

TASK FORCE
VANGUARD
A UNITED TREK EVENT

Dark Territory The Quality of Mercy

By DarkKush

State Room
Starbase Bastion
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The transparent aluminum window was frigid to the touch. Captain Banti Awokou suppressed a shiver before removing his hand. The Starship Aldebaran, his latest command, floated before him. The moorings entangling the angelic ship didn't mar its sleek beauty one parsec.

Stretching over six hundred meters in length, the Galaxy-class starship dominated the docking port, as befitting its class designation. Uncharacteristically Awokou smiled, thrilled at the prospect of returning to her.

"I don't believe I have said anything in jest," Rear Admiral Terrence Glover said by way of introduction. The younger brown-skinned man stood ramrod straight at the entrance to the room. Awokou's smile quickly morphed into a look of concern.

He always knew that his protégé would one day rise to the admiral's rank, but he hadn't assumed it would be so quickly, or under such tragic circumstances. Yet so much had changed in Awokou's universe since that fateful day in the skies above Lakesh.

The captain put the thoughts of that particular tragedy in the back of his mind. "My apologies...sir," He nearly tripped over the word. It would take him a little while to get used to the idea of Glover being his superior officer. "I meant no offense."

"None taken." Terrence seemed oblivious to the fumble, which saddened Awokou. He would've thought the Glover he knew would've enjoyed showing off his fifth pip to his old mentor.

But a lot of bad things just hadn't happened to Banti since the Dominion War; Terrence had been drastically changed as well.

The man seemed more closed off, his body language wary, his arms folded across his broad chest.

His expression was mildly impatient, at odds with the recollections of Banti's wife Rozi, who told him how Glover had spent hours at his bedside while he had been in a coma.

"You wished to speak with me captain?" Glover prodded, gently but still insistent. Awokou's heart sank further.

"Yes sir, I...I wanted to thank you," Awokou began, not quite sure how to proceed, and feeling as awkward as he had on his first date with Rozi.

Glover's head tilted to the side and he gave the captain a look like he was a curious new specimen. "I don't follow."

"I know you helped get me the Aldebaran," Awokou said, recalling the scuttlebutt he had heard from some of his friends in the Fleet. "Not everyone thought I was ready for such a prestigious assignment." He was one of those doubters, but only Rozi knew that.

"It was...a logical choice," Glover shrugged, coming off even colder than many Vulcans Banti knew. "Your service record was exemplary before your accident." Banti tensed at how sterile and antiseptic his old friend made it sound. "And with the dearth of skilled senior officers currently in the Fleet, and in light of your previous history restoring the reputation of Phoenix, it made sense to move Aldebaran past the incident."

"I see," Awokou nodded slowly, wondering if these were the same arguments Terrence had made to secure the post for Banti. There was a part of him that hoped that Terrence hadn't been so dry when making those arguments though.

The captain chided himself. He had no right to criticize the man who had just helped him get a prestige command. Further, Awokou wasn't taking into account how rough the last several years had been for Terrence, the emotional buffeting the man had received.

He had lost his father and his marriage; and before that his ship. That fifth pip must seem like cold comfort, and something that can't replace what had been torn away from him.

"Admiral, Aldebaran doesn't push off for another several days, if you would like to...tour her, that can be arranged, and then afterwards we could have dinner. Rozi would love to see you." Banti was laying it on a little thickly. Actually Rozi was a little peeved at Glover for not showing up while Banti was convalescing after reawakening.

But Awokou had cut the man some slack. Terrence was dealing with his own emotional turmoil and the demands of a new and possibly crushing responsibility. However, Banti also knew that his wife would smother any sharp words she had for the younger man and treat him with the respect he deserved.

The thought of his wife, her graciousness and compassion, made him smile again. "Am I wearing my uniform inside out or something?" Terrence asked, a glimpse of the man's old mirth breaking through.

Laughing, Banti couldn't help but give the man a quick once-over. The man looked resplendent in his long black jacket and matching trousers. Glover's hair hadn't been touched by gray while Banti's had become snow-white. Terrence looked nearly the same as when he had commanded the Aegis, though he seemed even sadder now, with bags around his eyes. The major difference was the man's neatly trimmed mustache and beard, perhaps a sign of his new office.

The man's visage was still stern, but he had unfolded his arms at least. Now they awkwardly rested at his side. Awokou had never seen Glover anxious, even when they served on the Cardassian front.

"We'll have to reschedule I'm afraid," the admiral replied. "I have business to attend to at Starbase 27."

"Along the Romulan Neutral Zone," Awokou pointed out. "Don't tell me the Star Empire is acting up again? Trying to take advantage of this whole refugee situation?"

"Let's hope that isn't the case," Glover said, without adding more. Normally Terrence would add something, he would drop a hint, but that was the past, and Awokou had woken up to a much different future. Glover nodded respectfully before he turned to make his exit.

The man tried one more stab at it. "Lt. Rojas will also be at the dinner." Glover stopped, but didn't turn around.

Banti sought to reel him in. "She was gushing about seeing you again, well, not in so many words, but I could read the excitement on her face when she heard you would be here to review Intercept Group Four."

Terrence turned around slowly. I think I've got the fish on the line, Awokou thought. "I appreciate you also recommending her for flight control officer," the captain added. "We're going to need someone with her skills navigating us through the Delta Quadrant."

"Please send my regards to Lt. Rojas," Glover said, "But I will have to get reacquainted upon your return."

"Excuse me sir," Awokou's forcefulness erupted from him, "I know you're grieving Terrence, but that doesn't give you the right or excuse to turn your back on your friends!"

"I think you need to watch your tone Captain," Glover's nostrils flared and his eyes lit with fire. Banti knew that he was risking losing his ship even before he had made himself at home, but there were some things that needed to be said.

"I understand that your schedule is busy, but I really wish you could comprehend how much it would mean to all of us if you stopped by," Awokou softened his tone, but not his stance.

"There's no time," Glover said.

"We could be gone for years," Awokou rejoined. It was predicted that the mission would last at least five years, unless circumstances demanded otherwise.

"I'm sorry," Terrence said, his neutral expression not giving a hint to his true feelings.

"It's almost as if you want to get rid of us, shorn us off like dead skin or something," Awokou felt his emotions springing forth and the words escaped before he could stop them. Since his awakening from the coma, his emotions had been harder to control.

"I'm an admiral now, things are different," Terrence offered.

"No, the biggest difference is you," Banti shot back. "Lt. Rojas had thought you were going to put her on your staff. She did all that extra training at Starfleet Academy to build up her resume and then you pass her off to me. I'm pleased, but it's not what she wanted."

"Is this what she told you?" Glover's expression became hooded.

"No," the captain admitted, "but sitting in that captain's chair, you learn something about sapient nature."

"Perhaps you are mistaken," Terrence replied.

"Maybe," Banti confessed, "But my gut tells me otherwise. You don't have to push us away. You don't have to do this alone. I can tell you from personal experience that you can't do this alone."

"Thank you...Banti," Glover said. The captain's voice caught in his throat. Awokou reached out, to grab the man's shoulder, to pat it for reassurance, but the rear admiral fell back. "It's going to take time," Terrence offered.

"Fair enough," Awokou reined in his emotions.

"Please relay that message to your wife and Juanita," Glover said.

"I will do," the captain promised.

"Now sir, am I dismissed?" Terrence asked with the heartening sliver of a smile.

"Yes sir," Awokou smiled in return.

The Watering Hole Starbase Bastion

Lt. Kenule Dryer leaned half-way over the table to hear what the other man was saying even though he was practically shouting. If the music, pounding from archaic audio speakers lined along the bulkheads, wasn't loud enough, the raucous crowd was.

There was dancing, singing, a lot of swaying, furious games of dom-jot and billiards among others. And the maddening clanging of glass and metal steins; often against rough wooden tables and bar tops as the patrons ordered more rounds. The scantily clad Farian and Orion waitresses were only happy to accommodate them. The gruff Nausicaan tending the bar looked tougher than any of the drinkers-including the Klingon ones, or the aggressive décor.

"Say again?" Dryer asked.

"This is great isn't it?" Lt. Yori Shibata grinned.

"Huh?" Now Kenule was yelling.

Shibata got halfway out of his chair, and leaned over the table. His lips nearly brushed against Dryer's ear. Still, the man cupped the sides of his mouth, "This is great," he repeated.

Kenule winced at the shouted words bouncing directly against his eardrum. "If you say so."

"Ah come on, don't be such a buzz kill," Shibata good-naturedly chided. Kenule had just met the man on the shuttle ride to Bastion. Both were late replacements. Despite Dryer's desire to be left alone, Shibata had attached himself to Kenule like an Aldebaran mud leech. "This is great, a to the letter recreation of an Old Earth establishment called a biker bar," Shibata said, clearly impressed.

The words were lost on Kenule and not just because he could still barely hear them. Against his better judgment, which had been happening far more frequently since Shibata had warped into his life, Dryer asked, "What is a 'biker bar'?"

Shibata's smile faltered, "Are you serious?"

"I wouldn't ask if I wasn't," Kenule rejoined.

"Oh, of course," Shibata's smile returned. "I forgot who I was talking to here for a moment. Mr. Uptight."

"Uptight?"

"Never mind," Shibata waved the query away. "I bet you never even went to your ship's recreation lounge."

"My last posting was at the Daystrom Annex on Galor IV," Kenule huffed; miffed that Shibata had forgotten that already. "And no I didn't frequent the recreation establishment there. I...was too busy. I often just ate in the lab."

"Like I said, buzz kill," Shibata's words were belied by his smile. "Got to live a little Ken."

"Kenule," Dryer pointed out, now really peeved. He hated being called Ken.

"What?" Shibata asked.

"Kenule," he repeated. "That is my name. Not Ken."

"Like I said, way too uptight," Shibata replied. "Anyway a biker bar is a made for bikers," he paused, seeing if that would register. It didn't. Shibata continued, "Bikers were people on Old Earth who rode motorcycles."

"I've heard of them," Kenule pointed out, a bit too proudly.

"Ah...good," Shibata said, "Anyway, these bikers would sometimes form clubs and bars like these catered to them."

"Oh, I get that," Dryer said, "It's like a themed-establishment, often like starship lounges."

"Yes," Shibata said, "Something like that."

"Who would want to spend their time or their money in a place like this?" Kenule wondered, looking around again. He held up his golden Tenarian Schnapps, "The drinks are too potent, the food is subpar, and I sense a fight is about to break out any moment."

Shibata laughed, "That's the whole point. It's the spirit of adventure, the unknown, and I mean, that's what Starfleet is all about, is it not?"

"I suppose," Kenule offered, starting to regret his decision to leave the comfortable environs of his lab. But Admiral Haftel had literally pushed him out. He

said it would be good for Dryer's career, and that he couldn't hide forever. "If you wanted some real adventure you should try that Alshain restaurant on the esplanade. I would go in there, except I don't eat meat."

"Damn, you're a vegan and you barely drink," Shibata shook his head, "What do you do for fun?"

"Well, I," Kenule began, but paused as he struggled to formulate an answer.

"You know, hold that thought," Shibata said as his head nearly cranked 360 degrees on his neck. Kenule followed his gaze. He saw an attractive blonde, dressed in low cut green blouse with matching skintight pants, making her way to the bar. Shibata wasn't the only one paying attention.

"Hey, Ken, I've already paid for the drinks, so I'll catch you around," Shibata said, as he got out of his seat.

"My name is," Dryer started, but Shibata was already gone. Kenule was both happy and sad that he was alone again.

USS Aldebaran

Chief Engineer Silane floated beneath Aldebaran's ventral secondary hull. He wanted to see if the heavy-warp sled had been attached properly. The Mark III Heavy-Warp Sleds could travel at Warp 9.997 for up to five months and should significantly cut down on the voyage to the Delta Quadrant.

For most of that trip the crew would be in stasis, except for Silane. A Medusan, his non-corporeal form wasn't subject to the ravages of time and space like many of his organic colleagues.

Beside him flew one such colleague. Lt. Selvin piloted the cargo management unit expertly beside him. The Vulcan was his closest friend on the ship. Silane wasn't sure if it was because Vulcans, with the assistance of a special visor could actually look on his true form without going mad, or if Silane's emotional spectrum was muted enough not to disrupt the Vulcan's staid manner.

In any event he enjoyed the friendship and the companionship particularly at the moment. "What do you think Selvin?" Silane asked, though it was really the modulated computer voice from his containment sac.

The yellow-hued organic replied, "The couplings are secure."

Silane approximated a nod, or at least thought he did, "I agree. I think it's safe to report back to the captain that the sled has been successfully connected." Once the sled's warp coils were spent, it would be converted into a logistic supply node. It was truly a miracle of engineering and one Silane wished he had participated in conceiving and constructing.

"Denizens from Omicron Ceti III have an eatery onboard Starbase Bastion," Selvin said. Silane tried nodding again. He knew that the Cetians were famous for

their vegetarian cuisine, and Selvin, like most Vulcans, was a vegan. "If you are not busy perhaps we could dine there."

"Unfortunately I have other plans," Silane said, contemplating whether he should elaborate.

"Understood," Selvin coolly replied, not quite able to hide the disappointment in his voice. The Medusan was certain he knew the origin for that disappointment. So he no longer saw any concern in spelling it out.

"Dr. Xylia has already asked me to dinner. There's a new Alshain restaurant at the station. You are welcome to join us." Even though Silane didn't eat organic sustenance, he enjoyed observing the process and the camaraderie.

"Thank you," Selvin began, his words frigid, "But I will decline."

"You really shouldn't be that way," Silane said disapprovingly, "Xylia can't help where she was born. Or choose her nationality."

"I am well aware of that Silane," Selvin replied frostily. "But I can choose who I dine with."

After a long pause, Silane conceded, "Fair enough. I do want you to know that the offer still stands."

"Thank you," Selvin said. Through the workbee's viewport, Silane saw the man dip his head respectfully. "I shall not keep you from your appointment," Selvin added. The CMU angled away from the Medusan and pattered back toward the Main Shuttlebay. Silane watched him go, pulsing softly all the while.

Conference Room Starbase Bastion

The conference room, graciously volunteered by the station's commander, afforded the captains a premium view of all of Intercept Group Four's ships. Aldebaran and Wyoming already were ensconced in their warp sleds while work was proceeding apace on Palomar and Enzmann. Together the quartet of ships would join Empress. The Galaxy-class cruiser was the only surviving ship from the first IG-4.

The other five vessels had been lost in combat against the Kothlis'Ka, one of the species streaming out of the Delta Quadrant. IG-4 had tried failed to prevent the Kothlis'Ka Armada from proceeding on toward Romulan space.

Empress's captain had refused to return home, but had acceded to Starfleet Command's demand that she not take the Empress into Romulan territory. A Starfleet vessel anywhere near that infernal horde might trigger a hostile response from the Star Empire.

Command had also allowed the captain to send a warning to the Romulans, though so far neither she nor Command had received a reply, as far as Banti had

heard. He suspected that Terrence's rush to get back to the Romulan Neutral Zone was compelled by the oncoming Kothlis'Ka.

In the borrowed conference room, Captain Awokou held court with the captains of the taskforce he would lead into the Delta Quadrant.

He hated being one ship short for the new intercept group, but with the Satie Administration's halt on starship construction and their new focus on unmanned warp combat vehicles, the Fleet was spread thin. Not only had a significant amount of men and materiel been thrown into Taskforce Vanguard, but there were still all the ongoing conflagrations that always demanded Starfleet's time in addition to the standard missions of exploration.

"This business with the Kothlis'Ka is just ghastly," Captain Blazek, of the Ambassador-class Palomar, shook his elongated, purple head. His bulbous, fire orange eyes blinked spasmodically as he contemplated the enormity of his own statement. "An entire group wiped out."

"Not entirely," admonished Captain Niann, of the Cheyenne-class Wyoming. The brown-skinned Akaali's skin coloration was darker than Banti's. With her broad nostrils, full lips, and brown skin, Niann could easily have passed for a member of Banti's family, a daughter even, if not for the twin ridges bracing each side of her forehead and stopping just before they touched her eyebrows. "Empress survived," she pointed out, "And she's still ready to fight."

"I think it was a mistake for Command not to recall Empress," Commander Raul Gomes, of the Miranda-class Enzmann, spoke up. Despite his youthful square face, Gomes's hair was steel gray. Gomes's age made Banti wonder why he hadn't reached a higher rank. Awokou suspected that the man's long history in Starfleet Intelligence perhaps was the reason. Once he got to know the man, Banti thought he might ask him.

Usually Awokou brought his meetings to a close quickly after the main business had concluded, yet he was allowing this one to wind down naturally. He thought it would be a good thing for the captains to get to know each other better, especially before they all went into deep sleep. Who knew what situation awaited them once they were reawakened.

With a sense of gallows humor, he thought back to his recent return to the land of the living. Banti was still grappling with all of the changes the Federation had undergone in just two short years, as well as how he had changed.

Today he was far more amenable to sitting back and allowing his subordinates to speak their minds than he had been in the past. In fact, the idea that these were his subordinates felt odd to him, more so than it would have previously. They were his equals, all charged with bringing their crews home as safely as possible, and all nagged by the same fears and doubts.

"The pressures, the strains on that crew must be immense," Gomes said. "I understand the need to tough it out, but can Empress's crew be truly up to the task after such a harrowing ordeal?"

No one had a ready answer. They all knew that Gomes had been at Wolf 359, and had been one of the lucky survivors. He knew firsthand what it must have been like to fight and survive against an impossible foe.

"I guess we'll find out soon enough," was all Blazek could muster.

"There have been some positives," Niann pointed out, "There have been some successful contacts, remember the Concorde?" Participating in the refugee side of the undertaking, Captain Selmek had helped repatriate the species he had encountered.

"What about Erickson?" Blazek just had to point out. "Just think what might have happened if the Venturi or the Tholians had gotten their hands on that alien technology?" The Erickson had helped avert a near catastrophe after encountering aliens who possessed a polaric ion generator.

