

THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY

By:

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Through a Glass Darkly

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Chapter 1

“What the—!” Vexen grabbed at the ceiling bulkhead as the ship shuddered, then tilted precariously towards starboard. Shifting her weight to keep her body balanced upright, she flung an astonished glance at her co-pilot. Remard’s face screwed into a perplexed expression and he opened his mouth to speak, but the controlling computer blared an alarm. “Vexen and Remard, alert! My internal scans indicate a virus. What should I do?”

Vexen and Remard shared a look of disbelief. As if jolted into action, he leaped from his chair to the main panel board. Taut, blue-skinned fingers flying over the levers, he deftly hit the correct combination, and the vessel righted to its normal position. Once more on solid footing, Vexen hurried over and peered at the monitor that held his attention.

“That can’t be right,” she gasped, staring at the lights on the screen that flashed an ominous red. “Viruses are non-existent.”

“Except that one is inside DELLA.” Stress quickened the usual placid pace of his defined Askian accent. “And it is spreading. Fast.”

“What is it affecting? What can we do to stop it?”

“It is trying to direct navigation. We are headed toward the sun.”

Vexen sent a fast glance at the near port window. Through the pane the pulsating brightness of the Hezlim System’s sun shone like an Earth diamond. She leaned closer to Remard, watching as his hands manipulated the keys in an attempt to regain control.

“DELLA,” she addressed the computer. “Bring all commands to this console and establish Priority 5 security.”

“I will attempt to do so, Vexen.”

Remard gave a frustrated shake of his head. “She has no anti-virus. There is no way to stop this thing from attacking our life support.”

News Vexen did not want to hear. Pressing her lips in a determined line, she growled, “I’m not going down without a fight. There must be something-- Wait.” A thought struck her and she reached for the inter-space communicator, noting with an anxious eye how the virus snaked relentlessly closer toward the telecom main frame. *It’s like it has an intelligence on how to render us helpless.*

“Vexen? Honey, what’s up?” The deep voice of her husband sounded as close as if he stood right by her. “It’s not like you to use the emergency channel.”

Since she couldn’t see his image through the subspace monitor she knew that meant they’d veered into the fringes of the sun’s distorting gamma rays. “Leland, we’re in trouble.”

A second passed, long enough time for him to assess the reason of the blackened monitor on his end. “Hell, yes, you are. Why are you heading toward the sun?” Disciplined training maintained a certain calmness to his words, but she detected a hint of underlining urgency in his tone.

“DELLA has a virus.”

“A what? Vexen, computer viruses don’t exist.”

“That’s what I told Remard.” She made a wry grimace, his statement reminding her of how the two so often thought as one. “He’s battling to keep us on course, but this thing is a runaway monster. Leland, without an anti-virus, how do we fight it?”

Suddenly, his familiar, bearded image popped onto the screen. One look at his expression told her he’d already plunged into his own strategy of how to defeat her ‘runaway monster’. “I’ve circumvented it to less essential functions.”

“You are hacked into DELLA, Major?” Remard sounded relieved to be able to address his online presence. “Is it possible to identify the virus?”

He lowered his lids, but not quick enough. Vexen didn’t miss reading the concern he tried to hide in his eyes. “Computer history is not my profession, it’s only a hobby.” He glanced up, flashing a reassuring smile. “But DELLA has built-in safe guards. I’m confident between the two of us that we can squash this bug.”

“That’s why I interrupted your Security Meeting, sweetheart.” Vexen made sure her return smile displayed only wifely teasing. “I knew you’d find this situation more challenging than sitting in and listening to Commander Dreyfuss’s dry speeches.”

“And hobby or not,” Remard added, “you have already beaten this ‘bug’ at stage one. I offer my gratitude at your revival of our visuals.”

Before Leland could acknowledge his part in the small victory, DELLA blared another alarm. “Vexen and Remard, alert! I’ve detected an alien object in cargo bay.”

“*What’s going on over there?*” Leland’s studied mask slipped as he let loose his shout of worry and frustration.

“I don’t understand.” Vexen shook her head in confusion as she watched the readings blink across the monitor. “This indicates some kind of life source. But we have nothing in the cargo bay except for the medical supplies we’re transporting from Stradus 3.”

“A life source? Hell, don’t you get it?” Leland’s finely arched nostrils flared in barely controlled anger. “That’s a pirate. It stowed away in the supplies and it’s initiated the virus to hijack the ship.”

“Clever imp, is it not?” Quickly, Remard ran his gaze again down DELLA’s findings. “So. Appears like it is only one intruder. I will investigate.” From behind the sliding door of a side panel he removed a molecular pistol, then grabbed another. He strapped both to his belt while he grunted at Vexen. “How long have I complained to our superiors that medical transports should be equipped with better firearms? What I would not give for a heavy duty proton rifle right now.”

