Human game is the most civilised though.'

Shalmara Deth focused her gaze on her companion. 'What's the problem, Jee?'

'What do you mean?'

'We've been friends for almost three centuries, I know the look you get when something bothers you. What is it?'

Jirana smiled. 'You know me too well. I have learned that in the past ten years,

six of my people have died.'

'It's not unusual, you are a long-lived species but you are not immortal.'

'From non-natural causes, but all were supposed accidents.'

'And you don't believe in coincidences?'

'No, I don't. There are so few of us left that the death of one affects us all.'

'What can you do about it?'

'Two things, both difficult.'

'Can I help?'

'I doubt it.'

'What options are there?' Deth asked.

'I can make quiet investigations myself, and maybe track the man down. I know who he is, but I won't be able to stop him on my own.'

'And the second option?'

'Ask Starfleet for help.'

'Is there any reason they won't help you?'

Jirana turned to face the stars again, seeking answers. She turned back to the table. 'Perhaps, perhaps not. El-Auria doesn't exist anymore, and we're not members of the Federation. There are one or two of us who could ask for help, but it would not necessarily be given, at least not without a lot of questions I'd rather not answer. Let me make my enquiries first. If I know where I can find the man killing my people, it may be easier to convince Starfleet to assist me, us.'

'Shall we go and play? You can teach me the rules.'

Jirana nodded, smiling again. 'Sure, let's go.'

'Lieutenant Commander Deth, report to the bridge please,' da Silva said over

the comm.

‘Got to go, rain check?’

‘Sure,’ the ship’s civilian counsellor replied with a wan smile.

As Deth exited the Pool Table, Jirana decided to contact someone who might be able to help. It was a short walk to her quarters and she opened a channel straight away. As expected, her friend was up.

‘I wondered if I would hear from you,’ Guinan said from her berth on the *Enterprise*.

‘I take it you know about Talara?’

Guinan nodded. *‘Do you believe he is still chasing us down?’*

‘He did promise to exterminate us.’

‘Jirana, it was said in the heat of the moment. I seriously doubt he meant it.’

‘What of the shuttle he stole?’

At this, Guinan bowed her head. *‘All right, it was his shuttle that gave them our location, but they were heading in our direction anyway.’*

‘We would have had time to get away!’ Jirana cried out. ‘He’s making good on his promise. He has been for years.’

‘I think you’re seeing a conspiracy where none exists. We spoke about this before.’

‘I’m sending you a file, Guinan. Look at it and then tell me that I’m wrong this time.’

The ebony-skinned El-Aurian hundreds of light years away nodded her head in acquiescence. *‘I’ll read it.’*

Jirana sent it and sat back as Guinan read the entries.

‘Is this accurate?’

'I've had it confirmed in every case.'

'Let me speak with Captain Picard.'

'Why?' Jirana asked, suddenly defensive.

'I won't give him any specifics, but if I know him, he'll get the general idea and offer to help. He has a lot of friends in high places. Some of them might be able to find Casaan.'

'He could be anyone by now.'

'You know as well as I do that his species only have a limited number of forms. He'll almost what, nine hundred by now? He has probably used most of them, and we know what he feels like in here,' she pointed at her head, covered by its usual giant hat. *'We'll know when he's close.'*

'Knowing he's there and stopping him are two different things, Guinan.'

The older El-Aurian smiled. *'When you're older, you'll know what battles to fight, and which ones are lost causes.'*

'You can be infuriating.'

'Thank you. Don't you have people to see?'

'I do, I'll keep you apprised.'

Guinan nodded. *'Safe travelling.'*

The Federation logo filled the screen and Jirana sighed. She knew Casaan wouldn't stop until all of them were dead. She knew only brief snippets of Casaan's visit to her homeworld, as she was on an expedition at the time. She knew that he had been to the central archives and that it was later that evening that things started to go wrong. Jirana stood and decided to go to the holodeck later by herself, with a special program she had written, specifically for this task.

Putting those thoughts out of her mind, she left for her office and the problems of others so this ship and these people could be helped.