Banti was concerned about encountering such dangers as well, but he didn't want to encourage Blazek's pessimism. In the past Awokou might have considered it realism, but now, he wasn't so sure of that.

"Neither the Tholians, nor the Venturi succeeded," Niann said. "I think you are worrying too much. I'm surprised that you signed on for this journey at all."

"I didn't," Blazek replied, quieting the room. "There was a hole that needed filling and I follow orders."

"Speaking of following orders," Banti said, only slightly regretting his next words. "I have another engagement to attend to. Please remain if you wish to do so." He got up from his seat.

He had been so engrossed in the conversation that he had forgotten his dinner date with his wife. While Terrence could blow off Rozi Awokou, Banti had long ago learned that was not the best course of action.

"Plans for dinner I take it?" Gomes asked, grinning. "I wouldn't be late if I were you sir. Take it from a divorced man."

Awokou paused and glared at the man. "How did you know I was meeting my wife?" He thought back to Gomes's Starfleet Intelligence career with some disquiet.

Gomes shrugged, "I know that look sir. It's a look that many a man has got when they are afraid they have displeased or about to displease their wives."

Niann chuckled at that and the tension broke. Banti allowed the tension in his shoulders to ease. "Very apt Commander," Awokou nodded. "Perhaps we can all meet for dinner, aboard Aldebaran, before we set out for the Delta Quadrant?"

There were accommodating nods around the table. Awokou managed a smile. "I will have my first officer make the arrangements." He looked at each of his fellow captains before leaving, his eyes lingering a bit too long on the still smiling Gomes. Once dinner was over with Rozi tonight, Awokou planned to burn some of his capital to check more thoroughly into Gomes's background.

Internally, Banti had just gone to blue alert.

Esplanade Starbase Bastion

"I can't believe you convinced me to do this," Lt. Juanita Rojas chuckled, feeling very underdressed.

"Oh, come on, red looks good on you," Lt. Narcissa stopped and twirled in her own golden 23rd century-style uniform. Unlike Juanita, the tall, deep green, violet-haired Orion had the legs for the miniskirt. Completing the twirl, Narcissa said, "Doesn't she look fetching Loto?"

Lt. Loto, the third member of their trio, hunched his massive shoulders, an anxious look on his face. The bald headed, tanned Arbazan nervously licked his lips and rubbed his ridged forehead, thinking of something to say or deflect Narcissa's line of inquiry.

"Oh never mind," Narcissa blew through her teeth. She pinched one of the man's massive biceps and the gesture startled him. The Orion was unfazed. "Operations red does look good on you too though."

Juanita couldn't help but give a sidelong glance, which she blamed on Narcissa's prompting. Loto's compact, ripped physique in his crimson tunic was very eye catching. If he had been a little bit taller he would've put Juanita in the mind of her beau. And she was certain that Tai Donar would not be pleased that she was eyeing another man.

She stopped immediately and forced her eyes forward. From the periphery of her vision she saw that Narcissa had not. The Orion loved to tease the taciturn Arbazan. They had been at it long before Juanita had joined the crew.

"I can't believe they have one holosuite dedicated to the missions of the Enterprise-1701-and 1701-A," Juanita marveled. She also wanted to spare poor Loto.

"Why is it such a surprise?" Narcissa shrugged, "I mean it's only the most famous ship in the Fleet. Even the Enterprises-D or E haven't racked up as many achievements."

"It's got to be close by now," Juanita rejoined, thinking of her dream ship.

"Not by a mile," Narcissa asserted, "Besides Picard is too stuffy. He's not as vivacious as Kirk."

"I'm not so sure about that," Juanita shook her head.

"You'll see," Narcissa proclaimed. "Once we're in the simulation and you see his holographic likeness up close."

"Okay," Juanita said, not coating her doubt.

"Which Enterprise captain do you think was the best?" Loto interjected. Juanita was shocked. Not by the interjection but that the man attempted to make conversation at all. He didn't direct the question to either woman in particular. As it was Narcissa's wont, she jumped right in.

"Come on Kirk," Narcissa rolled her eyes as if it were a no-brainer.

"Well, I think Picard," Juanita shot back. "What do you think Loto?"

"Well, there's April, Pike, Kirk, Decker," Loto rattled off the names of each commanding officer, "Harriman, Garrett, Picard, Riker, Picard, Jellico..."

"Seriously, Jellico doesn't count," Narcissa interceded. Juanita playfully jabbed the Orion in the ribs.

"Shush," she admonished her friend. Now that the Arbazan was talking she didn't want him to wall himself off again.

Loto had continued talking, wrapped in his own thoughts, and oblivious to their offside jibing. "Harriman," he concluded. That drew surprised looks from both women.

"Harriman?" Narcissa was incredulous.

"Harriman?" Juanita's tone was more inquisitive but still she was just as puzzled.

"Yes," the Arbazan doubled down, still oblivious to the shocks he had generated. "It took tremendous courage to first take command after Captain Kirk and then to retain command after the shakedown cruise tragedy," the man reasoned. "It is not easy to weather public condemnation."

That brought Narcissa up short. She nodded sagely, an old pain etching across her face. Both she and Loto had served aboard Aldebaran during the now infamous incident. So they knew full well what it was like to keep their heads up while being pariahs.

"Maybe Harriman isn't such a bad choice after all," Narcissa conceded, her normal wattage dimming considerably.

"He's a great choice," Juanita said with forced cheer. "Good pick Loto."

The Arbazan looked at her curiously, "You're...welcome Lieutenant Rojas."

"While we're in our costumes, we're all on a first name basis, okay?" Narcissa said, her clouds dissipating.

"So, what's going to be the mission for this program?" Juanita asked.

"I don't know," Narcissa shrugged, "I think Loto should pick."

"The mission where the Enterprise encountered the planet killer," the Arbazan surprisingly had one already picked out. Surprising to Juanita because that inferred that he was actually looking forward to the holosuite program. She couldn't read that in his stony disposition.

"Ooh that's a good one," Narcissa gushed. "I can't wait to get inside the suit now."

"Ah, guys, I think we might have to delay our session," Juanita said, her pulse quickening.

"What's wrong?" Narcissa narrowed her eyes, perceptive to the serious switch in tone. Juanita pointed across, to the other side of the Esplanade. "Fark!" She muttered as she saw Silane trying to intercede in vain between Dr. Xylia and three angry Klingons. "I see what you're saying," she replied. "Looks like someone needs our..."

Before the Orion finished, Loto took off, his sure physical movements speaking a lethal language that Juanita hoped the Klingons heard as loudly as she did.

Esplanade Starbase Bastion

"I would appreciate it if you would kindly stop doing that sir," Chief Engineer Silane said, which naturally prompted another poke, this time harder, from the leader of pack of Klingons that had accosted him and Dr. Xylia. His containment sac could withstand the poking, but the constant jabbing was disconcerting...not to mention rude.

"And what are you going to do if I don't?" The Klingon challenged. Wiry, yet muscled arms sprouted from his rusted metallic vest. His dirty blond hair was pulled back into a ponytail. Surprisingly the man sported no facial hair. His sagittal ridge was also less impressive than his compatriots. The muscle bound heckler with the heaviest forehead ridge had thick metal rings hanging from each ridge in addition to his ears. The third man was heavysset, with his thick hair just as unkempt as his slovenly dress.

None of the men wore Defense Force uniforms, to which Silane was both pleased and slightly alarmed. He was glad that the Defense Force hadn't stooped so low in their recruiting program, but disquieted by the fact that the Medusan couldn't fall back on using the shared wartime experience to deflect their anger.

"He's just going to float away Joqala," the disheveled one brayed, drawing laughter from the other two.

"Geq might be right," chortled the pierced one, "Or if you poke a hole in that suit, he might just deflate." The man added, with a dangerously curious gleam in his eye at the thought.

"And in the process drive you and almost everyone else within eyesight insane," Dr. Xylia said, seemingly unfazed by their sudden admirers.

"Who said you could speak Romulan!" Joqala, the blond, snarled. "My grandparents died on Narendra III!"

"My apologies for your loss," Xylia said coolly.

"You don't sound sorry," Geq, the thickset one, lumbered forward. "She doesn't sound sorry one bit, does she Ch'taak?"

"No," the ringed man shook his head, causing the metal rings to jingle. "But I got something that might make her feel sorry," he grinned, and made a show for reaching for the large serrated blade at his side.

"What are you doing with that?" Silane asked, floating closer to Xylia. "You were supposed to hand over all weapons upon entry onto this starbase."

"And what are you going to do about it?" Laughed Ch'taak. "Report me? You'll be dead before you touch your combadge."

"And so would you," a new, familiar and welcome voice entered the fray. The Klingons turned to see Lt. Loto standing behind them. Lieutenants Narcissa and Rojas were bringing up the rear. Silane pulsed with relief. Xylia merely arched one eyebrow.

Loto stood calmly, his arms folded across his muscled chest. His expression was impassive, his voice level. "I would recommend that you gentlemen proceed on your way."

"No one calls me a gentleman!" Joqala said, pushing past his compatriots to square off against the Arbazan. He glared down at Loto, his nostrils flaring, his lips pulled back in a snarl. "What do you mean by that? Do you think we are soft, like humans?" He gave Juanita a quick glare before returning his gaze to Loto.

The other Klingons moved to flank the stoic Arbazan. Narcissa moved to engage them, but Loto held up one hand, and she stopped in her tracks. Lt. Rojas also stood at the ready, both hands curling and uncurling, her body language taut and anticipating violence.

Joqala placed one thick finger in the center of Loto's chest. "I asked you a question," he said. "Do you think we are soft?" He repeated, before pressing an indentation into the Arbazan's chest.

"Grishnar cat got your tongue?" Geq asked, and Ch'taak guffawed.

"Perhaps this Arbazan is intimidated by real men," Ch'taak offered.

"Well, he is wearing a child's garments after all," Geq declared.

"I heard their kind don't like seloh," Ch'taak added.

"Is that right?" Joqala asked Loto, his face contorting in disgust. "Just what manner of 'man' are you?"

"One that is about to kick your asses," Narcissa couldn't help herself.

"What are you doing here Orion?" Geq's fat head turned toward her and looked her up and down. "I didn't know Federation starbases had pleasure mazes." All three men laughed at that, and Narcissa's face turned a shade of green he had never seen before.

Almost too fast for Silane's optic receptors to capture, Loto grabbed Joqala's pointed finger, twisted it until it popped. Joqala squealed in pain before a thrust to the throat silenced him and a chop to the back of his head felled him.

Loto, not slowing down, moved on to a still smirking Ch'taak. The jeweled Klingon was slow on the uptake. Unfortunately for him, Loto was not. Two kicks, one low, the other high, and Ch'taak joined Joqala.

Next, the methodical Arbazan turned toward Geq. The hefty Klingon backed away, stopping when he bumped into Narcissa. He threw back an elbow, to knock the woman out of his way. The Orion ducked beneath it, and drove her own elbow into his side.

The man crumbled, protecting his side, and left everything else exposed. Narcissa made nearly as quick work of Geq as Loto had of his comrades.

Once Geq had joined them on the ground, all three grumbling an admixture of moans and curses, Loto nodded with satisfaction and Ryse grinned. Loto casually walked over to Ch'taak and extricated his blade. "I'll be confiscating this. If you want it back, file a report."

Silane glanced at Xylia. The Romulan's eyebrow was nearly to the roof, and Lt. Rojas was looking just as stunned. The two Aldebaran security officers had taken down the Klingon toughs within seconds, before the station's security could respond, or even be made aware of a potential hostile situation. Narcissa was completely nonplussed. "Now, that we got that little warm up in," the Orion said, "I'm ready for that holoprogram."

Ready Room

USS Aldebaran

"Did I catch you at a bad time Captain?" Captain Banti Awokou asked his counterpart, not attempting to hide his curiosity.

The holoprojector displayed a head-to-toe image of Captain Tan Erasia, of the Starship Empress. A medical apron was draped over the woman's uniform. "No," she said, her voice strained, "I have a few minutes before surgery."

"Excuse me?" Awokou hoped he hadn't balked, "Did you say surgery?"

"Yes," the Efrosian nodded, "I was a doctor before pursuing the command track. We lost our chief medical officer during the battle with the Kothlis'Ka Armada. While we still have some talented medical technicians and a functional EMH, I like to pitch in when I can." The woman leaned close, lowering her voice, more so from habit than necessity, "Besides, I really don't trust those medical holograms. Too cold and antiseptic."

"I see," Awokou nodded, more so to move the conversation along than because he agreed with her. "I wanted to provide you an update on our progress," he said.

"Could you just send it through subspace?" Erasia asked. "It might take a little while to get here but it'll arrive certainly before you do."

"One can hope," Awokou said. He was hoping to develop a rapport with his counterpart, similar to what he had done with the other IG-4 captains. Banti knew that establishing a relationship with Erasia might be tougher due to Aldebaran replacing Empress as the lead taskforce ship. In the first IG-4 iteration, Erasia had taken charge of the taskforce after the lead ship Narcissus had been destroyed.

Not only had that group been decimated, with Empress incurring casualties and massive damage, but Erasia had been eclipsed by him and the Aldebaran. Banti hoped that there wouldn't be any hard feelings, though he couldn't put it past her if there were.

In any event, he was hoping to clear the air before they arrived in the Delta Quadrant and begun working together. "So, how are things going?" Banti found himself asking. Inwardly he winced. In time's past he had been more direct.

Erasia looked befuddled. "You didn't receive our latest report?"

"No, oh no, I've read that one and all the ones you've sent," Awokou rushed to clarify. "I meant, how are things...with...well..." He paused, gathering himself, but unable to stop his cheeks from warming, "you and me?"

"I wasn't aware that we were going steady," the Efrosian quipped.

"Oh no, not that, I wasn't asking you..." Awokou grew flustered. Finally he managed, "I'm a married man, a happily married man."

"Cool your thrusters sir," Erasia chuckled, "I was just joshing, as my XO is fond of saying; trying to ease some of the tension."

"I see," Awokou said, feeling a great burden lifting off his shoulders. He would hate to have to explain this portion of the conversation to Command or his wife. Rozi definitely put more fear into him any admirals.

"I really don't have much time," Erasia said, "but I want you to know that I am fine with you taking command. I'm not going to say it was an easy thing to accept...at first, but right now, I have more important things to patch up than a wounded ego. It definitely keeps things in perspective."

Thinking of his own injuries, Banti nodded in understanding. "It certainly does."

Erasia smiled, "Well, I guess this is the start of a beautiful relationship."

"I certainly hope so," Awokou matched her smile.

"Well then, I guess the only thing left to say is that I can't wait to see you in the DQ," the Efrosian said. "Now, permission to go deliver a baby sir?"

"Permission granted," Awokou laughed.

Captain's Quarters

USS Aldebaran

Captain Awokou stepped into a room filled with laughter. His ready-made apology for being late died quickly on his tongue. His ability to adapt was something he hadn't lost Banti was glad to realize. The captain's stomach grumbled as the aroma of the food found his nose.

He headed right into the dining area. His wife was standing opposite their guest. Both were placing dishes onto the table as they finished their laugh. Rozi was dressed in a simple, elegant royal blue dress while their fair-skinned guest still wore his uniform.

"Counselor Banyan, dear," Awokou nodded at both of them. "I'm sorry to interrupt."

"Oh don't be silly," Rozi waved away his apology. "Banyan was just helping with programming the dessert, and he was telling me about the first desert he made while a student at the Nausicaan School of Culinary Arts."

"There's a Nausicaan cooking school?" Awokou asked, incredulous.

"Oh yes captain," The Lumerian counselor stood up to his full, imposing height. His thin frame and the twinkle in his brown eyes made him seem less imposing. The marking on his forehead wrinkled slightly after his expression and voice took on a serious cast. "The Nausicaans take great pride in their cuisine and especially their desserts. I can also tell you that failure was not an option."

"I can only imagine," Awokou chuckled, "So what was your first dessert?"

"Bloodfruit cake," Banyan looked wistful.

"I take it that since you're here recounting the story with my wife that it met with approval?" The captain asked.

"Actually the chef hated it," the Lumerian shrugged.

"Well it is fruit cake after all," Awokou laughed again and Rozi joined in. Banyan looked at both of them, a perplexed look on his face.

"It's an Old Earth thing," Rozi explained, "There is an Earth dessert also called fruit cake, which it appeared no one liked."

"At least according to Old Earth television," Awokou added.

"Television?" The counselor inquired.

"Ah, let's save that for the meal," the captain advised. "And what are we having today?" He asked, as his eyes roved the table. The counselor stood at attention and nodded respectfully in Rozi's direction before gesturing grandly at the repast. His wife chuckled again.

"I thought it would be fitting to introduce you to the Delta Quadrant before we get there, with a sampling of several dishes," Rozi smiled.

"I knew you had been dying to try out some of the recipes Voyager sent back," Banti grinned. Courtesy of Project Pathfinder, the stranded Starship Voyager had sent a lot of information about the Delta Quadrant, including data about its flora, fauna, and foodstuffs.

"To the best of my ability I was able to program the replicator to reproduce Leola rice pilaf, Gabosti stew, Talaxian bread, and for dessert, Jimbalian fudge cake with L'maki nut frosting."

Plagued with a sweet tooth, Awokou's eyes went directly to the purplish round cake.

"I had some trouble with programming the L'maki nut, and that's when our gracious counselor chivalrously offered his assistance."

Banyan bowed. "It was all in the furtherance of greater galactic understanding." All three laughed.

Once they had settled down, Banti clapped his hands. He was ready to eat, but he was also ready to talk, to relax, and with his wife and the irrepressible counselor

as his dinner companions he knew that both were going to be as plentiful as the helpings.

Guest Quarters
Starbase Bastion
The Next Morning...

This part always made Lt. Yori Shibata nervous. It was always easier to get into situations than to extricate yourself from them.