“Be careful. We have no idea what this life form is, or--”

“What advanced weaponry it might possess?” Remard gave her a straightforward look. “Secure this door behind me with a force field.”

Vexen nodded. “I’ll keep track on you at all times. If it becomes,” she hesitated, “dangerous, I’ll beam you inside.” She watched him step through to the outside corridor before she swung back to ask Leland, “How do we contain the virus?”

“Working from this secondary control is like treading through muddy water.” Frowning in thought, he rubbed an absent-minded thumb down the side of his chin. Vexen watched the silken hairs of his bronze beard part beneath the nail, memory of how it felt to brush her lips against those soft, wiry strands ratcheting her pulse to an unsteady rhythm. With an effort, she yanked her thoughts back to the urgency of the moment as Leland announced, “I need to be with DELLA. I’m beaming over.”

“You can’t!” she protested. “We’re still within range of those gamma rays. I won’t be able to secure your signal.”

“I’m the closest thing that you have as any kind of expert, Vexen. But I need hands-on with DELLA. I’m sending the beaming coordinates.”

“No.” She slapped her fist against the panel, then, her gaze locked with his, she inhaled a deep, ragged breath. “Listen to me. If you think I’m going to take a chance of your atoms being vaporized in those rays--” She bit her lip to try and halt the hideous image that threatened to burst onto her mind’s eye. “Forget it. Remard and I will fight this together.”

“The two of you can’t do it alone.” Features softening, he waited for her to comment. But Vexen forced a brave smile. “I’m going to shut off the coms now so I can concentrate on Remard. See you later, darling.”

“No! Vexan!” As if realizing her seriousness, Leland reached out an imploring hand. “Damn you, all right, you win.” He released a heavy sigh. “Let me send a hologram. I can program it with everything I know.”

“Can it make it through the rays?” Hope, like a downy feather, tickled beneath her breast.

“It’ll come across at a lower frequency. There should be no problems. I’m punching in the coordinates. But to maneuver through the ship, he’ll need to wear a MR. Got one ready?”

“Uh--wait.” She fumbled beneath the console, hunting through the drawer of miscellaneous items until she spotted the Mini-Receiver. “Yes. Here’s one.” She flipped the ‘on’ button and placed it next to the monitor. A flash of movement from screen four showed her that Remard stole into the hallway leading to the cargo bay. She tensed, wondering what he might discover once he entered the area. “Beaming. Now.” Leland’s voice drew her attention back to the MR.

Softly hued, differing colored light swirled like an eddy above the object. The colors merged, blending into a solitary outline. A form reminiscent of Leland flickered, and then faded.

“More power!” she called out, trying to keep one eye on the MR while she directed the other at Remard.

“The virus has adapted to the block I engineered.” Leland’s monitor blurred, then his image reappeared. Fury shone in his charcoal tinted eyes. “It’s interfering with navigation again and trying to send you closer to the sun. There’s only one thing I know to do before--” His screen went black.

“Leland!” Vexen sped her fingers over the controls in a vain attempt to reach him. “What? What were you going to do?”

A low hum issued from the MR. Colors swirled again, brighter, more sharply defined. They collided into one solid mass, and then with a loud explosion of static, an impression of Leland stood before her.

~*~

The hologram didn’t waste any time. It bent over the console, peering intently at the screen to view the virus’ progress. “You’re right. This is one damned monster.”

“When you researched computer viruses, did you find anything similar to this one?” Instantly, she caught what she said and tried to correct herself with, “I mean, when Leland —my husband— studied those old programs, he...” Her voice trailed off as the hologram’s head turned, mouth spreading in a

teasing grin. The hairs at the nape of Vexen's neck electrified. *That's exactly what Leland would do.*

"Just so there won't be any confusion, I suggest that you recognize I am..." a gaze ran down the length of her body in an all too intimate, and eerily familiar, way, "the same as your husband."

Vexen blinked. "You are merely a projection."

"Of necessity I must possess his knowledge." Returning its attention to the screen, the image added as if in after thought, "And I hold all his memories."

"If you assume--" Abruptly, Vexen broke off. She'd never met a hologram with *personality* before and to think that Leland programmed this one with too much of an attitude set her teeth on edge. But the fact remained that the current emergency, and not the irritation of having to deal with a mouthy computer graphic, demanded she keep a cool head. Clearing her throat, she picked the MR off the console. "You'll need this."

"Care to attach it on my sleeve?"

She placed it on the left shirt cuff, but both the MR and her fingers slipped through the non-existent fabric. "You aren't solid."

"Ah. I see the problem. Minor interference." Quickly, digits were punched on the keypad. "Now I'm fully downloaded."