Chapter Four

USS *Stonehouse* Entering Lyshan system Stardate 53428.8

The senior staff had returned to the conference room for one further briefing session before the ship reached Lyshan IV. Captain Morpheus Cole sighed as he walked around the table, hesitant to impart the information he had recently received from Command. Everyone was looking at him with an expectant expression, except Commander da Silva.

'I have just received word from Command that the Lyshan system is being ceded to the Cardassians, but they have agreed to allow us to rebuild the planet's infrastructure.'

'They can barely manage their own world,' da Silva cut in. 'How can they look after another?'

'A *Keldon*-class warship will be joining us in the next week or so and will patrol the system while we maintain orbit,' Cole answered.

'Captain, do the Lyshan Defence Force know that Command have allowed them to be enslaved again?' Commander Deth asked.

'Commander, such a view is not helpful in this situation.'

'Lyshan is, or was, a Federation protectorate. Did they cede anything to us this time?' Lieutenant Grait asked, snorting in derision. He was clearly making reference to the now-defunct Demilitarised Zone created half a decade before.

'Lieutenant...' Cole called out warningly.

'Captain,' da Silva said, 'we all have strong feelings about this kind of behaviour from Command. We've seen what happened before, and there was no major war beforehand. With the Federation still rebuilding, we can ill afford another Maquis-style insurgency.'

'There won't be one,' Carter Greyhorse interjected, having stayed silent thus far. 'The Maquis became operational because they were defending their homes from what they saw as a Federation betrayal and a Cardassian occupation. In this case there is neither. The Lyshani people are still non-

aligned and their defence forces could help bolster the Cardassian presence in the region, especially if the Talarians come knocking.'

'What makes you think they will?' Grait asked.

'The Talarians and the Federation were involved in a cold war for more than a decade before it erupted in 2353 following the sabotage of a Federation vessel in Talarian space, which destroyed one of their ships. For the next four years, hundreds of people were killed on both sides until an agreement was reached after the Galen border conflicts. The Galen Treaty has always been a touchy subject with them and I believe that they will attack as soon as they have amassed a large enough fleet.'

'I take it Command disagrees and doesn't believe the Talarians to be a threat?' da Silva asked.

Greyhorse nodded. 'They consider the Talarians to be too xenophobic to try a concentrated attack though they might, and I stress might, test our defensive strength.'

'Then we'll keep a lookout for them and send them back to the Swine Goddess's Soured Teat,' Grait replied with relish, stealing a look at Deth, the tactical officer.

Cole held back a sigh. 'Make continuous scans for any Talarian activity. We should be ready to repel any attack they make.'

'Aye sir.'

'Right, down to business,' Cole changed into tactical mode. 'Doctor, I want your medical teams distributed to all major population centres to take care of the sick and wounded that Lyshani medicine cannot handle. We'll get to the outlying areas later. Zh'Meras, coordinate your people with the Corps of Engineers team to get started on the sewage and power generation systems. They are the top priority. Grait, have your security prepare for a sweep of the haunted cave system. I want to know exactly what is going on down there and who is responsible for it. Commander da Silva and I will meet with the Lyshani Premier and inform her of the current operations schedule. Commander Deth, you will coordinate all teams and department heads while we are on the surface and then share the duties with Commander da Silva and myself. If there are no further questions, you're all dismissed.'

Everyone but da Silva stood up and left.

‘Commander?’

‘Am I to be coordinating everything from up here?’

‘No, once we’ve spoken to the Premier, we’ll set up a base of operations on the surface, in a building that may no longer be used. We’re going to be here for a minimum of six long months; I wouldn’t expect or ask anyone to stay on board the entire time. It’s not healthy.’

‘Aye sir.’

‘One more thing, Commander. I want to use the runabouts and shuttles as frequently as possible, using the transporters as little as possible. Make sure the flight control teams are ready to perform continuous maintenance.’

‘Yes sir.’

‘*Captain Cole,*’ Lieutenant Tixx called over the comm. ‘*We’re approaching Lyshan IV.*’

‘Let’s go,’ Cole said to da Silva and they headed for the bridge.

The brown-and-green orb hung in space like a moss-covered marble and Greyhorse sighed. ‘Captain, may I recommend the science team gets to work on reseating the atmosphere?’

Cole tapped his combadge. ‘Mr Powell, I need you on the bridge.’