He propped up on one elbow and looked down at last night's lover. The stunning blonde was wiping sleep from her olive-green eyes. Both of them were still tangled in a purple bed sheet. "Ah, listen," he began, a bit reluctantly-he always thought putting a hitch in your voice worked best-"Last night was fun."

She nodded and smiled. "It sure was." The woman mimicked him by propping herself on one elbow to face him.

Shibata resisted the urge to reach out and brush an errant strand of hair from over her eyes. What's wrong with me? He wondered. Attachment scared him, but there was something about this woman.

"I've-uh-got to go," Shibata began, eager to nip whatever incipient feelings might be sprouting for this woman. It wasn't like he was going to have time for them to grow anyway. The Delta Quadrant awaited. "I'm due back on my vessel. We're shoving off soon."

"Oh really?" The woman's eyes brightened. "So am I."

"You are?" Shibata's heart thumped, with both dread and possibility. He hadn't considered that the woman might be part of Taskforce Vanguard, or even in Starfleet. Admittedly neither had spent much time talking.

"Are you in Starfleet?" Shibata asked. The woman nodded.

"What ship?" he followed up.

"You first," she said, a playful gleam in her eyes.

"The Aldebaran," he said proudly. It had taken him a long time to work his way up to a Galaxy-class vessel. Even if it did take Command almost a little too long to recognize his abilities.

"Impressive," she observed. "You're into communications."

His eyes widened. Now he was the one impressed. "How did you know that?"

"You're a good talker," she smiled. "Seemed like a good fit."

"Okay," he nodded. "You got me there. Enough with the mystery. What ship do you serve on?"

"Well, umm," she grinned, "Oh, I'll just come out with it; I also serve on the Aldebaran."

"Get out of here," Shibata tried to control his racing heart. He wasn't sure why it was galloping. Was it fear or excitement? "Small galaxy huh?" He tried to sound nonchalant.

"You could say that Lt. Shibata," she replied.

"How do you know my name?" Now confusion was thrown into Yori's emotional cauldron.

The woman sat up halfway in bed and extended a hand. "I'm guessing we should've done this first. I'm Lt. Commander April Thayer, first officer of the Aldebaran."

Ready Room

USS Aldebaran

April Thayer smoothed her uniform more out of nerves than necessity. She gathered herself, took a quick breath, and pressed the door chime.

The ghosts had been haunting her as soon as she saw Aldebaran on her approach to the station, but now they were screeching something awful, as well as pulling and clawing, doing their damndest to pull her back into the past.

"Enter," she heard the voice call out strongly from the other side of the door. "Here goes," she muttered, right as the door opened. She stepped across the threshold, holding the apparitions at bay.

She had had some fun this morning, unfortunately at poor Lt. Shibata's expense, but now playtime was over. Captain Banti Awokou stood up from his chair, laying a padd onto the neat stack of others on his desk. He came around his desk and clasped her hand in a firm grip. He nodded as he spoke, "Commander Thayer, welcome to the Aldebaran," he paused, "Or should I say welcome back?"

She winced uncontrollably and the other man grimaced. "Was that impolite?"

"No, no sir, it wasn't," she said, "It's me, I mean; this is all..." she waved her hands, at a loss for words. "Permission to speak freely sir?"

"Of course," Awokou said, taking a step back from her, as if he was expecting a blow.

"Why did you request me?" She asked.

"Your sterling service record," he said bluntly, "which was only embellished by your actions during the Talarian Incursion."

"My second chance I guess," she said, with a nervous smile. "I never asked to be thrust into the spotlight."

"Many, who are, seldom do," he replied, "But it's what you do with that spotlight that matters."

"Or what the Fleet decides to do with a newly minted hero," She said, "which I find it a bit odd that they would want to stick me back on the ship that tarnished that sterling record."

"You didn't have to take me up on the offer," Awokou said.

"No sir, I didn't," she admitted, "But I felt I owed my friends and crewmates, I owed this grand ship more."

"Redemption is a powerful incentive," the captain nodded, "I should know." His gaze was imploring, "You've heard about my mission to Lakesh?"

"But sir, what happened to you at Lakesh wasn't your fault," she offered.

"Tell that to my nightmares," he shook his head, his expression becoming hooded. "Or the overconfidence that fed into the disaster. We all have our crosses to bear Commander."

"I see sir," she said, feeling a bit less apprehensive and grateful to feel the tension ease between her shoulders.

"Have a seat," the captain gestured as he made his way back around to his chair. "We have a lot of things to discuss before we disembark."

Quantum Café

USS Aldebaran

Lt. Kenule Dryer couldn't believe he was sitting across another table, sharing another drink with Yori Shibata. He had been acquainting himself with the Astrometrics lab when he had gotten the call from Shibata. The man had sounded so desperate, even through the tinny speaker of the combadge that Kenule couldn't help but come to his aid.

He was regretting that decision more and more. Already on his third drink, Yori threw his hands in the air, gesticulating dramatically. "My career is over, done, kaput, just like that. I mean, all that striving to make it to the big leagues, to get a Galaxy or Sovereign assignment and it's over in a nanosecond."

Kenule shook his head, his scientific brain irresistibly drawn to the man before him, because it was as if another being inhabited Shibata's body. Gone was the assured man of just one day ago. Now the communications officer was just moments of way from blubbering into his beer.

Dryer touched his own glass and then thought better of it. "You care to tell me what happened?" He didn't add finally to the end of that sentence, though he sorely wanted to.

"Oh man, I screwed up, big time."

"I got that part, but maybe it would help, or help me help you if you told me what you screwed up exactly."

"You remember that supernova blonde that came into the bar last night?"

"Not particularly."

"Are you serious? You've got to be joking right?"

"No," Kenule replied.

"Oh come on," Yori gave him a disbelieving look. "Are you telling me you're the only head she didn't turn?"

"I guess so," Dryer shrugged.

"Yeah, whatever," Shibata was still skeptical. "Well, anyway, that blonde and I got very close and personal, if you catch my drift."

"I do," Kenule grimaced, "Please don't provide details."

In spite of himself, Shibata grinned. "I'm a gentleman, I never kiss and tell."

"And what is this exactly?"

The communicator officer's face fell, "The end of my career. That's what this is," he said with solemn certainty.

"And would like to tell me why that is?" Dryer griped, his patience finally wearing thin.

"You're not going to believe this."

"Try me."

"Well, that blonde, well, she's aboard this ship!"

"Okay," Kenule digested that nugget. Shibata waited with bated breath. "What's the problem?"

"Don't you see?" Shibata threw up his hands again.

"No, I don't," his voice trailed off as he noticed a person approaching the table. Shibata was oblivious to her approach. Kenule rose out of his seat, prompting a curious look from Yori.

"Commander Thayer," Dryer announced, standing at attention and Shibata nearly jumped out of his chair. He clamored to his feet.

Lt. Commander Thayer stopped beside Shibata. Similar to the two men, she was dressed in her black and gray Starfleet uniform. "Gentlemen," she said, "At ease please. This is a bar; we'll leave the ranks for the bridge."

"Of course," Dryer dipped his head as he relaxed.

"So what are you boys drinking?" She asked, a twinkle in her eye.

"Slug-o-Cola," Kenule offered. Thayer made a face.

"I'm sorry Lieutenant but how can you drink that stuff?"

"Good point, but it was one of the few non-alcoholic beverages on the menu."

"There's synthhol," Thayer offered. Now Dryer made a face.

"I've never liked the stuff."

"Well good luck with the Slug-o-Cola," she said before touching Shibata lightly on the shoulder. Yori nearly knocked over his drink. "And what's your poison Lieutenant?"

"Ah, ah, Warnog," he said, his face reddening.

"Good choice," she opined. "Might try some myself."

"Care to join us?" Dryer asked, not really wanting to extend his stay in the bar, but feeling the question was the next progressive step in the conversation. Shibata looked mortified at the prospect.

"Thanks for the offer," Thayer beamed, "but I'm meeting someone. Perhaps next time?"

"Of course," Kenule said.

"Next time then," she smiled at them both before walking away.

"You know you could've at least said hello," Dryer chided Shibata after the first officer wasn't in earshot. "You're going on and on about your dim career prospects and you give the XO the cold shoulder."

Shibata tugged at his gold collar. "What's up with the silent treatment?" Kenule prodded.

"Th-that's her," Shibata said.

"Who's her, what?" Dryer asked, sitting back down. The man's weird behavior was nettlesome.

"She's the blonde, from the other night," Shibata said. He still was standing.

"Are you saying that you slept with Commander Thayer?" Kenule cocked his head to the side, his eyes following where she had walked. Thayer was now greeting a lithe Orion.

"Not so loud!" Shibata said as he retook his seat.

"Are you serious?" Kenule was incredulous.

All Yori could do was throw up his hands again. The communications officer looked flustered and probably for the first time, at a loss for words.

Dryer finally took a sip of his soft drink and nearly gagged as the thick liquid slimed his throat. "Yeah, you are in trouble."

Quantum Café

USS Aldebaran

"I see the café hasn't changed," Thayer took in the old haunt, a recreation of the Earth establishment. During her Academy days, she had frequented the real thing quite a bit. She ordered a Warnog from an attentive waiter.

"For good or ill," Lt. Narcissa smiled. "It's good to see you again sir."

"After what we went through, I think April is fine." She returned the smile. The Orion's expression turned dark, but only for a moment. The waiter brought the Klingon beer back to her at warp speed.

"Okay April," Narcissa tried it out and found she liked it. "It's good to have you back."

"Thanks," Thayer said with less confidence. "I'm not sure yet if it's good for me to be back," she admitted.

"You should never have left," Narcissa replied.

"Well, the inquiry board had something to do with that," Thayer gamely smiled.

"You did nothing wrong," Narcissa said.

"Yeah, but it took me a long time to do right," the first officer countered, "and when I did, well...mutiny isn't looked kindly on, even for the right reasons."

"I know," Narcissa said, staring into her azure drink. Narcissa had joined in Thayer's plan to retake the ship, turning on her immediate superior in order to do so.

"And what ship's commanding officer would want to have a subordinate who might not only second guess them but take up arms against them as well?" Thayer asked. "I was lucky to get the backwater assignment that I got on Galen IV. Of course who knew that the Talarions would attack there during their incursion?"

"Well they certainly didn't know who was there to greet them," Narcissa's smile was vicious.

Thayer grimaced, not wishing to relieve the desperate fight for survival as she helped the colonists fight off the Talarions.

"I would rather not think about it," she confessed. Narcissa dipped her head respectfully.

"Then we'll discuss something else," the Orion said.

"Okay," Thayer replied, but then came up short. Her friendship with Narcissa had been forged in the kiln of the mutiny and was still in its infancy. The last time she had seen Narcissa the woman had been a member of the Security Division and not running it. A lot had changed since she had first served on Aldebaran.

"How does the old crew feel about me coming back, honestly?" Thayer asked. Aldebaran was a mixture of the old and new, with some of the personnel on both sides of the mutiny still serving.

"For the most part I think many are relieved to have you back," Narcissa replied, "Which I am assuming was part of the captain's reasoning for selecting you."

"Yes, I was thinking the same thing," She took a sip of the beer. She didn't add that she hoped she could live up to the captain's expectations. Though April wasn't a fan of ranks, she didn't want to express the deep well of her doubts to Narcissa.

She didn't want to throw her problems in the other woman's lap. It wouldn't be fair to her. So instead Thayer asked the woman about her life after the mutiny. Narcissa glowed as she talked about her new role as security chief.

"And how are things with Lt. Loto?" Thayer asked. This question drew the Orion up short, which prompted a raised eyebrow from April. Was there more going on there than just work, she wondered.

"What do you mean?" Narcissa finally asked, punctuating it with a nervous sip of her drink.

"Oh, I, uh, was just talking about you splitting the bridge duties," Thayer explained.

"Things are fine in that regard," Narcissa answered, with some relief. "Neither one of us, Loto especially, clamor to be on the bridge, so there's no jockeying among us or the staff about that assignment."

"Good to hear," Thayer said, feeling bad that she might have touched a nerve. Though it did make her curious. Reining herself in, she took a long draught from her beer stein. The two women settled into a comfortable silence, each keeping company with their own thoughts.

"Care if I interrupt?" A young, bronze-skinned woman asked. It took Thayer a moment to remember the woman's name from her file.

"Lt. Rojas," She said, smiling. "Please. The more the merrier."

"Absolutely," Narcissa said. Rojas pulled up a chair and settled into it. The waiter appeared like magic again and the young helmswoman placed her order. He came back nearly as fast.

"You look tired," Narcissa offered.

"Yes," Rojas admitted, swirling her straw around her glass. "It's been a long day, calculating the voyage. I don't like the idea of the ship flying without a pilot at the helm."

"It is an adjustment," Thayer said. April had her own misgivings about the crew being put into stasis until they reached the Delta Quadrant.

"At least Chief Silane will be awake," Narcissa said, as a way to make the best of a bad situation. Being non-corporeal, the Medusan wasn't subjected to the same strains that corporeal lifeforms were.

"And we will be waking periodically," Thayer said, "It won't be a full five month sleep thank goodness."

"I'm glad for that," Rojas smiled. "I don't want to get rusty."

"From what I've read of your file, I have serious doubts that'll happen," Thayer smiled back.

"Thank you Commander," Rojas said.

"While we're off duty, it's April," Thayer replied.

"Yes sir...I mean, April," Rojas responded. April laughed.

"You know, I like this impromptu girls' night out," Thayer said. "So, what do you guys do for fun on this boat these days?"

"Perhaps we can take this back to Starbase Bastion since for a final night," Narcissa offered.

"I don't see why not," Rojas said, "I guess it would be a waste of a good starbase if we didn't."

"You two make excellent points," Thayer grinned.

"And maybe we should invite those two guys along," Rojas said.

"Who are you talking about?" Narcissa asked.

"Those two," Rojas tried to point without being obvious. Thayer threw caution to the wind and just looked back. Lieutenants Dryer and Shibata hastily looked elsewhere. She chuckled.

"They've been staring holes into the back of the commander's head since I got here," Rojas said. The three women laughed.

"Looks like I might finally have some competition on this barge," Narcissa replied.

Thayer was flattered, in spite of herself. Competition to an Orion woman, especially one as beautiful as Narcissa was high praise indeed, even if it might have been in jest.

"Do you think we should ask them?" Rojas pondered.

"Nah," Thayer said, "Let's not embarrass them further."

"Your call," Rojas said.

"Least we can do is walk by their table," Narcissa teased, "One of the pups might jump out of their seats." The three women shared another laugh.

Been there, done that, Thayer thought, but she said, "I don't see the harm. Let's do it."

Captain's Quarters USS Aldebaran

Captain Awokou couldn't sleep. Rozi placed a hand on his chest. "Trouble sleeping?" She asked.

"Yeah," he admitted.

"I thought you would be tuckered out from the dinner," his wife replied. They had finally had the big gathering with all of the taskforce captains. Banti was tired, but sleep wouldn't come.

"You're thinking about tomorrow, aren't you?" Rozi asked.

Awokou raised an eyebrow, "Sometimes I think I married a Betazoid."

His wife chuckled, "Have you ever considered that you're not that hard to figure out?"

"Never." The two shared a laugh. Banti continued, "Yes, I'm keyed up about tomorrow. We're finally going to begin the voyage, and I'll be going into another deep sleep." The prospect of going into such a long slumber made him anxious.

"This time it will be a simple, controlled procedure and monitored by the EMH," she said, in her most reassuring voice. "Nothing to worry about."

"I know, but still," he said, turning to face her. "It feels like I just woke up. I don't want to go back."

"You could stay awake you know, but it will be a pretty lonesome trip, because I'm getting my beauty sleep," Rozi declared.

"You don't need it," Banti said, stroking her cheek.

"Oh stop it," Rozi coquettishly batted her eyes.

He moved in closer to her and kissed her. "I see where this is going," Rozi said.

"And you have a problem with it?" Banti asked, with a chuckle. "Are you too tired?"

"I will be. After," Rozi said, cradling Awokou's face in her hands as their lips met.

Cargo Bay
USS Aldebaran
Three months later...

Chief Engineer Silane ran a tentacle over the captain's stasis pod. The man looked pensive, as he had for the last three months. He wondered if organics dreamed while in stasis as if the captain was having a bad dream, or went into deep sleep with a troubled mind.

It was one, of a variety of questions, he had about corporeal lifeforms. His fascination with them had led him to Starfleet. Whenever he thought he had a good grasp on them, he met a new sapient that upturned that view.

It left his mind in a constant state of adaptation, which Silane valued highly. The crews' hibernation had made these last three months the loneliest he had ever endured. He missed their conversation, their laughter, their arguing, their auras. And the Emergency Medical Hologram had been a poor substitute.

He floated over to the unit that held Lt. Selvin. In contrast to the captain, the operations officer looked peaceful. More so than when he was awake. The Vulcan was nestled in one of hundreds of pods in this cargo bay. All of the other cargo bays were filled as well, with the plus thousand crew and personnel sleeping through the voyage to the Delta Quadrant.

All except Silane. Being noncorporeal had its benefits and its drawbacks, it would so appear. The captain had left him in charge of the ship, making sure its systems ran smoothly and that everything would be shipshape when they arrived at their destination.

So far everything had gone swimmingly, which afforded the Medusan a little time to spend among his friends.

He was just making his second circuit around the cargo bay when the main computer spoke through the bulkhead speakers, "Receiving distress call."

That pulled Silane up short. "Computer," he said, "Play message." The message was garbled, but the Medusan could detect a frantic edge to the voice. Someone was being attacked and they were calling for help.

Starfleet's standing orders were to respond to all distress calls. But this was a highly unusual circumstance. If he altered course Aldebaran would miss their rendezvous with the rest of the intercept group.

He was plagued with indecision for the barest of seconds, which was too long. "Computer, alter course, to source of the distress call. Deactivate warp sled."

"Acknowledged," the computer said, and the ship stopped with a jolt, before he felt it shift, as the ship's own warp engine asserted control.