She tried again to attach the MR, but it dropped in a shoulder pocket. Reaching inside, her hands stilled. Beneath her touch, through the material of the covering uniform, she felt the warmth of a rock hard bicep. Her gaze flew upwards. How come the neatly trimmed beard now looked so *real* that it captured the lighting of the overhead lamps, the curling hairs glistening with a damp-like sheen as if freshly emerged from under a sonic shower?

Before she could move away, strong arms came around her waist, enclosing her in a tender but firm hold. "Vexen, baby, you look kinda pale." *His* voice, Leland's deep, husky tones sighed near her earlobe. "But I'm here, my love. I won't leave you."

~*~

Vexen shoved hard against the iron chest. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Giving my wife reassurance that she doesn't need to worry--"

"I am not your wife!"

"Sweetheart, we don't have time for an argument."

The way he stood, the way he looked at her, even the arousing scent of the Terkurian cologne that wafted off his shirt collar all crashed into one powerhouse blow that threatened to overwhelm Vexen's senses. *Except that...* Caught off guard, she gave a fast shake of head to clear her muddled thoughts. *It's not a 'he'. He--it's!--not real.*

"The gamma rays somehow distorted your programming." It was the only logical conclusion and she stated it as reasonably as she could. "But I need you to remember the reason why you're here."

"To kick this damned virus off DELLA." Once more, it faced the console, a scowl darkening the handsome features. "Hell, Vex. I'm no fool."

Vexen watched how deftly it handled the zig-zagged path of the virus that spread across the screens of

five different monitors. A faint wave of uneasiness left her cold. *He speaks like Leland, acts just like--* Sub-space static over the com station interrupted her musing, and she snatched the receiver with a ready hand.

“Leland?” She almost shouted his name. “Are you there?”

Though distant and garbled, her husband’s voice responded, “Vex, can you hear me?”

“Yes!” Sheer relief weakened her knees. “Leland--”

“Did the hologram make it?” he cut in.

“He--I mean, it’s here. But what did you program it with?”

“What?” His voice faded, and then came back. “...everything pertaining to what I know about viruses. Vexen, the pirate...” Again, his voice muted, returning a couple of seconds later with, “...in a shuttle.”

“A shuttle?” She latched on to those words. “Leland, you’re flying over in a shuttle?”

“ETA...minutes.” The receiver went dead.

“Damn.” With a frustrated sigh, Vexen demanded of the hologram, “Has the virus disrupted all our communications?”

“Not if I can help it.”

“Concentrate heavily on that area. It’s essential we keep the coms going.”

“Agreed. And let’s start with straight communication between the two of us. Don’t refer to me as an ‘it’.”

She’d sent an anxious glance at Remard’s monitor, but that comment spun her on her heel to throw her full attention at Leland’s double. “You are an ‘it’. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“I’m more than nothing. And I have a name. Use it.”

Apprehension crawled along her scalp to slink down the back of her neck and clench the muscles between her shoulder blades. Then, just as quickly, a hot flash of anger made her see red.

“You’re not Leland. You can’t use his name.” She gave a wild gesture of her hand toward the port window. “Look. You’re a hologram. You don’t have a reflection like I do. You are programmed to only combat this virus. So, damnit, get a move on and do what my husband created you to do!”

“You’ll have to call me something, and I won’t respond to ‘it’.”

She had no time to remark. From Remard’s monitor came the whine of his pistol issuing rapidly repeating discharges. Vexen whirled, pasting a stunned stare at the screen. “DELLA, identify!”

“One second, Vexen. I’m accessing data.”

With a growing sense of horror, Vexen watched a monstrous blob emerge from the hold of the cargo bay. Numerous appendages unfolded, extending limb-like. A pair of antennae sprouted upwards, snapping to attention in Remard’s direction. He fired his pistol again, but the shots disappeared with a loud sucking noise when they struck the mass of quivering blackness.

Vexen’s mouth dropped open. “What is that thing?” Again, she commanded the computer, “Identify that creature, DELLA!”

“Vexan, I’m sorry but I’m unable to comply. *Registry of Documented Life Forms in Quatrum Section Ten* has been corrupted.”

“The virus destroyed the files so we wouldn’t be able to learn how to contain this -- this -- whatever it

is.” Realization hit hard, and she knew a moment of utter, total bewilderment. *Why would a pirate sabotage us? What can he possibly want from a supply ship?*

“The alien life form is impervious to Lieutenant Remard’s molecular pistol.” DELLA stated the observation factually, and then gave a warning beep. “The weapon’s charge has been drained to a dangerous level.”

Spurred out of her stupefaction, Vexen rammed into motion. Slapping a couple of neutron grenades to the sides of her belt, she then grabbed a container of medical aids. Pressing the lock to the exit door, she flung across her shoulder, “Leland, kill that damn virus!”

As she raced down the hallway, she cursed herself. *Hell, I called him Leland.*