‘*On my way.*’

‘Open a channel to the Premier.’

‘Channel open.’

‘Premier Kashir, this is Captain Cole of the Federation starship *Stonehouse*. We have been sent by the Federation Diplomatic Service and Starfleet Command to assist you in rebuilding your world.’

A woman’s face appeared on the viewscreen, relegating the view of the planet to the small screens at the rear of the bridge. She resembled a Terran cat only

as far as the fact was covered in fur and had a long tail whipping about behind her. Her facial features and limbs were fully humanoid, though Cole did see the remnants of pads on the palms of her hands.

'I am Premier Kashir, and I welcome you to Lyshan, Captain Cole. We have been looking forward to your arrival and would be honoured if you could join us for evening tea,' she responded in a vaguely Japanese accent.

'My first officer will come down as soon as we have begun coordinating our teams.'

'I am gratified that you would get to work straight away, but I'm afraid that you may find the Lyshani people not as friendly as they once were. Recent events have clouded their perception of offworlders.'

'I understand, Premier. The sooner we're able to get to work, the sooner your people will live the way they did.'

'It will not be the same, but it will be better,' Kashir replied. 'We will see you in two hours, Captain. Lyshan out.'

Chapter Five

Government Headquarters Southern Continent, Lyshan IV Stardate 53428.9

Captain Cole and Commander da Silva materialised in a public square outside the main headquarters of the Lyshani government where a number of security personnel had gathered. A man came out to greet them and suddenly looked up as the three shuttles assigned to the *Stonehouse* descended through the cloud cover with a sonic boom and moved off in different directions. The man winced at the sound but recovered quickly, reaching out to shake their hands. Cole smiled as he took the proffered hand and da Silva did the same, though her smile was somewhat forced.

‘Captain Cole, Commander da Silva, I am Rassid, Premier Kashir’s personal aide. If you will please follow me, I will take you to her.’

‘Thank you, Rassid. I am pleased to see that the Dominion did not cause much damage to your capitol buildings.’

‘You are quite mistaken, Captain,’ the aide replied. ‘We have spent our entire global economy on rebuilding as best we can. Once the Premier realised that we would bankrupt ourselves if we continued, she requested your help with the subspace radio left behind in your embassy.’

Da Silva turned to Cole questioningly. ‘We have an embassy on a protectorate world?’

‘Commander, the situation was desperate at the time, but at least we have somewhere to make our base of operations.’

‘I will have Commander Deth send a few of the ship’s engineers to make sure the building is sound and get our equipment inside,’ she replied.

Cole probably would have given her the order to return to the ship just then, as she feared, but they encountered a surprise when they emerged onto the upper floor of the building and saw the friezes on the wall.

‘I don’t remember seeing these when I was here last,’ Cole muttered.

‘When this building was damaged, the sculptors decided to erect a reminder

of the strife when they remade the wall.'

Cole and da Silva saw a story depicted of the Dominion landing and the Federation leaving, followed by Jem'Hadar storming through the streets and damaging the city. On the opposite wall, the friezes told the story of the Lyshani resistance defeating the Dominion. It was not entirely accurate, told through this world's particular cultural beliefs, but it was enough to see that the Dominion had damaged the very psyche of this planet. Rassid ushered them through the gold-inlayed double doors at the end of the corridor.

This was an anteroom, where they would wait until Kashir was ready to receive them. Rassid disappeared through another door, leaving the two Starfleet officers alone with three security guards and a number of city- and landscape paintings.

'They seem to have done a marvellous job of rebuilding on their own, sir,' da Silva said.

'I think you'll find that much of it is cosmetic, Commander,' Cole replied. 'The capital city will have taken the most damage and they would have spent billions of credits to return it to some semblance of what it used to be. I can almost guarantee that if you go ten kilometres from the city, it will be a very different picture.'

'Premier Kashir will see you now,' Rassid said, appearing in the doorway to his office.

As the Starfleet officers approached him, he opened the double doors leading to what they assumed was the office of the Premier.

'Madame Premier, may I introduce Captain Cole and Commander da Silva.'

Premier Kashir used her tail to place a padd back on her desk and came round it to greet the Starfleet officers. 'Welcome back, Captain. I am gratified to see that you survived the war.'