Approximating a human gesture, Silane sighed before he approached the captain's stasis pod. He wasn't sure how Captain Awokou was going to react to what he had done.

Main Bridge USS Aldebaran

Captain Awokou yawned and stretched. He moved his neck around and rolled his shoulders, but the crick in his neck wouldn't dislodge. He gave up and smoothed his tunic.

It felt good to be awake again, even better to be back on his bridge. He glanced around at his bridge crew and saw some as enthused, while others were less so and then a third were still wiping the sleep from their eyes.

"Mr. Loto, what do we have here?" He asked. It had been a long time since he had been in a fight and Banti hoped he was up to the task. In response to this question, the sculpted Arbazan quickly perused his terminal before looking up at him.

"The capital vessel is conducting an orbital bombardment while smaller vessels are engaged in dogfighting." The man said. The large ship in question was a spherical center within a rotating disk. Smaller, faster versions of the vessel were engaged in a tumult with a nearly as large triple-hulled ship and darting pyramidal fighters that reminded Awokou of Tholian spacecraft. The saucer ships seemed to have the upper hand, but the other side was valiantly scrapping.

"Reading intense hypothermic energy buildup," Loto said. Seconds later a blinding bluish white javelin of energy shot from the three-hulled vessel, smashing into the biggest saucer. It stopped the bombardment...temporarily. Smaller saucers swarmed the three-hulled ship preventing them from taking another shot. The largest saucer resumed assaulting the planet.

"The distress call came from the surface below," Lt. Shibata said from the upper deck, touching the earpiece in his ear. It was an unnecessary affectation that the old Awokou wouldn't have tolerated, but he had mellowed in his old age. "It appears to be a major city, perhaps the planetary capital. There are reports of mass casualties."

"My God," Rozi muttered from the seat beside Banti's. As the mission's first contact specialist, this was certainly not the way she envisioned the first meeting with new lifeforms.

"I guess that decides what side we're on," Lt. Commander Thayer said, seated on the other side of Awokou's chair. The young woman was on the edge of her seat, ready to jump into the action.

Awokou was torn. While he shared Thayer's desire to help, he wasn't as clear cut about her which side to assist. Instead of ordering Loto to power weapons, he requested Shibata to send a general hail.

"Disputants," Awokou began, "I am Captain Banti Awokou of the Federation Starship Aldebaran. I would like to render any aid I can in bringing this conflict to a peaceful resolution while aiding the injured on the planet below and on your vessels."

He waited tensely for a few moments. "Aldebaran..." came the static filled reply, "We need immediate assistance....Alien assailants have attacked our planet... our defenses are failing..."

"Sir, we should do something," Thayer urged. The woman was halfway out of her chair. She sat back down after Banti gave her a disapproving look.

"Who are the assailants? Why have they attacked your planet?" He had to ask.

"We...don't know...the attack was swift, sudden...devastating." And likely victorious, Awokou surmised.

"Attacking vessels, why have you selected this planet?" He asked next. There was no verbal response, but one of the smaller saucers paused to take a shot off the Aldebaran's bow.

"I think they want us to butt out," Thayer said.

"I got the message," Awokou said dryly. "Mr. Shibata, try hailing them again." The tension was thick on the bridge. It wasn't just Commander Thayer that wanted to get into the action.

But the captain was still cautious. He didn't want to potentially drag Aldebaran into a larger conflict, especially when he didn't have the rest of the intercept group for backup.

"Raise shields and charge weapons," he ordered. "And let's try to reason with them again."

This time the larger saucer fired. The ship rumbled, "Minimal damage to shields," Lt. Loto informed them.

"Sir, that's twice we've been fired upon," Thayer pointed out.

"I'm aware of that commander, but both times we're not attacking blows, both were warning shots." He tapped his chin, pondering his next move as the battle unfolded around him.

"I'm inclined not to take sides here, but I think we can assist the injured," he said. "Lt. Rojas, take us closer to the planet on my mark."

"Aye sir," Rojas quickly replied.

To the fighting ships, he announced, "We are going to lend medical assistance to the planet below. We are not taking sides in this conflict. We merely want to save lives."

"Take us in helm," Awokou said. The ship moved away and beneath the battle. He tapped the combadge on his chest. "Dr. Xylia, be on standby with a medical away team. Once we're in transporter range I'll be sending you down."

"Yes sir," was the doctor's reply.

"Lt. Shibata, try to contact someone on the surface. Tell them we want to offer help." The man quickly began putting out calls.

"Federation starship...this is the office of the Rector...any help you can..."

Lt. Shibata looked up, annoyed. "The line has just been cut."

"I wonder who?" Thayer said, not hiding her sarcasm.

"Saucer fighters moving to intercept," Loto called out.

"Target their engines and weapons," Awokou said, "We want to incapacitate, not destroy."

The fighters fired in succession, their volleys crackling across the ship's shields. The deck plates trembled, but the shielding held.

"Return fire," Awokou ordered. Loto quickly translated the captain's orders into action. Fingers of phaser fire stroked the fighters and stopping their advance.

"Capital vessel moving to engage," Loto said next. Though Awokou could see that with his own eyes.

"Power to forward shields," he instructed. "And arm quantum torpedoes." Before the large saucer ship fired the triple-hulled vessel flew between it and Aldebaran, firing salvoes of hypothermic charges. The large saucer backed away, as did its fighters. The fighters circled the larger ship and for a moment the captain thought they were preparing to strike again. But instead the contingent warped away.

Awokou held in the sigh of relief. He didn't shy away from battle, but he preferred peaceful resolutions.

He wasn't sure how peaceful or long lasting this resolution would be however. "Receiving a hail from the lead starship," Lt. Shibata's words broke through Awokou's reverie.

"Onscreen," Awokou ordered.

An attractive fair-skinned humanoid, whose face was marred by a purpling bruise running across the nose to her right cheek, smiled at him. The woman's swept back hairline revealed an enlarged forehead bisected by a slight ridge running down to the top of her nose. "I am Lotura," she said, "Thank you for coming to our aid."

Awokou nodded in acceptance. He had a lot of questions, but he could deal with those later. First, there were hopefully lives they could save. "Where do you need us?"

Planet's Surface

As soon as Captain Awokou materialized he began choking. The air was coated with smoke. Fires blazed across the city and there were small ones still melting consoles within the large, circular office. He swallowed hard several times and got control of the hacking as he took in the trashed environs.

"Captain Awokou, apologies," the humanoid man rushed to him, prompting a tensing from Lt. Narcissa. The young Orion reached for the phaser at her hip. Awokou motioned for her to stay her hand and maintain her position.

The humanoid reached out to Awokou and the captain mimicked him. He grabbed the captain by forearm and squeezed. Awokou returned the gesture. This man looked different than Lotura, possibly of a different species. He was reptilian, brownish-yellow and pebbled skinned, and with a crest of colorful feathers flowing from his head down his back. He wore black robes that simulated wings. His sharp, red eyes took in everything.

"I am Rector Chaun," he announced, "Welcome to Eonessa Prime." A member of Lotura's race, another female, stood quietly behind the reptilian. The steel-gray haired, dark hued woman was regarding them just as expertly as the rector.

"Thank you," Awokou nodded, "I wish it could be under better circumstances."

"So do I," Chaun agreed, "but the work your medical teams have done thus far, not to mention your other crewpersons has saved lives and for that I am grateful."

"I regret that we couldn't do more," Awokou said sadly. He had yet to personally tour the devastation, but reports from Dr. Xylia and the other away teams were pretty heartbreaking and sobering. If Aldebaran hadn't arrived when it did the city might have been completely razed.

"It is a blessing that you arrived at all," Chaun nodded, "Our distress call was meant for our colonies. They are pretty far flung and have yet to arrive. If not for you, by the time they would get here there might be nothing left."

"Thank you but I think you are overstating the case," Awokou said, "The actions of Commander Lotura are to be commended."

That prompted a small smile from the other woman. As if sensing that, Chaun turned to her. "May I present Vinaren, leader of the Vaphoran community on Eonessa Prime."

"Greetings Captain, and other members of your crew," Vinaren nodded at all of them.

"Forgive me for not acknowledging the rest of your esteemed crew," Chaun interjected.

"It's all right," Awokou said.

"No, we owe much to all of you," Chaun would not be mollified, "and it is the least I can do to recognize that truth."

"Thank you again," Awokou simply accepted the man's effusiveness.

"Vaphorans?" Rozi stepped forward. "Are you not native to this world?"

"No, we aren't," Vinaren turned to the captain's wife. "Our homeworld is far from here."

"In the Delta Quadrant," Rozi surmised.

"Yes," Vinaren nodded. "How did you know?"

"Our original mission was to meet refugees streaming from the Delta Quadrant and help them acclimate to the Alpha Quadrant," Captain Awokou said.

"Were you uprooted by the Borg?" Rozi asked. "We've heard reports that many civilizations were. Were you among those?"

A pained expression fell across Vinaren's face and after a moment, she slowly nodded, "Yes. Yes, we are refugees from the Borg."

"But now they are welcome citizens of Eonessa Prime," Chaun declared. "If not for the saviors, perhaps millions would've died from brain fever. Their medicines saved us, including my own hatchling. And now, we've been rescued again by visitors from the stars."

Vinaren looked a little embarrassed. Awokou could relate.

"Were the attackers also from the Delta Quadrant?" Narcissa asked.

"I wouldn't know," Vinaren said.

"They were not a species that you came across in your travels to here?" Awokou asked.

"None that I would recall," the Vaphoran replied.

"Then why would they attack this planet?" The captain pressed.

Vinaren looked askance. Chaun spoke up. "It could've been a new enemy one of our colonies dredged up. Space can be unforgiving, as you can imagine."

"Yes, I suppose so," Awokou said. There was very little he knew about the Vaphorans or the Eonessans for that matter. Perhaps they were an aggressive, expansionist power and this was a case of the chickens coming home to roost, pun not intended. It would bear further investigation.

"Do you think they will come back?" Narcissa asked.

"I hope, no, I pray to the Sky Walkers that they don't," Chaun said, looking heavenward.

"If they do, we will do what we can to engender a peaceful resolution to the conflict," the captain promised.

"Thank the Walkers," Chaun said, "if that is so, then we will have been saved thrice."

"Perhaps," Awokou replied, feeling less convinced.

Ready Room

USS Aldebaran

Captain Awokou was tired, but he knew he needed to take this call. It had been several days of grueling work, helping the Eonessans and Vaphorans pick up the pieces of their shattered city and lives. He fell into his seat and activated his desktop computer. The Federation symbol morphed into an image of Captain Tan Erasia. The Efrosian had a concerned look on her face.

"Captain Awokou, I hope all is well," the Empress Captain said.

"As well as can be expected Captain Erasia," Awokou replied. "You have received the new orders from Command?"

"Yes," she nodded. "I will take command of the intercept group once they arrive," she said. The woman didn't seem as pleased as he would've thought to be restored to her position of authority.

"Is everything alright?" He felt compelled to ask.

"I just want you to know, I didn't want this," Erasia said. Awokou nodded.

"No one could have anticipated this turn of events, and with you being the most familiar with that part of space, and with your past leadership, it makes sense that you take the reins."

Erasia leaned forward, "It's my past leadership that gives me pause." Awokou sat back and regarded the woman. He mentally flipped through Erasia's report of the intercept group's fateful battle with the Kothlis'Ka armada. There had been some questionable calls made, but Awokou wasn't certain he wouldn't have made the same decisions. And he didn't like second guessing a fellow captain.

"You were faced with a no win scenario and you got your ship through it," Awokou said. "You're more than capable of shepherding the new taskforce through whatever might come next."

"Thank you for your confidence," the woman gamely smiled. "Sometimes I find it a bit lacking in myself," she admitted, "especially after the Kothlis'Ka. For a while I was upset that Command had taken away leadership of the taskforce from me, I felt it was a vote of no confidence, but then I got to thinking, maybe they were right to do so. Right now, I don't quite know what to feel."

"I understand," he said, "I've had my own doubts. Coming back from my incapacitation I wonder if I still have what it takes," he said; Awokou felt he should and could share this with Erasia since she had been so open with him.

"Thank you for being honest," she smiled again, this time it was warmer. "I know you have a lot of work to continue to do at Eonessa Prime. Any advice for me?" Erasia asked.

Awokou opened his mouth and then stopped himself. He was going to tell her to keep an eye out for Commander Gomes. His check on the man's background hadn't dredged up anything, which inexplicably made Awokou even more suspicious. But at the same time, he was willing to concede that his feelings were a rare affliction of paranoia. And with no evidence, he didn't think it would be right to prejudice Erasia against one of her colleagues.

She was a sharp woman, a hardy survivor. If Gomes wasn't on the up and up, he was confident Erasia would figure it out and be able to deal with him. He saw that the Efrosian was waiting expectantly.

"Stuff your doubts and continue doing your job," the captain said. It was advice he would do his best to adhere to himself.

Erasia nodded, "Wise words."

"Good luck to you Captain," Awokou said.

"And to you, Captain," Erasia smiled again. Awokou ended the communication. Afterwards he sat back, his tired bones thanking him for the respite.

And they complained when he forced himself back to his feet. "Miles to go," he muttered to himself before stepping out of his office and back into the hurly burly.

Private Quarters
USS Aldebaran
Two months later...

Lt. Juanita Rojas shrugged out of her jacket before sitting down at her desk. She activated her computer. Minutes later, the welcoming visage of Commander Tai Donar appeared. She shared a smile with the Angosian.

"How are things on the Erickson?" She asked.

"They are going well," he said, "Still acclimating to being the ship's XO," Tai admitted, "It's a whole new level of responsibility."

"One I'm sure you're adapting to well," Juanita said confidently.

"I suppose," he grinned, "Angosian super soldiers are highly adaptable."

"Don't get ahead of yourself," Rojas blew through her teeth. "I was hoping it would take a little bit longer before the promotion went to your head."

"How can it with you keeping my feet solidly on the ground?" Tai offered.

"When did you become such a smooth talker?" Juanita asked, "Is that another adaptation?"

"Perhaps," the Erickson first officer conceded. "So, how are things at Eonessa Prime?" Juanita sighed at the question. "That doesn't sound good," Donar leaned forward, suddenly concerned, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Juanita replied, "I guess."

"This definitely doesn't sound good."

"I don't want to alarm you," the helmswoman quickly said. "It's just..." she lowered her voice and leaned closer to the screen. "I wish we hadn't been diverted to Eonessa Prime."

"Why?" Tai asked, surprise at her reply evident on his face.

"I really wanted to explore the Delta Quadrant," she admitted. She had been reluctant about taking on the assignment at first, of being away from Tai, her family and other friends for five years, but the thrill of flying through an uncharted sector of space eventually corralled her.

"You're pretty close to it," Donar offered. It was true that IG-4 would be exploring the part of the Delta Quadrant closest to the Alpha Quadrant and Eonessa Prime was near the desired stretch of space.

"Close but no cigar," Juanita said. The Angosian looked at her askance. "An old Earth phrase," she explained. He shrugged.

"You're doing good work on Eonessa Prime, helping rebuild after the attack," Donar said.

"I know," Juanita conceded, "and I'm glad we are able to lend a hand."

"And you have some exposure to the Delta Quadrant with the Vaphorans," Tai said. Juanita had filled in him about the Eonessan 'saviors' in previous conversations. Juanita scowled now at their mention.

"I know that look," Donar said, "What's wrong with them?"

"Nothing," Rojas said, "absolutely nothing."

"Uh oh," Tai said, approximating a human phraseology. Juanita chuckled.

"It's just that they are very closed, very standoffish. Nice, but too distant."

"And that makes you suspicious?"

"Well, yeah," Juanita said, as if the question didn't even need to be asked.

"Not every species is as gregarious as Earthlings," Tai pointed out.

"Don't I know it," Rojas tapped the screen. Donar gave a closed lipped smile. "But still it would be great to learn more about them. I mean, they've shared some information, but it's mainly medical data about a wealth of species they've encountered."

"So this was a medical ship that arrived at Eonessa Prime?"

"No," Juanita shook her head, "I don't think so. They've just collected very extensive data on other species physiologies."

"Similar to what Starfleet does with stellar phenomena?" Tai asked.

"Yes, I guess so," Juanita said, not having thought of the comparison.

"So, they are explorers of a different sort," Donar surmised.

"It would seem so. Yes." Juanita agreed.

"Have they done anything else to arouse your suspicions?" The Angosian asked.

Juanita shook her head. "No, they've worked alongside us, and continue helping the Eonessans. However once the work for the day is done they retreat to their ship and their domiciles. The Eonessans, on the other hand are very welcoming. I can't wait to share some of their liquors with you. I think they might test even your constitution."

Tai chuckled, "I doubt that."

"We'll see," Juanita replied.

"At least we'll find out sooner, with Aldebaran returning to back to the Federation at the completion of your mission," Donar said.

"Yes, I guess there is a silver lining to missing out on the Delta Quadrant," Juanita smiled.

"When I see you again, I'll do my best to take your mind off the Delta Quadrant," the Angosian promised. Juanita cocked her right eyebrow.

"I don't know if even you are up to that challenge," she said.

"Now that the challenge has been made, I have no choice but to meet it and exceed it," Donar said, with mock solemnity. He touched the screen. "I can't wait to see you again."

"You're so on," Juanita declared.

Quantum Café

USS Aldebaran

"I think I'll try the Saurian brandy now," the bright-eyed Eonessan said.

"I-I told you this wassssn't a g-good idea," Lt. Kenule Dryer stumbled over his words. The stars outside had suddenly become brighter and were pulsing like strobe lights, forcing him to squint. And his head felt like it was being stuffed with cotton. He would thoroughly castigate himself later for getting tipsy, though he had to admit that he had been intrigued by the idea.

"You're on your third drink," a disbelieving Lt. Shibata said. "Ilerd here is on his sixth," the communications officer clapped the back of the smiling Eonessan.

"I find Federation concoctions tasty, if a bit mild," the reptilian said.

"You call this mild?" Now Kenule was disbelieving. He pointed at his Makara fizz. "You could clean warp coils with this."

Shibata laughed, "I think you're overstating things a bit Ken."

"It's Kenule," Dryer said sharply. That prompted a deeper laugh from Shibata. Kenule stewed. Shibata got the attention of the waiter and put in Ilerd's order.

Once the quick waiter returned with the drink, the Eonessan went to work, imbibing the potent alcohol in one gulp.

"My, my, very pleasing."

"Another?" Shibata suggested.

"I think so," Ilerd said.

"You've both got to be kidding me," Kenule pulled back from the table.

"Where are you going?" Shibata asked. Both he and Ilerd looked disappointed.

"I'm going to sleep this off," Dryer answered, "Some of us have work to do in the morning and I would prefer not to do that hung over."

"You've really got to build up your tolerance," Shibata advised.

"Gee, thanks for the tip," The Science Officer said, dipping his head at both men.

"Leaving so soon?" Kenule's back stiffened at the voice. He turned around slowly to a smiling Lt. Juanita Rojas. The moment he had been dreading, yet strangely anticipating, had come to pass, and with the alcohol loosening his tongue he didn't know what he might say.

Clamping down on his thoughts, he looked at the woman coolly. Sensing his coldness, she took a step backward. "Is everything okay Lieutenant?"

It was surprising, at least to him that he had been able to avoid her this long but even a Galaxy-class starship was only so big.

"If you'll excuse me," Kenule said brusquely, and sidestepped her, with only a little give in his step. He was proud that he had kept his mouth shut. Dryer didn't know if he would be able to do so the next time the helmswoman talked to him. He kept walking toward the door, feeling the eyes of his drinking companions and Lt.

Rojas on him. He could imagine that his abrupt behavior had prompted all kinds of questions and looks, but at the moment he didn't care. He didn't know if it was the liquor which accounted for his present feelings, but he embraced them.

He owed it to the ghosts in his head.

Sickbay

USS Aldebaran

Doctor Xylia resisted the urge to plop into her chair. It had been another long day, and she chided herself for returning to her office and not heading for the refuge of her quarters. Or maybe even the Quantum Café or the planet below.

She hadn't spoken with Silane in a long while, the engineer extremely busy with helping rebuild the capital city, as much as she had been in repairing bodies. Spending some time with the Medusan would have been a welcome respite.

Alas, Xylia couldn't pull herself away from a good medical mystery. She pulled up the data on the Eonessan brain fever. On her screen, a helical virus appeared.

The affliction was a viral hemorrhagic fever that dissolved the brain into goo and one symptom was bleeding from the facial orifices. It was a vicious, nasty disease. And it was a mystery because it hadn't appeared until a year ago and had quickly reached pandemic status.

The Eonessans had been fortunate that the Vaphorans had come along. The Delta Quadrant denizens had extensive medical knowledge and had been able to create a cure. Xylia almost salivated at the prospect of getting her hands on the Vaphorans medical database.

However they hadn't been so forthcoming in sharing information. The data she had on the brain fever had come from the Eonessans.

What made it extremely dangerous was that it was transmitted by respiratory routes. However that had proven beneficial to ending the plague quickly when the Vaphorans spread the cure by aerosol dissemination. She wished that Romulan authorities had been as quick acting and as compassionate as the Vaphorans. When there was an outbreak of the Gnawing on her native Khazara the Empire had quarantined the colony first and had been slow to send medical personnel. Xylia's family had been taken refuge among one of the plague ships that escaped across the Neutral Zone to Federation space.

During the trip Xylia watched many of her family, friends, and neighbors succumb to the horrific disease, their internal organs liquefying. By the time Starfleet intervened Xylia was an orphan. A kindly Vulcan medic took guardianship of her, and Xylia's life path was set. She couldn't help thinking of her Romulan and Vulcan family as she studied this disease. Her heart went out to the Eonessans for their courage. She hoped to do her part to prevent brain fever or something similar from ever happening again.

Taking her eyes off the virus to replicate a coffee, the Romulan retrieved the cup and this time did plop down. It was going to be long night.

Fringill Park

Eonessa Prime

Captain Banti Awokou walked slowly with his wife. Together they watched the denizens of the recovering city catching the waning rays of sunlight before dusk settled in. Rozi paused to smile at a father playing with his two hatchlings.

Banti's smile was tinged with sadness. They had never had children. There had been no time for it, and it was at times like these he regretted that decision. He wondered if Rozi did, but he was too afraid to ask.

It wasn't too late for either of them, though Banti doubted he had the energy to corral young children these days. He barely had enough to manage his starship. And he wondered, somewhat facetiously, if the nanites holding him together would meet their match courtesy of his progeny.

Rozi leaned in close to him and wrapped her hand in his. Banti sniffed her air. "This park is beautiful," his wife said. "And the people, so peaceful, even after all the tragedy that's befallen them."

"Yes," Awokou said. Some xenophobia at the presence of aliens wouldn't have been unexpected, especially since the capital was still recovering from an alien attack. However the captain had experienced nothing but graciousness from the Eonessans. The Vaphorans were another matter. His dealings with them had thus far been polite, but noticeably distant.

The Eonessans weren't as put off by their coldness as Banti had been. Of course, with the Vaphorans saving the Eonessans from the brain fever, the captain could see why the Eonessans would be so accommodating of their standoffishness.

Soon the Vaphorans wouldn't be a concern. Banti was expecting Starfleet Command to issue new orders for the Aldebaran any day now. The mysterious assailants hadn't returned in two months and it was a growing likelihood that they would not return.

With mixed feelings the captain looked forward to returning to Federation space. He didn't like not completing his mission to the Delta Quadrant, but he also didn't mind returning to more familiar territory, which actually wasn't so familiar due to his being out of commission for so long. It would still be exploration and he was fine with that.

"You know the Eonessans remind me of us," Rozi said.

"How so?" Banti asked.

"Well, there level of development is roughly analogous to 22nd century Earth," his wife pointed out. "But I was thinking more so of their social strides. How they

evolved beyond a caste based society, similar to how we overcame all of our divisions.”

Rozi had been spending a lot of time with Eonessan historians and they had been delighted to share their history with her. Rozi had been equally as forthcoming, and as standard with his wife, she had made several friends. Banti knew parting from them would be difficult for his wife, but she was a veteran enough to understand the nature of the business.

“Yet they did it without a first contact situation,” Banti said, recalling his history lessons of Earth’s first contact with Vulcan and how that unified humanity in ways still hard to fathom.

“Yes,” Rozi nodded, “They did it without that prompt. Impressive.”

“I can only imagine where the Eonessans can go next,” Banti speculated.

“And how the Vaphorans will play a role in their future development,” Shadows crossed over Rozi’s face, and they weren’t all caused by the fading sun.

“That troubles you,” Banti surmised.

“It’s just that we know so little about them,” the first contact specialist admitted. “And they have such an outsized sway over the Eonessans. What if they use it in exploitative ways?”

“Do you think they’ve done so thus far?”

“No,” Rozi admitted. “I can’t say that. They’ve mostly kept to themselves, but still the degree that the Eonessans revere them borders on religious fervor, and I don’t think that’s healthy.”

“Maybe,” Banti said.

“Maybe? That’s all you’re giving me?” Rozi cocked an eyebrow.

“The Vaphorans did save them from a pandemic,” Banti allowed, “And with the Eonessans being an effusive people, from what I can tell, the esteem in which they hold the Vaphorans seems in keeping. Besides, religious fervor doesn’t have to be a bad thing. Consider the Bajorans and their Prophets.”

“True,” Rozi conceded, “Yet the Prophets aren’t flesh and blood. And they reside in a wormhole above the planet. I could see why the Bajorans would come to worship them. I’m less sanguine about doing the same for mortals.”

“Well, the Eonessans haven’t set up any church for the Vaphorans,” Banti said.

“Yet,” Rozi pursed her lips.

Banti smiled, “Yet,” he said. “But really it is their purview to do so if they are so inclined. And it’s not our place to interfere.”

“I know,” his wife nestled close to him and Banti wrapped his arm around her, at the hips. “It just raises my hackles is all.”

“You’ve grown fond of the Eonessans, as we all have, I think,” Banti said. “I don’t want them to be hurt or used either. But from what we’ve seen of the Vaphorans I think it would be unfair to accuse them of such intentions.”

“You’re right,” Rozi said, though with less conviction.

"Everything is going to be alright, Love," Banti promised. "Not everyone has ulterior motives."

"I know that too, but I just have a hard time believing it," his wife smiled. Banti chuckled.

"Look at us, we've talked through the sunset," the captain said. Darkness had fallen across the park and street lamps had come on.

"Perhaps we can just watch the sunset tomorrow," Rozi said.

"I guess there always is tomorrow," Banti said. He leaned down to kiss his wife. On the edge of his consciousness he heard a familiar whine and felt a tingling across his skin.

His wife disappeared in his grasp and his lips touched the air. He blinked, surprised, and momentarily confused.

Tapping his combadge, he barked, "Aldebaran, why did you just transport my wife back to the ship?"

A startled Commander Thayer replied, "Sir, we didn't."

"Then where is she? What just happened?" Banti demanded. Neither of them had an answer.

Main Bridge USS Aldebaran

"Captain, sensors have identified a transport signature on the far side of the planet," Lt. Selvin said. "It came from a ship in orbit."

Lt. Commander April Thayer sat up in the command seat. "After that ship!"

"Captain, Captain Awokou is demanding he be beamed up immediately," Lt. Shibata chimed in. April was pleased that the awkwardness that had developed between them had evaporated in the heat of action. Shibata likened himself a player but when it mattered he was a professional, and she was glad to see that.

"Belay that," Thayer said. "We need to get after the ship." She sensed the nervousness on the bridge at her order. Only Lt. Narcissa had her back. The Orion stood ready at her station, and eager to follow her orders. "You heard me!" She barked. "Dr. Awokou's life could be in danger!" That snapped everyone back to attention.

"Mr. Shibata, inform the captain that we are on the trail of a possible suspect in his wife's abduction," Thayer said, wincing a little as she imagined the man's reaction, "and we will beam him up once we return."

"Aye sir," Shibata said and relayed the message.

"And inform the Eonessan authorities. We might need their assistance," Thayer added.

"On it," Shibata quickly said.

"Red alert!" She commanded and crimson lighting splashed across the bridge. "Raise shields and power weapons." The hunt was on.

Main Bridge

USS Aldebaran

Lt. Commander Thayer gritted her teeth. "Are you sure about that?" She asked.

"Yes sir," Lt. Selvin coolly said, "The biosignature is Dr. Awokou's."

"Hail that vessel," Thayer ordered. On the main screen one saucer ship was escaping, at the equivalent of full impulse.

"No response," The Vulcan operations officer replied.

"Narcissa, target their propulsion system," Thayer said, "Or your best guest for it. I don't want them warping away."

"Aye sir," Narcissa said. Moments later one phaser beam shot out from Aldebaran. The nimble saucer avoided the blast. Narcissa sent five more.

They connected, spinning the ship violently around. "Their shields are down," Narcissa said. "And so are their engines."

"Beam Dr. Awokou out of there, right now!" Thayer demanded.

Seconds later the startled woman appeared on the bridge. Thayer ran and caught her before she fell to the ground. April let her down easy.

A shocked, confused expression was etched on the first contact specialist's face. "It's going to be okay ma'am," Thayer promised before standing back up.

She tapped her combadge, "Sickbay, emergency transport. Dr. Awokou." Before Awokou could speak she was whisked away again.

"Now, what to do about that ship," she muttered.

"I surmise they've made the decision for us," Selvin said. "I'm reading a massive power build up."

"They're going to destroy themselves!" Lt. Rojas said excitedly.

"They're not getting out of this so easily," Thayer said. "Beam as many of them as you can get a lock on and send them to the brig."

"Aye, aye," Narcissa said.

"Helm, move us away from that explosion," Thayer said.

"Yes Captain," Rojas said, expertly shifting Aldebaran away from the destructing vessel.

"Transport complete," the Orion informed her. "Permission to leave the bridge?"

"Of course," April knew the woman would want to oversee the handling of the new prisoners.

"Reinforce aft shields," Thayer told Selvin. The Vulcan complied, and not a moment too soon. The shockwave from the exploding ship buffeted Aldebaran, rattling the bridge.

"Damage report," the first officer ordered.

"Minimal damage to aft sections, shields down ten percent," Selvin replied.

"Mr. Selvin, you have the conn," Thayer strode to the turbolift and got in. Once hidden from the bridge crew she a tremor ran through her. She hoped it looked easy to them because she had been on edge the whole time. April knew they wouldn't always be this easy so she was thankful that things had seemingly worked out so well this time. Or had they?

She looked up beseechingly, a new question occupying her mind, "Now, which to choose: Sickbay or the brig?"

Sickbay

USS Aldebaran

Captain Awokou was running even before he finished materializing. Once the transporter beam had given way, he rushed to the biobed. He nearly knocked over Dr. Xylia as he swept Rozi into his arms. Both women were taken by surprise, but at the moment he didn't care.

Rozi had been sitting up on the bed. He wrapped his arms tightly around her and held her close. The captain buried his lips into her hair and kissed the crown several times before pulling back from her, just slightly.

"Rozi are you okay? Did they hurt you?"

His wife shook her head, "No, they didn't hurt me." The captain looked to the medic. She held up her scanner.

"She's fine, just a bit shaken up," the Romulan woman said.

"And I'm probably not helping matters," Banti realized. He forced himself to pull away from his wife.

"What did they want with you?" He asked.

Rozi screwed her face. "I don't know. I was beamed into what I assume was a cell. I didn't see them."

"Why you? Why not both of us?" The captain pondered.

"Those are good questions," Rozi said. She started to get off the bed, "I think we should go find out. Commander Thayer told me that she had beamed the ship's crew to the holding cells."

"I don't know if that's advisable," Banti said, "for you I mean. Don't you think it might be too much excitement?"

His wife looked at him dourly. He took a step back and gestured toward the exit. "After you dear."

Detention Center

USS Aldebaran

By the time the Awokous stepped into the brig, the room was filled with other members of the crew. Both Narcissa and Loto were there, as was a full security contingent. Science Officer Dryer was nose deep in his tricorder. Lt. Shibata was consulting with Nurse Beacham. The two seemed to be sharing a joke.

The captain cleared his throat and it caused both of the junior officers to jump. He tried to frown but couldn't hide his smile. Shibata nervously rubbed the back of his head.

"Are you two conferring about the aliens?" Awokou asked.

"Ah," Nurse Beacham opened her mouth. The violet-haired woman reddened terribly.

"Not...uh, quite sir," The communications officer admitted.

"Personal business on personal time," The captain injected as much sternness in his voice as he could muster.

"Of course sir," Shibata said. Awokou roved his eyes over the rest of the room. Some of the other crew was trying hard not to laugh. He did catch Lt. Narcissa in mid-eye roll. He smiled at the Orion.

"Lt. Shibata have you established communication with the aliens yet?" Rozi stepped forward. Banti's eyes finally found the aliens. There were two of them.

He had never seen the species before, which wasn't really a surprise to him. They were both tall, with spindly appendages. Their skin tone was light blue, with darker blue stripes running across their faces and exposed hands. Three fingers on each webbed hand and their boots accommodated three toes.

Their jutting faces were vaguely humanoid though squat, with two eyes, a nose, and a mouth. Two long tendrils bracketed their mouths. And two sharp ridges ran along their chin lines from the opposite sides. They were hairless, the ceiling lights glinting off their bald damp heads. Their eyes were as black as obsidian. Banti inspected both beings. He couldn't tell what sex they were, or even if they had different genders. The captain took special note of the slick black space suits each being wore. Within them, he saw a network of tubes, with fluid sluicing through them.

"Their outfits serve as some kind of hydration units?" He asked.

"I believe so sir," Lt. Dryer answered.

"Lt. Shibata, I'm still waiting for an answer," Rozi demanded.

"We have been able to establish communication with them ma'am," a chagrined Shibata said. "Though they aren't saying much."

"Elaborate," Captain Awokou commanded.

"They've said they will have no congress with butchers, or something to that effect." The communications officer replied. Banti looked at his wife askance. The first contact specialist was similarly puzzled.

"Butchers," Captain Awokou repeated.

"Perhaps I should take a crack at it," Rozi offered.

Shibata didn't look convinced, but he said, "I've already adjusted the universal translator for their language."

"Thank you," Rozi said. She was about to step forward when the captain placed a hand on her shoulder.

He leaned in close to her and whispered, "Are you sure you want to do this? These people just kidnapped you."

Rozi looked at his hand and Banti removed it. More gently, she said, "I should want to know the reasons why more than anyone on this ship Banti. Let me do this."

Banti nodded. Sometimes he had problems letting go. Sometimes he foolishly thought her too fragile. He stood firmly behind his wife as she approached the force field. The aliens focused on her. One of the beings stepped forward. The captain noticed gill slits on the lead alien's neck. The way the creature glared down at his wife gave Banti the chills.

He steeled himself not to intervene further. He hopefully hadn't undercut his wife too much already.

"We mean you no harm," Rozi said, with open arms. "So why did you abduct me?"

The alien continued glaring at her. "Harvest us and be done with it." His voice was deep, masculine. Banti assumed he was male. The alien turned away from her.

She looked at her husband, this time seeking his assistance. The captain stepped forward and with his best stentorian voice, declared, "I'm Captain Banti Awokou, commander of this vessel, and I demand to know what you mean by that!"

The lead alien spun around quickly, "I don't know how much the Vidiians are paying you, but it won't matter once our fleet gets here!" He hissed. "Your blood money will be as worthless as your lives."

"What are you talking about?" Awokou took a step back, perplexed. "Vidiians? Blood money?" He looked at his crew. "Does anyone have any idea what he's talking about?" Everyone looked at each other, confusion reigning in the room.

Lt. Dryer snapped his fingers loudly and began rapidly typing on his tricorder. He frowned, and held it up. "Sir, I don't think you are going to like this."