'I'm afraid I don't remember you, Premier,' Cole said as politely as he could.

'There is no reason you would; I was a cleric in the monastery when you visited during your diplomatic tenure. We spoke only briefly.'

Cole closed his eyes for a moment. 'You wore the magenta robes of the

Western Order, if I remember correctly.'

Kashir's eyes widened. 'My people do not have such good recall.'

'I'm sure that's not the case, Premier.'

She smiled. 'You're too kind. I'm nearly eighty and I have only thirty years before I will be unable to remember anything but my oldest memories. Come, we have much to discuss.'

The Starfleet officers took seats on a couch while Kashir sat in a high-backed leather armchair.

'My people tell me that your auxiliary vessels are already at work.'

'Yes ma'am. I have three teams beginning the process of getting your world back to pre-war levels. There is a medical team treating your wounded in the major cities, an engineering team working on the sewage and power systems, and a security team investigating the cave system.'

Da Silva thought the premier looked impressed with Cole's diligence but she herself thought it was too little. One ship could not hope to get the infrastructure up to pre-war levels in six months which was how long their mission was supposed to last. Conceivably the Diplomatic Corps' Special Executive could extend their mission another three months past that, but no ship of the line could be spared indefinitely, especially in this time of rebuilding. She just sat there quietly as Cole and Kashir discussed the long-term operation of the Starfleet personnel. The Premier agreed to spare whatever personnel she could for the embassy from her own diplomatic staff, though Cole preferred to have his own people.

Da Silva left only a part of her mind on their conversation while she mentally reviewed the crew roster and realised that once everyone was involved on the surface, there would only be a skeleton crew on board the ship—a fact that did not bode well if the Cardassians decided to betray them or if the Talarians attacked.

'Well, I think we've taken up enough of your time, Premier,' Cole said and da Silva pulled herself back into the moment.

'Thank you, Captain,' Kashir replied. 'I may come by to get progress reports occasionally.'

'One of my senior officers can give you a daily briefing, if you'd like.'

'That would be fine.'

'Commander, would you mind?'

'Not at all, sir,' da Silva answered, smiling at them both and seething on the inside.

Chapter Six

Shuttlecraft *Winchester* Southern Continent, Lyshan IV Stardate 53429.0

Lieutenant Kyle Lipman, chief medical officer of the *Stonehouse*, sat uncomfortably in the co-pilot's chair of the shuttle as the pilot flew toward the main hospital just to the right of the city centre. As they approached the landing pad on the roof, Lipman saw two flyers deposit wounded and then fly off again, presumably to retrieve more wounded from a distant site.

'We're all set. How long until we land?' the deputy chief medical officer, Carmen Angelo, asked.

'Five minutes,' the pilot replied.

'I want you to deal with the most critical patients first,' Lipman told her. 'Spread throughout the hospital and if necessary call me for authorisation for emergency beam out. You can stay here and the EMH can do the work.'

'Aye sir, what about the radiation cases? The main hospital has a radiation wing where the sickest people from the radioactive parts of the planet are cared for.'

Lipman narrowed his eyes in thought. 'There was no mention of any nuclear disasters or attacks. Where have these patients come from?'

'I don't know sir.'

'All right, get the others to each floor and then I want you to investigate the radiation wing. If the Cardassians and the Dominion didn't do this, then somebody else did, and they won't want us poking our noses around. I'll send a discreet message to the ship to have them start scanning for any radioactive areas of the planet.'

'Aye sir,' Angelo replied and retreated to the rear of the shuttle to give orders to the nurses, technicians and orderlies.

'Are you picking up any radioactive particles with the sensors?' Lipman asked the pilot.

'Not within a hundred kilometres of the capital city. Was there nothing in the briefing?'

'No, but I'm beginning to think that even the Captain didn't get the full information regarding the state of the Lyshani people. Once you've dropped us off, I want you to find any evidence of a radioactive event, whether it be from a power station or a missile.'

'Sir, I was ordered to drop you on the surface and then return to the ship.'

'I'm changing those orders. If you have any trouble with your superiors, then tell them to come to me. Anything medical-related that might endanger this crew falls under my jurisdiction and I want to know if there is any evidence of a local radioactive event. Is that understood?'