The captain took the proffered device and looked down at the tiny screen. He shook his head, "Son, I think you're right."

Captain's Ready Room

USS Aldebaran

Captain Banti Awokou looked at the image on his desktop again. He shook his head, his mind still reeling as he processed the information that Lt. Dryer had conjured from the databanks. The picture was of a beautiful, smiling fair-skinned humanoid woman that looked like she belonged to the same species as the Vaphorans.

However it was a holographic recreation of Vidiian hematologist Denara Pel recorded and sent by Voyager's chief medical officer, as part of his notes on the Vidiians and the vicious phage that afflicted them. The real Pel's visage was a horrific, discolored patchwork of grafted skins. According to the Doctor's notes and Voyager's logs, sent through the Pathfinder Project that had been established to maintain contact with the far flung vessel, the starship had encountered the Vidiians several times.

Once a peaceful, cultured civilization, they had resorted to acts of unthinkable barbarism to survive the ravages of The Phage, a disease that consumed and killed thousands daily for two millennia. Some of the survivors had resorted to forced organ removal from unwilling participants and had sought to ensnare Voyager's crew for their life preserving aims.

It was ghastly and Awokou shuddered at the Voyager's crews' encounters with the vile organ thieves. What could turn an artistic society into such monsters? What froze his insides even more was wondering if there was anything that would reduce the Federation to such despicable acts. How precious was survival?

Thankfully the door chime took him away from his darkening thoughts. "Enter," he said. The captain stood up as Rector Chaun crossed into the room. He gave a short bow.

"Thank you for agreeing to meet me on such short notice," the captain began.

"My apologies for that unpleasant business with Dr. Awokou," Chaun said, shaking his head vigorously. "Is she alright?"

Awokou nodded tightly. "She is well."

"I apologize that we couldn't be of quicker assistance," the Eonessan leader replied.

"No need," Awokou waved it away. "Please have a seat sir."

Chaun cautiously took the proffered seat. Once seated, he said, "I assume this is about the aborted kidnapping." The captain nodded.

"What about it necessitated that I meet with you privately, aboard your vessel?"

"The statements made by the abductors," Awokou began and then paused, momentarily at a loss for words. "I don't think the Vaphorans are who they say they are."

Chaun's head crest shook and he snorted in disbelief. "Excuse me captain?"

"The abductors called the Vaphorans Vidiians. Have you heard that name before?" Chaun repeated the word, sounding out each syllable.

He shook his head, "No. Should I?"

Awokou grunted. "Perhaps I should show you." He turned the desktop screen around for the rector to get a look.

Chaun leaned forward in his chair. "This looks like a Vaphoran. But one I don't recognize."

"I wouldn't expect you to. This is a person named Denara Pel, encountered by one of our ships in the Delta Quadrant. She belongs to a species called the Vidiians. However this isn't her actual appearance."

"Oh?" The Eonessan didn't try to hide his confusion. Awokou tapped a button. Chaun shrank back in his seat.

"The Vidiians suffered from a disease called the Phage. To combat that disease they engaged in all manner of criminal activities, including organ stealing." The rector shuddered at the thought.

"What does any of this have to do with the Vaphorans?" Chaun was genuinely baffled.

"The abductors accused the Vaphorans of being the Vidiians," Awokou answered, "And I think it bears investigating."

"That's absurd!" Chaun said indignantly. "How dare you accuse the saviors of something so immoral!"

"Rector Chaun, you can't deny the similarities in the physical appearances."

"Of course not, but are you going to tell me that humans have never encountered other species that look just like them or near enough?"

The Eonessan had him there. "You're right," Awokou could do nothing but admit the truth. "However, the Vaphorans came from the Delta Quadrant, same as the Vidiians, and they've been very circumspect. Perhaps they are hiding something."

"Those people saved my people and now you want me to believe that they are organ stealers?" Chaun stood up. "I think we are done here."

"Sir," Awokou stood up as well. "The abductors said a fleet was on its way here. I think we need to get to the bottom of this before they arrive."

"And you think it would soften the blow to accuse the Vaphorans of such perfidy if it came from me?" Chaun scoffed.

"Well, I wouldn't say it in such a way," Awokou looked squarely at the man. "But yes."

"I'll take my leave of you now Captain." Chaun said, turning abruptly and storming out of the office.

"What else can go wrong today," Awokou muttered to the empty room. As if granting his wish, his compin chirped.

The captain tapped it. "Go ahead," he said grudgingly.

"Captain, I need you in Sickbay," Dr. Xylia said, "I've discovered something about the Eonessan brain fever that you need to see."

"On my way," He withheld the sigh until the link had been broken. Squaring his shoulders, refusing to let the bridge crew see how weary he was, Awokou strode out of the office.

Control Room

Vaphoran Starship Rirata

"Speaker Vinaren, perhaps we should verify Captain Awokou's inquiries," Commander Lotura recommended. The community leader sat opposite her, in the station normally reserved for the chief surgeon. As a precaution against the phage, Vidiian ships were built with isolation in mind, including control rooms that only needed to be peopled by two persons. "They have proven themselves worthy of our trust."

"Don't be so naïve Lotura," Vinaren sniffed. The woman had hastily brought a shuttle up from the planet after meeting with Rector Chaun. "That so-called trustworthiness was predicated on their beliefs that we weren't Vidiian. You are well aware of our peoples' encounters with the Starfleet vessel Voyager. I don't think it is much of a stretch to see the reaction of this crew being similar."

"We aren't trying to steal their organs," Lotura pointed out. "How else would you expect our victims to react?"

Vinaren stiffened at the word 'victim'. "We did what we had to do to survive. Surely any species can understand that, or should."

"That's easy to say if you're not on the receiving end," Lotura rejoined. Vinaren shook her head, unwilling to concede. Lotura shrugged. "At the very least this can show that we are willing to move beyond the past."

"Haven't we proven that thus far?" Vinaren whined. "Look how we have built up the Eonessans?"

"And they are grateful," Lotura nodded, "to a fault. Perhaps they wouldn't be so grateful if they knew the truth."

Vinaren's gaze turned steely. "Vorum was punished. The council agreed to speak no more of it."

"Still, it shows we have a ways to go, as does our reaction to Captain Awokou," Lotura said.

"We don't know what their response could be," Vinaren smacked the console in front of her, "For all we know they could hand us over to our attackers." Lotura shook her head in disbelief.

"I find that improbable," the Rirata commander said, "They have shown a willingness to defend the Eonessans, and us as well, that is admirable. They deserve our honesty."

"We can't take that risk," Vinaren shook her head. "I didn't come up here to discuss this with you."

"Oh?" Lotura's stomach twisted in knots. She suspected the reason for the leader's visit.

The speaker leaned forward, her brows knitting, her face taking on an even more serious cast. Unbidden, Lotura sat back, anticipating the question. The speaker asked, "Can Rirata survive a battle against the Starfleet vessel?"

Sickbay

USS Aldebaran

Captain Awokou felt he needed another explanation, but time wouldn't permit it. He leaned back in his chair as he wrapped his mind around what the doctor had revealed to him. "Are you saying that the Eonessan brain fever was engineered?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying," Dr. Xylia replied, a mortified expression on her face. "And I think the Vidiians were the culprits."

"But you don't have proof of that," Awokou replied.

"No, but we do know the Vidiians have the medical know-how to do something like this," the Romulan asserted.

"You're right," Awokou scratched his chin. "It wasn't my intent to discount your findings Doctor." The woman dipped her head in acknowledgement. The captain shook his own head.

"This just keeps getting worse and worse. The Vaphorans aren't who they claim to be and now they might have inflicted a near pandemic upon the Eonessans. I wonder why?"

"I could only imagine winning over their trust," Xylia offered. "And to seek out refuge. I could see that many of their fellow Delta Quadrant neighbors not being sanguine with them."

"Like the aliens in our brig," Awokou said.

"Yes sir," Xylia added.

"I think we need to learn more about those aliens," Awokou stood up. "Perhaps we are holding the wrong people."

Detention Center

USS Aldebaran

"Let's try this again," Captain Awokou offered. With him were Commander Thayer and Lt. Loto, in addition to the guard on duty. The Arbazan had insisted on being in the brig with him even though the captain was confident that the force field kept a secure barrier between him and the prisoners. "We looked into your claims. I believe you were correct that the Vaphorans are the Vidiians."

"As if you didn't know who you were working for," scoffed one of the aliens. He charged toward the captain, but wisely stopped before contacting the slightly shimmering field. "Why insult our intelligence before you perform your butchery? Just get it over with. We will be avenged soon enough!"

The second alien placed a restraining hand on the disconsolate one's shoulder. "Sesban, perhaps we should listen to what this one has to say." Sesban shook his head and turned his back to the captain.

"However you wish to spend your remaining time is your concern Fontin, but I will not be their plaything."

"So be it," Fontin shrugged. He stepped forward and addressed the captain. "You say you were unaware that you were in league with the Vidiians?"

"I am," Awokou nodded.

"And now that you are aware, what do you intend to do about it?" Fontin charged.

"If possible, find a peaceful solution to whatever your grievance is with them," the captain said.

Sesban laughed. It was a harsh, scraping sound.

"And the first thing I think I should do is release you," the captain said, "As a sign of trust."

"Captain," Loto protested.

"Sir, I don't think this is the best idea," Commander Thayer added.

Awokou held up a hand. He didn't like the idea of releasing the men who had kidnapped his wife, but if this was all a horrible misunderstanding that could lead to serious bloodshed, he had a duty to prevent it, and his first item of business was establishing trust with their forced guests.

"Ensign, lower the forcefield," Awokou commanded. Sesban turned around, and gave the captain a skeptical look. The forcefield crackled before dropping.

Before anyone could stop him, Awokou walked across the threshold. "See, this isn't a trick."

Sesban rounded on him, prompting Loto to rush forward to defend the captain, and Thayer was right on the Arbazan's heels. Fontin pushed Sesban back.

"I meant what I said, I think we should start over," Awokou replied, unfazed by Sesban's anger.

"We will take this gesture as one of reaching out," Fontin said, "And we shall do the same."

"It won't save you, not when our armada arrives," Sesban sneered.

"I hope to save us all," Awokou calmly rejoined. "But first, I need to learn why you are pursuing the Vidiians."

"Do you know what a Vidiian honatta is Captain?" Fontin asked. The human shook his head. Fontin's voice grew hushed as a faraway look came over his eyes.

"I encountered my first when I was just a pollywog..."

Delta Quadrant

Twenty Years Ago...

Lereth touched his wife's hand. The woman, sitting beside him, stirred. Her eyes fluttered open, her ragged lips parted, but a wheeze stole her words.

Lereth did his best to smile, to comfort her while shielding his own grief. He squeezed her hand. "Soon, you will have new lungs," he promised. The woman nodded before drifting off again.

He watched the woman's tortured breathing for a few moments, a tightness forming in his own chest. He never liked this part, but his duties as a husband, as his wife's honatta had to come first.

Lereth repeated that to himself as he watched the other ship leave orbit. On that ship was his quarry. In addition to saving his wife, the family within could provide enough organs and skin to sustain several Vidiians. Saving Gyda and making a profit in the process was too good to ignore.

What he did ignore was his guilt as he activated his ship's impulse drive. He had found the family on the surface of the resort planet, enjoying a vacation. His scanner had honed in on them, its readouts telling him that their lungs would be compatible for Gyda.

He had trailed them for days, even though he didn't have to. He had even chatted up the father, an oceanographer on their native Nethun. They were good people, they didn't deserve what was about to befall them, but Lereth steeled himself. His wife came first.

He kept his ship far enough back not to arouse suspicion. He had placed a transponder on the Neth vessel so he wasn't worried about losing them. He would wait until they were too far to call for quick assistance before he would strike. He settled in for a long hunt.

While he waited, Lereth stroked Gyda's torn skin. He sighed and touched his own smooth face. Lereth was one of the few untouched by the Phage. He had thought Gyda was also spared, but the disease came later in her life.

His love and survivor's guilt drove him from his business to the honatta. For the longest he had kept Gyda away from his new venture, only bringing her the organs she needed to live. But her condition had worsened and he felt a need to keep her with him to watch over her.

He reluctantly took his hand from his wife and returned it to the console. He checked the ship's sensors to see if there were any other vessels nearby. Satisfied they were alone Lereth activated the ship's hypothermic charges.

He drove his ship at the unsuspecting Neth, lobbing hypothermic charges at them, encasing the hapless vessel within a crackling cage. Its shields collapsed quickly. The grapples latched onto the benighted starship, holding her steady while Lereth flew beside it.

With practiced ease, he attacked the docking arm to the ship's airlock. He had taken time to study the ship's schematics while the Neth family shared their fateful vacation.

Sighing, he touched Gyda's face once more. Gathering himself, Lereth grabbed the harvester and made his way to the airlock. He hoped his work would be quick this time.

Conference Lounge

USS Aldebaran

"He struck my father first," Fontin recalled, anguish contorting his features, "with a terrible weapon, one that lit up like a sun, blinding me. I still remember....and I remember my father falling, on the ground, clutching his sides, wheezing for breath.

My mother ran to him, cradled him, and then the man, the demon, approached her. He...he held the weapon over her. I charged him, and he batted me away. He looked at me, and I'll never forget the expression. It was part appraisal, part sadness.

'Too young,' he said before returning to my mother. I later learned that he stole both of their lungs." His eyes watered, but his face was stone cold.

"Fontin's family weren't the only ones," Sesban spoke up, "The Vidiians attacked many of our species, in addition to other races. They thought that once a cure had been found for their affliction that all would be forgiven, that they could go on living their lives on the bones of others, but that will never happen."

"Yes," Fontin nodded, "We joined with others, routing them from the planet Vaphora, and following them all the way here. We will have our revenge, and there is nothing you can do to stop it."

"I see," Captain Awokou stroked his chin, taking in everything the men said. He gazed at his senior officers. There was a mix of troubled and horrified looks on their faces.

"You might want your revenge, and certainly the Vidiians have to account for their actions, but what about the Eonessans? They are innocents, victims of the Vidiians as well. Doctor?"

Xylia explained how the Vidiians had inflicted the neural disease, the 'brain fever', upon the Eonessans. Fontin shook his head sadly while Sesban stared daggers.

"The Eonessans have been harboring these criminals," Sesban said, "They will suffer the same fate."

"I can't allow that," Awokou declared. "The Eonessans are bystanders."

"And the Vidiians deserve to be tried," Commander Thayer interjected, "How can we know which among them are innocent as well?"

"Commander Thayer is correct," Awokou said, "There needs to be due process."

" 'Trials'? 'Due process'?" Sesban sneered. "There was none for Fontin's family, or so many others. The stain of the Vidiians will be wiped from the galaxy!"

Awokou was taken aback by the man's hatred. While the Vidiians' crimes were monstrous, he could no more countenance genocide as a remedy. He struggled to find a way out of this, and finally arrived at: "We will take you back to your fleet. There I will explain our situation to your commanders and hopefully arrive at a

solution that spares the Eonessans and insures that only the guilty among the Vidiians receive justice.”

“Good luck with that,” Sesban scoffed, sitting back in his chair.

“Captain, your attempt is noble, but is doomed to failure,” Fontin said. “There has been too much blood shed. Our peoples cry out for rectification.”

“And they can have it, in a way that is just, that doesn’t stain you as the Vidiians have been tainted,” Awokou urged.

“Our commanders may listen,” Fontin said, “But it is doubtful they will be swayed.”

“We have to try,” Awokou stated. Fontin nodded and Sesban did so reluctantly. Awokou started to get, but fell back to his seat as the ship rocked.

He looked at Commander Thayer and the woman had a similarly perplexed look.

“Someone just fired on us,” Lt. Loto got out right before the ship went to red alert, washing the conference room in red.

Awokou jumped out of his seat and thundered to the bridge. The duty officer hopped out of the center chair, a tight expression on her face.

“Lieutenant, what just happened?” Awokou demanded.

“Sir, it’s the Vaphorans,” she said, “They just fired on us and they’re moving to do so again.”

Main Bridge USS Aldebaran

The ship shook again. “Minimal damage,” Lt. Loto, who had taken over at the tactical station, said, his face buried into his console screen. On the main screen the Vidiian ship had come about, its weapons’ ports crackling with charging energy.

“Hail the Vidiians,” Captain Awokou ordered. Lotura seemed like a sensible counterpart. He hoped to talk some sense into her, though he couldn’t quite quell his discomfort that she had attacked Aldebaran.

“The Vidiians are responding,” Lt. Shibata replied. “Onscreen now sir.” The image shifted to the bridge of the other ship. The captain stood up. Awokou put on his best poker face.

“Speaker Vinaren,” he said slowly, “Where is Commander Lotura?”

The dark skinned Vidiian leaned forward in her seat, her expression cold, “Commander Lotura has been relieved.”

“May I ask why?” Awokou inquired.

“She didn’t agree with this course of action,” the Vidiian leader admitted.

“I would concur,” Awokou said, “Violence should be the last resort always. I’m certain we can come to some agreement without an exchange of fire.”

Sesban snorted loudly behind him. The two Neth had poured out onto the bridge with the rushing senior officers. Out of the corner of his eye, Awokou noticed they had taken up position near the turbolift, thankfully out of the way of his crew.

"I see where this is going," Vinaren charged, "You mean to hand us over to our pursuers."

"I said nothing of the sort," Awokou shot back, his cheeks warming at the accusation.

"You will sacrifice my people, likely the only survivors left from our colony, to pay for crimes we didn't commit."

"All Vidiians are guilty!" Sesban couldn't restrain himself. He jabbed a finger at the main screen. "Those that didn't steal organs received them."

"That's not true," Vinaren shook her head. "Some of us were immune to the Phage."

"Yet you countenanced the barbarity of our brethren," Fontin said quietly, the softness more damning than Sesban's fury. Vinaren blinked.

"The Vidiians are charging weapons," Loto said.

"Evasive maneuvers," Awokou ordered, "Full power to forward shields."