'Yes sir,' the pilot replied. 'We're about to land.'

Lipman turned to face the other medical personnel. 'All right, people, get ready. From this point onward until the end of this mission, there will no longer be standard duty shifts. You'll work the length of a standard Lyshani day. The former Federation Embassy will be made safe for our use again and will be used as sleeping quarters and if necessary an emergency shelter.'

At that moment the shuttle landed on the roof of the hospital. The hatch opened and the medical technicians filed out carrying their pouches with a tricorder, hyposprays, and dermal regenerators. The shuttle had the bulkier equipment and two orderlies carried it off before the shuttle ascended into the sky for its survey.

Lipman watched his people enter the hospital through the roof doors and then followed. He had made it down one flight of stairs before a feline figure jumped up to his level and joined him. Though the Lyshani did not wear clothes as such, they did wear bands of coloured cloth which hid their genitalia and also denoted rank and status. The Lyshani standing before him was a female doctor, and quite senior.

'I am Doctor Kyle Lipman, chief medical officer of the *Stonehouse*.'

'I am Derev, chief of medicine here at Central Medical. Please let me know if there is anything I or any of my doctors can do to help you.'

'I would like to study your anatomical texts if that is acceptable. It will enable

me, us, to better treat your people and learn more about you.'

'As long as you do not butcher us like the Grey Devils you are welcome to learn all about us,' Derev replied.

'If you don't mind my asking, what did they do to you?'

'They hunted our Warriors in the jungles and their leader experimented on us, trying to adapt our genetics to their Grey Devils.'

'I know a little bit about their genetic work. What is so special about your genome that the Vorta wanted for the Jem'Hadar?'

Derev raised a furry eyebrow. 'My people have an adaptive genome. You will find that although we are all Lyshani, there are more than two hundred distinctive phenotypes. Our world is very harsh and we have adapted to live in different environments. Those that live in the jungles have prehensile tails and there are even sea-breathers with gills.'

'None of this was in our briefing.'

'The Vorta tried to engineer the Grey Devils' genetic template to take our adaptive genome. It didn't work. Their own DNA reasserted itself.'

Lipman now knew why the Dominion had taken the planet. Not only to train their new Alpha Jem'Hadar, but also because the Lyshani were naturally genetically engineered. He would of course have to put all this in his official log entry, and knew that once Captain Cole listened to or read it, he would be summoned for a debriefing and likely told not to speak of it to anyone. It was a delaying tactic, and he would argue for full disclosure on everything Starfleet knew about these people, and the Dominion's interest in them.

'Thank you for this information, Doctor. Could you give me a tour of the hospital? I would also like to know what kind of illnesses and injuries your people are suffering from.'

'I would be only too glad to assist, but I have been asked by the Chirurgeon General to be extremely careful with where your people go. They are all being monitored and I will be alerted if they attempt to enter any secured areas.'

'We're here to treat all your sick and injured, Doctor, not some of them.'

'Then we're going to have a problem,' the chief of medicine replied with a heavy sigh.

Chapter Seven

Shuttlecraft *Honeycut*

Main Power Station

Southern Continent, Lyshan IV

Stardate 53429.1

The shuttlecraft landed near the large structure which the Lyshani called South Power Five and Lieutenant Commander Taylor Farrell immediately saw the problem. The Dominion had hit the power stations first, destroying infrastructure that the Lyshani resistance would use against them. The other power stations had not been too badly hit but this one had taken the brunt of the damage. While the others were repaired, this one remained offline. It was therefore Farrell's job to bring it back online as quickly as possible, to provide power for the southern and western parts of the continent. Her eight-strong team followed her out of the shuttlecraft with all their gear before it lifted off to return to the ship.

'Sir, I'm picking up lifesigns inside,' Lieutenant Mitchell reported as she stared at her tricorder. 'About thirty Lyshani but I can't be more specific from here.'

'I guess we should go and find out then. They're not supposed to be there so phasers on stun. And keep your eyes open. There's no telling what is waiting for us.'

They strode forward, walking just a metre or so apart in case they were attacked. The power station was geothermal, taking its energy directly from the region's seismically active volcanic range, and Farrell knew from experience just what it took to keep something like that working properly without upsetting the delicate balance. If the people living there were dangerous, the whole region would be in trouble.