"Vidiians are firing," Loto said.

"Brace yourselves!" Awokou commanded. He sat back down and gripped his armrests. The ship trembled terribly from the barrage.

"Shields are holding," Loto replied with unflappable calm.

"Time to return in kind," Commander Thayer said through gritted teeth.

"I agree Commander," Awokou said, "Return fire," he ordered. "Aim for their weapons and propulsion."

The deck plates shuddered from the familiar, though always unfortunate, phaser fire. Reddish yellow beams struck the Vidiian ship.

"No impact," Loto said, his voice neutral. If he was disappointed the phasers didn't do the trick he didn't show it.

"Fire again," Awokou said, "With photon torpedoes this time."

"Aye sir," the Arbazan replied.

"Belay that Lieutenant," Commander Thayer spoke up. Awokou's head whipped toward her.

"Excuse me Commander?"

"Sorry sir," she conceded, "but look at the screen." She pointed and the captain acceded. A flotilla of Eonessa vessels were entering orbit, headed straight for the Vidiian vessel.

"What are they doing?" Awokou said, more to himself than any of his crew.

"They're forming around the Vidiian vessel," Thayer answered.

"Lead Eonessan vessel is hailing us," Shibata said.

"Put them onscreen," Awokou ordered. Rector Chaun appeared.

"Captain Awokou," he said, his eyes flashing with uncharacteristic anger, "We want you to leave our world immediately."

“Rector,” the captain began, but the Eonessan cut him off.

“Now,” he demanded. Awokou looked at his bridge crew and found they were all looking at him. He glanced back at the furious Sesban and the sad Fontin. A new idea took root. If the Eonessans and Vidiians could no longer see reason, perhaps the oncoming armada might.

“Fine,” the captain said, “We will accede to your request,” he paused and stared squarely at the triumphant Rector, “But we are not done looking out for the Eonessan people,” he said cryptically.

With that, he ended the communication. He stood up and glanced again at Sesban and Fontin, “I would like to see you two in my ready room,” he said, gesturing toward it. He leaned down, “Commander Thayer take command and get us away from here. I’ll tell you where we’re going shortly.”

The woman was skeptical, but she wisely kept her opinions to herself. “Aye sir,” was all she said.

Awokou led the two Neth into his office. Once the doors were shut, he turned to them. His mien became serious. And his voice commanded compliance, “You are going to tell me how to reach your armada and how to leave the Eonessans alone.”

Main Bridge USS Aldebaran

The Galaxy-class ship cut through space at full warp. Within, the bridge was silent and tense, each hour more constricting. In the center chair Captain Awokou pondered what he would say, rewinding the speech again in his mind, hoping that it would be convincing enough. Flanking him, were Fontin and Sesban. Both Commander Thayer and his wife had given up their seats to the two Neth.

Awokou wanted the fleet they were heading toward to see their missing crewmen were well and were not prisoners. He hoped the gesture would go a long way to establishing goodwill.

“Long range sensors detecting a massive collection of vessels,” Lt. Narcissa said at the tactical console. She had relieved Loto.

“Here we go,” muttered Lt. Rojas, at the helm.

“Alter our course,” Awokou ordered. He felt the ship shift slightly as the young woman translated his command into action. Awokou stood up and glanced aft. Rozi was sitting at an auxiliary console. She nodded in support. Awokou nodded back. He tugged down on his tunic and faced the main viewer.

“Are we within communication range?” He asked.

“We will be within thirty minutes,” the Algolian ensign at the communications station promptly replied.

Lt. Commander Thayer stepped down into the command well. She stood at rigid attention. "Captain, if I may have a word?"

"Of course Commander," Awokou said. He gestured toward his ready room.

Ready Room USS Alebaran

Once both officers had been seated, Commander Thayer asked, "Permission to speak freely sir?"

"Of course," Awokou allowed.

"Sir, I think you should reconsider the use of the Alpha Weapons," Thayer said, reviving an old argument.

Starfleet had outfitted the taskforce with powerful weapons such as subspace fractal inversion fields, Genesis torpedo bombs, and zero-point singularity initiators. It was a horror show of armaments that truly reflected the dark roads Starfleet had turned down after decades of conflict against the Cardassians, Tzenkethi, Borg, and Dominion.

These were weapons of last resort in Banti's mind and should never have found their way onto Starfleet vessels, much less been cooked up by the Federation minds. He sighed and shook his head, realizing the folly of his beliefs. The first Intercept Group Four had not possessed Alpha Weapons and they had been decimated by the Kothlis'Ka armada. It is no doubt the weapons would've made an impact, could've saved lives, and maybe even been enough of a sufficient show of force to alter the Kothlis'Ka's inexorable march.

Admiral Glover had told him that the first IG-4 had not received the weapons due to their proximity to the Romulans and the Tholians. Starfleet Command didn't want to ruffle feathers. The tragedy that ensued made Command change its policies.

"Sir, a show of force could be exactly what we need to show that armada that we mean business," Thayer pressed.

"I understand that," Awokou nodded, "But I will not engage in needless saber rattling or potentially add to loss of life. I want to defuse tensions, not increase them, and if we go in waving our big weapons around I don't think that's conducive to conducting a peaceful dialogue."

"I get that sir," Thayer said, "But from what the Neth have told us, this fleet has been chasing the Vidiians for years now, hunting them down, hell bent on revenge. What can you say, or anyone say that can get them to change their ways now?"

It was an old argument April made, but still a good one. "I don't know if I can save the Vidiians," he admitted, "But hopefully the Eonessans can be spared." It pained him to make the admission, but he was a hard-eyed realist. The Vidiians had to pay for their crimes, and unfortunately some innocent Vidiians might suffer too.

"Maybe that wouldn't be the case if we used the Alpha Weapons," Thayer declared. "It would tell the Neth and their friends hands off."

Captain Awokou sat back in his chair, and weighed his options. He rewound the speech in his head again and found new doubts. It was wanting, but it had to be made, didn't it? He had to try diplomacy first? To go in, brandishing weapons, bullying their point, was not the Starfleet way, at least the Starfleet he had signed up to serve.

However things had seemed to change since the Dominion War and there was a crop of younger, more aggressive officers, baptized by fire, like Commander Thayer. Was he simply a man out of time? Or a man past his prime? Maybe he shouldn't have returned to the Fleet, or taken a less prestigious assignment. Maybe he just didn't have it anymore.

These thoughts wrapped around his mind like albatrosses, threatening to pull him into despair. But that was a luxury he couldn't afford right now. His crew needed him, and so did the Eonessans, and Vidiians as a matter of fact.

"Talk to Chief Silane," he said quietly, "Prepare the subspace fractal inversion field."

Main Bridge USS Aldebaran

As soon as they were within communication range, Captain Awokou hailed the alien fleet. While waiting for a response he took in the breadth of the assembled armada. Far beyond the Neth saucer ships were over a dozen starships of varying sizes and compositions. One massive warship, with its nacelles built into its sides, broke from the pack. The warship stopped short of the three shuttlecraft in front of the Aldebaran.

"A Kazon Predator-class warship," Lt. Dryer said softly, "Interesting." Awokou had had the science officer scouring the Voyager database to identify any starships or species they might encounter.

The announcement put Banti on edge. The Kazons had been antagonistic toward the Voyager crew, and if they were in the lead of this makeshift fleet that could pose problems.

He waited, a bit impatiently, until the hail was finally answered. The image focused on several aliens standing around what appeared to be a master display console. The aliens were all of different species. None of them appeared to be Kazon from what he recalled of their appearance. The captain hid his surprise. The aliens appraised him as hard as he appraised them. A fair-skinned man that could easily pass for human spoke first.

"I am Vebbis," the man introduced himself. His blue eyes shifted from Awokou to Sesban and Fontin. "I demand the release of our crewmen at once."

"Of course," the captain said. "I will need you to lower your shields so that we can transport them to your vessel."

Vebbis looked at the others. They debated. A pebble-skinned reptilian woman seemed the most suspicious.

"If you scan our vessel you will see that we don't have our shields up," Awokou said. And that had been a matter of contention with Commander Thayer. He glanced at the woman and gave a tight, awkward smile. She nodded in acknowledgement.

The reptilian ordered for someone to initiate a scan. Almost a minute later, the woman said, "Lower shields."

The captain looked at both Neth. They regarded him just as silently. There were no words that needed to be said. The truth would will out in the next few moments. "Activate," Awokou ordered. The two aliens disappeared within transporter beams. And reappeared on the bridge of the Kazon vessel seconds later.

"Are you unharmed?" A Neth female, standing at the master display, asked the two Neth. Both swore to their being unmolested. They took up positions behind her.

"I would like to meet with your leadership to discuss your attack on the Eonessan homeworld," Awokou said, standing up. He felt more confident on his feet.

"Don't you mean our pursuit of justice," hissed the reptilian.

"Gixia," Vebbis held up a hand. "We should at least listen to what Captain Awokou has to say."

"No, we shouldn't," Gixia said, "This could just be a stalling tactic."

"For all we know the Vidiians could be escaping now," A blue skinned man, with prominent facial tissue, spoke up. "You can't trust beings in league with them."

"Captain Awokou is not in league with the Vidiians," Fontin said, and Sesban nodded. "He is trying to find a peaceful solution that saves the Eonessans and insures justice for the Vidiians."

"There can be no justice for those who harbor mass murderers," spat a golden skinned man.

"Jaleth is right," Gixia said. "Captain Awokou," she said, as if it weren't his real name, "If you are so concerned with justice, you will move out of our way. We only want the Vidiians, but if these Eonessans intercede, they will get what is coming to them."

"I can't allow that to happen," he said with calm, deadly certainty. "I will not tolerate mass slaughter. As the victims of the Vidiians' crimes it would certainly make you no better to engage in similar behavior."

"No, but at least they will pay the price for their cruelty," Gixia declared.

"Colc, what do you think?" Vebbis asked the female Neth.

"They didn't have to bring back our crewmen, and unharmed," she replied. "I think we should listen to what the captain proposes."

"We should put this to a vote," a pale man with an elongated head suggested.

"We will resume communication shortly," Vebbis said before ending the communication.

It left Awokou waiting again. He was disappointed that the alien war council hadn't acceded to his request immediately. "I guess we'll just have to wait on the jury's verdict," Commander Thayer said dryly.

Captain's Ready Room

USS Aldebaran

"Enter," Captain Awokou said, pleased for the interruption. The door to his office slid open and his wife entered. Awokou brightened immediately. He stood. Rozi walked around the desk and wrapped her arms around him, pressing her face against his chest. The captain held his wife tightly.

"How are you doing?" She asked, gazing up at him.

"I'm...well," he said, finding it hard to muster up the enthusiasm. The alien flotilla had kept them waiting for hours, so long in fact that Awokou had finally retreated from the bridge into the ready room to contemplate his next move.

But mostly he had dealt with the ghosts of the past and how they were too similar to what was occurring now. He had also been weary before the attack that had crippled him and the Phoenix, he had also underestimated the stakes.

Had he foolishly put the Aldebaran in the jaws of a le-matya? Rozi, sensing his distress, stroked his wrinkled brow. She rubbed his knotted shoulders.

"You need to relax," she said, taking him by the elbow and gesturing toward the day bed set up in his office.

"What do you have in mind?" He was at least able to come up with a saucy smile.

"Not that mister," she replied with a grin. "But a little massage followed by a light nap might do the trick."

He stopped, leaving her tugging on his arm. "I can't take a nap. I need to be ready when the war council hails us."

"You'll be no good to anyone this tensed up," she gently chided. "You need your rest."

"You've never told me that before," he said suspiciously. "Are you doubting I'm up to this task?" He pulled out of her grip.

"You're the one doing the doubting," she fired right back. "And it's unnecessary. You're being too hard on yourself."

"I'm sorry," he relented, "It's just...this is all new to me again, and I'm afraid I'm frinxing it up."

"You're doing nothing of the sort," she shook her head. "You're trying to find a peaceful solution to this mess."

"Do you think the war council will see reason?" He asked, eager to hear her thoughts.

"I don't know," she shook her head, "The atrocities they've must have endured, it would harden any heart."

"I know," he admitted. "I find little sympathy with the Vidiians, however I can't sit idly by and allow innocents to be killed, no matter how tainted their associations might be, and the Eonessans definitely don't deserve to pay for the Vidiians' crimes."

"And you won't," she said confidently, "You always find a way."

"I didn't at Lakesh," he replied, stone-faced.

"You can't beat yourself up about that Banti," Rozi squeezed his hand. "There was nothing you could do."

"I should've, I should've," he struggled to find words. He turned from his wife and ambled back over to his desk. Beyond it he looked out of the port window.

"I failed my crew," he lowered his head, tears threatening. "What if I've led this crew, if I've led you, into another slaughter?"

Main Bridge

USS Aldebaran

Captain Awokou returned to the bridge unable to be alone with his thoughts anymore. Rozi had done her best to comfort him before he insisted he needed time alone. He had been embarrassed that he had nearly collapsed in his wife's arms, ashamed of his tears. He had never been so emotional before, never given into his doubts and fears, never craved another's support where the captaincy was concerned.

Surviving Lakesh, awakening from his coma, he was a new man, and Banti wasn't sure he liked him very much. But he still had a job to do and a crew, ship, and planet to protect.

He noticed his wife sitting up in her care, a concerned look on her face. He gave her a tight smile, and hoped that its falseness didn't shine through. He retook the command chair. "Commander Thayer, any change with the alien fleet?"

"No sir," Thayer blew through her teeth, not hiding her frustration. Her emotions were raw and to the surface as well. Normally Awokou would pull her to the side and suggest she rein them in, but at this moment who was he to judge. "This council meeting sure is taking a long time."

"It's an important decision," Awokou intoned sternly. "One that could affect the lives of millions."

"I understand that sir," Thayer said, a bit chastened. "Still we've been waiting for hours. Perhaps we should just ask them?"

"I am not unsympathetic," the captain smiled, putting a bit of warmth into the gesture. "But we shouldn't rush them."

"The captain is correct," Rozi spoke up. "We are unfamiliar with the debating or discussion rituals of these beings. If we request an answer they might think it impudent or a sign of aggression."

Thayer shook her head and shrugged, not convinced but also not willing to push the issue further. That troubled Awokou a little bit. He had wondered what it would be like with his wife serving aboard as first contact specialist. He hoped that the crew wouldn't assume that he would take her side automatically, or that Rozi would do the same where he was concerned.

In this case he couldn't argue because Rozi was right. And he hoped that Commander Thayer didn't see it as the married couple ganging up on her. With time and trust he was confident that if any such suspicions were present they would be dispelled.

That is, if they survived the next few hours.

The bridge settled into a tense silence. The captain was reviewing the status of the ship's weapons systems for the umpteenth time when an excited Lt. Shibata said, "Captain, we're receiving a transmission from the fleet."

"Put it on screen," Awokou didn't hide the relief in his voice. The image of the flotilla shifted to a Neth female: Colc.

"Captain Awokou, you extended a courtesy to my countrymen and now I will do the same for you." Without pause, and looking lethally serious, "Leave now and leave the Vidiians and their protectors to their fates."

Main Bridge

USS Aldebaran

"Alien ships are powering propulsion systems...and their weapons' systems," Lt. Loto said. Captain Awokou tensed as memories of old battles flashing through his mind. He had survived scrapes against the Cardassians, Tzenkethi, and Dominion, along with a few other adversaries, and he was grateful that he was still able to close the spigot on his fear like he used to do.

"Hail the Kazon vessel," Awokou ordered.

Vebbis appeared after a few moments. He had a regretful look on his face. "Captain Awokou, we have made our decision. The Vidiians will be brought to justice."

"What of the Eonessans? What if they intercede?" The captain asked.

"Then they will be dealt with," the man said coldly. "As you will be if you interfere."

Staring hard at the man Awokou commanded, "Raise shields and aim weapons at that ship. If you attempt to leave I will fire upon you."

Vebbis grimaced, "Captain, don't be a fool. You are vastly outnumbered and overpowered. We would slag your vessel."

"Don't be so sure about that," Awokou said. He turned his head to catch Loto on his periphery. "Activate the fractal inversion field."

"Field activation in one minute," the Arbazan security officer said.

"Am I supposed to be afraid?" Vebbis scoffed.

"If you go to warp you will find out," the captain promised.

"You won't survive that long," the other man declared.

"Several warships have joined the Kazon vessel," Loto said, "All our powering their weapons and aiming them at us."

"More power to forward shields," Awokou said, not backing down.

"Subspace fractal inversion field activated," Loto added.

"Maximum spread," the captain commanded.

"Captain I suggest we utilize the unmanned warp combat vehicles," Commander Thayer said. "It will even the odds."

"Not yet," Awokou put up a hand.

"Warships are encircling us," Loto said.

"Captain," Thayer pressed.

"Not yet," he snapped.

"Other warships are angling away from us, preparing to go to warp." The Arbazan said.

Awokou held Vebbis's gaze. "This is your final warning."

"You can do nothing," the man shook his head. "While we demolish you our other vessels will have brought justice to the Vidiians."

"The majority of the fleet is going to warp," Loto informed him.

The captain spoke again, "Don't do this Vebbis. Tell your ships to power down their weapons." Vebbis cut communications. The starfield shifted from the Kazon bridge to the flotilla of ships.

As the warp effect took hold of a majority of the vessels, Awokou closed his eyes and prayed. The ships were sheared in half as they came into contact with the cosmic string Aldebaran had laid out before them.

"Shields, full power," Awokou said as a series of explosions erupted around them and the ship was buffeted with debris. Lights blinked on and off and a terminal or two exploded. In the clash of klaxons, Awokou heard Thayer yell about multiple hull breaches. Banti gripped his armrests fiercely and tried not to think so desperately of his wife. He couldn't help looking at her and was relieved she was also hanging on in her seat. From the shaky view screen he saw that some pieces of ship were colliding with the warship's boxing them in, destroying some vessels in the process. Ironically the alien cruisers that were supposed to be restraining them kept them cocooned from a majority of the destruction.