Another member of her team sidled up to her, and the formation adjusted to compensate. 'Sir, look at the writing on the wall.'

Farrell glanced at the wall and it took her a moment to recognise the imagery. There was an image on the wall that was a cross between the Dominion's insignia and the Republic of Lyshan. She halted and turned to the others.

'There may be a Vorta or even some Jem'Hadar here that we can't detect. Whoever these Lyshani we have to believe that they are victims unless they give us cause to think otherwise. Is that understood?'

A chorus of “aye sirs” and “yes ma'am” answered her.

'Good, let's get moving. The sooner we're able to get this power station working, the sooner the people can try to get back to their lives. We have plenty of work to do here. The sewage system needs repairing and the other continents need plenty of work.'

No one said a word as they closed the last hundred metres.

Farrell was the first one to notice that the door was slightly ajar and held up her hands. 'I am Commander Farrell from the starship *Stonehouse*. We've come to help you get the power station working again.'

'We have enough for our needs, interloper!' a male voice called out.

'What about the rest of the people in the region?'

'They do not believe in the Great Revolution and need no power. The Dominion will rule over us all in benevolence.'

'The Dominion have gone from this world.'

'And we are it's caretakers until they return.'

Farrell sighed and took a step forward. An energy blast hit the ground less than a metre in front of her.

'You will come no further!'

She tapped her combadge. 'Lieutenant zh'Meras, we have a situation here.'

'*Go ahead, Commander,*' the ship's chief engineer and Corps. Liaison replied.

'There's a Dominion-worshipping cult holed up in the power station. About thirty of them. We need to get them out if we're to get it up and running again. Apparently they have part of it active, enough for their needs, but that's all.'

'*Let me speak to the Captain and I'll get back to you, zh'Meras out.*'

Farrell's engineering team moved closer together to discuss the situation and try to figure out a solution.

'We should beam in a flash-bang grenade and knock them out,' one said.

'We should just beam them out and move in; get the Lyshani militia here to deal with them,' another suggested.

'Why don't we leave them in there and do something else until we're allowed in?' asked a third.

'We'll wait until the Captain gives us an order,' Farrell replied. 'You've all worked on detachment before, you know how this works.'

'We usually work on small jobs, Commander,' Mitchell said. 'This is a large job for the nine of us. We have a whole planet to fix.'

'Zh'Meras' engineers will assist us once we know what needs doing and how long it is likely to take. Once the technological stuff is done, we'll have to teach the Lyshani survivors how to look after everything themselves.'

'What do you mean, survivors?'

'They lost almost forty percent of their population to the Dominion's war machine. The government is a puppet regime to Clan Jerin and we have play nice with everyone so the Cardassians can have this world in one piece once they sort themselves out.'

'Zh'Meras to Farrell.'

'Go ahead, Lieutenant.'

'Captain Cole has authorised you to do whatever is necessary to gain entrance to the power station short of murder. This station represents a major part of rebuilding this world's infrastructure. He is speaking with the Premier at the moment to send the militia out to your location.'

'Aye sir, Farrell out.'

'This is going to go badly,' Mitchell stated. 'The militia are probably controlled by the largest clan and will likely kill the cult members. They might even damage the power station. We have to get in there first, Commander.'

'Suggestions?' Farrell asked.

'Diplomacy is usually the best way,' Ensign Qala muttered in her insectoid tongue, 'but with the cult, I'm not so sure that would work. At least not in the time we have available.'

'We need to gain access. Scan the roof and see if there are any entrance points.'

'You have a plan?' Mitchell asked.

'The beginnings of one. See if you find anything we can use to get up on that roof.'

'I can get up there,' Crewman Raih said, stepping forward.

'How, Crewman?' Farrell asked.

'I'm what you humans would call an arachnid. I could scale the wall easily.'

Farrell smiled and Mitchell whispered into the young enlisted man's ear.
'Now you've done it.'

'Do you have all eight legs?'

'Yes ma'am,' Raih answered and adjusted his uniform to unfurl them.

'Isn't that uncomfortable?'

'Natural ability.'

'Excellent.'

To be continued ...