Once the tumult died down, only a handful of vessels were left. Without being told, Awokou sensed Aldebaran was in no mood to fight, but he would give it his all if pressed. "Hail the Kazon ship."

The large warship was battered but still intact. A shaken Vebbis, a large gash running across his forehead, stared at him with a shocked gaze.

"What did you do?" He asked, half in astonishment, half in accusation.

"What I had to," Awokou said with steeliness. "Now, if you're finally ready to listen, let's talk."

Conference Lounge USS Aldebaran

Captain Awokou was glad he wasn't a Betazoid. Despite his lack of empathic or telepathic ability, he sensed the powerful emotions roiling in the room. Along with Rozi, Commander Thayer, Lt. Narcissa and a security team, the room was filled with the leaders of what was left of the alien fleet.

Many bore injuries to go along with their shocked, defeated, or seething expressions. Awokou cleared his throat and stood, allowing the silence to ripple out organically from the gesture.

"I'm sorry for what has befallen many of your compatriots," he began, and the room immediately broke into a cacophony of shouts, curses, and cries. The security team tensed, but Awokou nodded to Narcissa to keep her team back.

"Please, please," Awokou held up his hands.

"Silence!" Vebbis spoke up. "Let the man speak."

"Thank you," the captain nodded, but Vebbis coldly turned his head. "I warned you, I warned all of you. We have terrible weapons, weapons I regret using against you, but I would do so again to protect the Eonessans."

"What gives you the right to murder us? To deny us justice?!" A humanoid with a crest of red feathers jabbed a finger at him. "You're no better than the Vidians!"

The room broke out into furious agreements and more cursing and shouting. The guards moved from their posts, but the captain waved for them to remain where they were.

"We still outnumber you," Vebbis said. "We can still have justice."

"You threaten us on our vessel?" Thayer spoke up. "That's not the smartest move."

"Neither was laying waste to our fleet, because you've left us with nothing to lose," Vebbis said. "We came here, fully prepared to die. Are you?"

"There doesn't have to be anymore death," Awokou said. "We don't wish it. We never wished what just happened, but I can't take that back."

"You should've left us alone, you should've left us to our purpose," a stocky, spotted woman, with a plume of ginger hair declared.

"I would never stand by and allow genocide to occur," Awokou replied.

"Yet you just slaughtered so many of us," the words pierced him more because they came from Fontin. The Neth looked away when the captain looked at him.

"There's nothing that will stop us from pursuing the Vidiians," Vebbis promised. "You can't protect them or the ones that harbor them forever. You have to return to your home and we can wait you out."

"About that," Awokou said, "As of this moment the Eonessan homeworld is a protectorate of the United Federation of Planets. Any attack will be met with overwhelming force by a fleet of vessels with weapons as powerful as mine."

This time gasps came from both the assembled aliens and his crew. Awokou stared squarely at Vebbis, "Don't test our resolve."

"This is not over," the alien leader declared. "There are more ships, more aggrieved races across the Delta Quadrant that will join our cause."

"And we'll be there to meet them," Awokou said.

Captain's Ready Room

USS Aldebaran

Once the meeting was over, Awokou watched silently from the bridge as the remnants of the alien fleet left the debris strewn space, heading away from the direction of the Eonessa Prime. Once he had Aldebaran underway back to that planet, with the crew working hard to restore the ship, the captain went to his ready room.

And he got to the truly hard part. It took several hours to get a response. It was about what he expected. The hologram of Admiral Glover stood within the holo-communicator built into the office's floor. The communicator was built off to the side of the captain's desk. He turned his chair to face the admiral.

The younger man did not look pleased. Awokou forwent asking him about Starbase 27 or anything else and instead prepared for the lambasting.

"Just what were you thinking Banti?" Glover upbraided him. Rarely if ever had Terrence called him by his first name and never in such a disrespectful manner. It was so uncharacteristic of their relationship, such a reversal of roles that it threw Banti for a loop. "You unilaterally made Eonessa Prime a Federation protectorate without consulting Starfleet."

"There was no time to do that," Awokou said, "I thought it was the best way to protect the Eonessans immediately and to let the alien fleet know that we were serious."

"No, that you were," the admiral fumed. "And now you've put the Federation's honor on the line."

"To prevent potential genocide, yes," Awokou replied with passion, "and I would do so again."

Glover glared at him. "But also to protect potential mass murderers like these Vidiians."

"There is that," the captain conceded, "But I didn't see any choice in the matter. The alien fleet made no bones about attacking the Eonessans if they came to the aid of the Vidiians and it would've been a slaughter."

"The Eonessans were free to make that choice," Glover said coldly, leaving Banti to wonder what had happened to the man. "We had already interfered enough with them. Now you've committed us to using more resources, resources that are scant at the moment, to protect them basically indefinitely."

"Sir, there was no other alternative," Awokou replied earnestly.

"The Fleet Admiral concurs," Glover said, almost reluctantly, "The details will be hashed out later between Starfleet Command and the Federation Council. Your new orders are to defend the Eonessan homeworld until reinforcements arrive and you are relieved."

"When can I expect them to arrive?" Awokou asked.

"Three months at the earliest," the admiral replied. He shook his head, "This wasn't an easy decision."

"Seldom are many when you sit in our chairs," Banti said, regretting it instantly because it felt too flippant to him.

"There were some who were very reluctant to extend our protection to the Vidiians," Glover said. "I think that was the biggest sticking point, and will likely continue to be so."

"I understand," Awokou said. "It mirrors the feelings from my own senior staff, and likely my whole crew."

"So what do you propose we do about them?" Glover asked, his gruffness mellowing a bit.

"Get the guilty to voluntarily come forward and accept Federation justice," Awokou said.

"And how do you propose we do that?" The admiral was intrigued.

"Withholding protection from them until they comply," the captain suggested. "And offering them our justice rather than that of their enemies."

Glover rubbed his bearded chin, as he mulled it over. "And what if they reject that offer?"

Without pause, Awokou answered, "We leave them to their fate."

The admiral's grin was wolfish. "You know I went to bat for you. And this is another reason why I'm glad I did." Awokou was relieved there was some old aspect of the man still inside even if his defense seemed to be for a warped reason.

"I wish we could get more ships there sooner," Glover said. "You'll be alone out there too long for my liking."

"We'll manage," Awokou promised, "I think it will take Vebbis a long time to scrounge up more ships that want to go against our Alpha Weapons."

The admiral shook his head again, his shoulders tensing, as his mouth drew into a tight line. "So much devastation, at our finger tips."

"Yes," Awokou said, shaking his head as well. "I will always regret what I did."

"What you were forced to do," Glover amended. "I understand all too well making decisions with catastrophic results."

Awokou thought about asking the man about Loyal, the Cardassian planet he had laid waste to at the end of the Dominion War. But he didn't want to reopen old wounds or generate new nightmares.

"You have a lot of work to do Captain," Glover dipped his head respectfully; "I'll leave you to it. Good luck. Glover out."

Awokou watched the hologram fade. "That wasn't so bad," he muttered to himself. "I guess the hard part will be the Vidi'ans." He sighed, grabbed the nearest padd on his desk, and got back to work.

Rector's Office Eonessa Prime Hours Later...

"You had no right," Rector Chaun flared, "I won't allow you to annex this planet!" The Eonessan was half out of his chair, his finger pointing like a dagger. Beside him stood Vinaren, concern entwined with relief on her face.

"Rector," Awokou did his best to remove the frustration from his voice, "As a Federation protectorate, your sovereignty remains intact. I made this move to protect your world, not to control it."

"Who are you to impose this upon us?" Chaun screeched. "We can take care of our own affairs. If your one ship stood against them, our Argosy certainly can."

"You have no idea, none, of what we had to do to convince the alien fleet to not invade your world," Awokou leaned forward, his eyes narrowing, his voice tightening, as horrible memories uncoiled in his mind. "We lost something, I lost something in this quest and I will not allow your pride and foolishness to throw it away."

"How dare you?" Chaun reared back as if struck. "I want your vessel gone, immediately!"

"Rector," Vinaren smoothly interjected, "Let's not be too hasty." The intercession brought the Eonessan leader up short. He turned to the woman.

"You can't see what they're doing? Taking over my planet? Disrespecting my office?"

"The captain has been nothing but a being of his word so far, and from little contact our people have had with this Starfleet, their members are forthright. He's offering protection, I suggest you take it."

"Thank you Speaker," Awokou dipped his head in her direction. She smiled.

"Don't thank me yet," she replied. "I on the other hand cannot accept acceding to your 'justice' system. You have no right to sit in judgment of us."

"She's right," Chaun huffed.

"It's either us or you can take your chances with all of the enemies you've amassed," Awokou said coolly. "This way we can at least explain to them that the guilty among you are paying for their crimes."

"There were no crimes," Vinaren said, "We broke none of our laws."

"If there are galactic laws, from what I've learned of your peoples' ways, you have been serial violators, of a most egregious sort," Awokou rejoined. "And such barbarity can't go unanswered."

"It will have to," Vinaren declared.

"There are limits to our protection," Awokou didn't relent. "It only extends to the Eonessans. Unless you surrender your guilty to us, we won't protect you."

"We've managed," Vinaren said. "And we will continue to do so."

"This is a decision that doesn't have to be made this instant," the captain charitably offered. "Mull it over."

"I've lost too many of my people, I will not hand over anyone to you," Vinaren's gaze was fierce, her expression determined.

Awokou shook his head, his own expression sad. "I wished you would change your mind. The Federation doesn't have a death penalty, except in extraordinary circumstances, and we support rehabilitation. There's so much you could contribute to Federation life and so much you could learn, and your people would be able to do so in peace, unafraid of retaliation."

"We've learned not to rely on the mercies of others," Vinaren replied. "We've learned how to survive on our own."

"You don't have to do that, not any more, if you don't want to," Awokou said. "In the Federation, it could be the chance for a new life."

"We had a great civilization once and we will do so again, by our own hands," Vinaren said.

"Besides they have a home here," Chaun declared. "Free from your persecution."

"Haven't you been listening?" Awokou could feel his temper rising. "Speaker Vinaren has all but admitted that her people are Vidiian, and when I had made that charge before you vehemently denied it."

"I don't deny that we are Vidiian," Vinaren admitted, "Though are from the planet Vaphora."

"They have not been truthful with you, they have deceived you," Awokou pointed out. Vinaren glared at him. Chaun's feathered crest ruffled as his eyes darted back and forth between the two.

"I don't care where they came from or what they did in the past," the Eonessan leader ultimately said, "In our hour of need they were there for us and I intend to be there for them."

"You and your people have been too hospitable to us," Vinaren said, "And we have not deserved it."

"Nonsense," the rector replied. Awokou restrained himself from throwing up his hands. Perhaps Vinaren and Chaun were made for each other. As much as he wanted to tell them so, he kept his thoughts to himself. His main concern had to be his crew and the Eonessan people.

"Rector I suggest that you do discuss Captain Awokou's offer with your parliament. We can take care of ourselves, but we are concerned for your welfare."

Chaun harrumphed, but eventually said, "I will do so. Unlike Captain Awokou it appears I do value discussion and consensus."

The captain took that dig. It meant that the Eonessans would at least discuss the issue and hopefully agree with it, though he would defend them whether they wanted him to or not.

"Rector if you will allow, I can explain what protectorate status entails to your parliament," Awokou offered.

"I think I get the gist of it," Chaun smoldered. "Your attendance is not required."

Awokou wanted to press the issue, but decided that wouldn't be wise. He looked at Vinaren, a plea in his eyes, and the Vidiian nodded.

"Perhaps I could attend the meeting?" She suggested. Chaun softened.

"Of course Speaker Vinaren, the parliamentarians will be interested in what you have to say."

"Now if you've finished issuing your order, I have a meeting to call," Chaun dismissed him.

Feeling appreciably better for Vinaren's assistance, Awokou beamed out with his head high.

Quantum Café

USS Aldebaran

Three months later...

Lt. Juanita Rojas looked out of one of the large viewports and frowned. She could see the Vidiian vessel hanging in space nearby. She wrapped her fingers around her sweating drink and shook her head. "I can't believe they are going to get away with it."

"I know," Lt. Narcissa also frowned. She cut her eyes at the ship. "They won't agree to our prosecution, and the Eonessans are shielding them." She turned back to face Juanita and took a hard sip.

"Perhaps they think we will protect them as well, if the aliens attack again," Lt. Loto said. The Arbazan had already finished his glass of Altairian brandy.

"And we probably will," Narcissa leaned forward and lowered her voice, "Despite what the Captain says."

Loto nodded in agreement, but Juanita wasn't so sure. "I just wish they hadn't put us in this situation."

"Well, look at it this way," Narcissa offered, "It won't be our problem much longer." The Aldebaran stood to be relieved by two starships, the Yoyodyne and the Aeneas. Aldebaran would be called back to Federation space, its fate uncertain. But Juanita was more worried about the captain. She was afraid that he would have to answer for his decision to make Eonessa Prime a protectorate.

She thought it was a move that was the best out of a bad situation, but she didn't wear admiral bars. She just hoped that Admiral Glover stood with his old mentor and could have sway over the rest of the Admiralty.

Selfishly she didn't mind being recalled to Federation space though. It would give her more time, hopefully, to spend with Tai, or at least they would be in the same quadrant. She had missed him terribly, more than she thought she would, and was a more than a bit relieved that she hadn't spent five years in the Delta Quadrant, away from him.

If Aldebaran was attached to another Intercept Group, Juanita knew she would have to rethink whether to stay aboard. Even though she had grown attached to Narcissa and Loto and she liked serving under the captain.

Out of the corner of her eye she spotted Lt. Dryer heading toward the exit. It brought her back to the chilly incident she had had with him months ago, something that hadn't been resolved. Work had gotten in the way of her figuring out what his deal was. She figured now was as good a time as any to find out. "Excuse me," she said, pushing away from the table. "There's something I've got to do."

Turbolift

USS Aldebaran

"Hold the lift please," Lt. Rojas called out as she dashed toward it. Lt. Dryer was already inside. The young science officer grimaced and for a second she thought he wouldn't comply. However he held the lift and she glided in.

She caught her breath, before saying, "Deck Two." Juanita really didn't have a destination in mind, and she didn't want to necessarily go back to her quarters right now on Deck Eight.

"How are things going Lieutenant?" She asked. The man's jaw tightened, but eventually he spat out.

"Fine."

"Hold lift," she ordered, and the carriage stopped. Lt. Dryer turned to her, a deep scowl on his face.

"What did you do that for?" He asked.

"Do you have a problem with me Lieutenant?" She bluntly asked. The man glared at her but didn't answer. "I get the sense that there's something personal between us, but I have no idea why. I've never met you."

"It's not you," he said, "It's the company you keep."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Captain...I mean, Admiral Glover," the man huffed. Juanita was taken aback.

"What could your problem be with the Admiral?"

"My cousin," the man caught himself, "My cousin was Nyota Dryer. And Terrence Glover was responsible for her death."

Quantum Café

USS Aldebaran

Lt. Yori Shibata nearly jumped out of his seat. Hands on the chair that Kenule had recently vacated, Lt. Commander Thayer leaned over and grinned. "Jumpy much Mr. Shibata?"

"Ah, no, I mean, no sir," Shibata said, easing back into his chair.

"No need for rank, I'm just here to get a drink," she said. "Mind if I sit down?"

"Well, er," he hated being so tongue tied, but he couldn't help it. It was so awkward sleeping with a superior officer.

"I'll take that as a yes," Thayer said, sitting in Dryer's old seat. Despite his perturbation, the blonde seemed to relish making him squirm. "I've missed you," she said.

A lump formed in Shibata's throat. "Well, ah, uh."

"Come on, no time to clam up now," she chuckled, "I know how golden that tongue of yours is."

He nearly knocked over his drink. "I've-I've got to go."

"Leaving so soon?" She asked innocently.

"Ah, yeah," he said. "I've got some, uh, alien dialects to study."

"Perhaps I could help?"

"No, ah, thank you sir, but I can handle it." He stood up.

"It's April by the way," she said, but Yori was already hustling toward the door.

Holodeck One

USS Aldebaran

"It's not an exact recreation, but it is fairly close," Chief Silane said. Lt. Selvin appraised the holographic recreation. The wind stirred his hair as it rifled through the tall buildings. Off in the distance was Fringill Park. Both Selvin and the Medusan engineer were overlooking the capital city from a buttressing cliff.

"It is a shame that the Eonessans won't allow us to beam down to their planet anymore," Silane added. Selvin nodded.

"I did find their architecture...agreeable," he allowed.

"Agreed," Silane said. "Though there was so much I looked forward to learning so much more about the Eonessans than their architecture."

"The Eonessan Parliament barred us from venturing onto their planet, though they did accept the protectorate status," the Vulcan replied. "There isn't much we can do now but review the knowledge we have already gained until there is a change in the political climate."

"Yes," Silane was sad. He floated in circles, mulling over his thoughts. "But I just wasn't thinking of us, I was thinking of Yoyodyne and Aeneas. Their crews will likely not be allowed to meet the Eonessans and explore their world, but be stuck on dreary patrol duty."

"Not every job in Starfleet is glamorous," Selvin said. "But the potential to learn is ever present. There is much of this system that remains unexplored."

"You are correct," Silane said. "Thanks for cheering me up."

"My intention was not to evoke an emotional response," Selvin replied.

"Of course it wasn't," the Medusan chuckled, or what approximated to a chuckle. He floated circles around the Vulcan before coming to rest beside him, at eye level. "You know the capital is majestic, with the wonderful lighting, it almost looks...romantic."

"I wouldn't be able to judge that," Selvin replied dryly.

"Perhaps because you don't try," Silane said. As if on cue the doors to the holodeck parted and Dr. Xylia stepped in.

Selvin's expression tightened and Xylia looked uncomfortable. "I didn't know you would be here," both nearly said at the same time. Then both turned to the Medusan for an explanation, their tones with varying strains of accusation.

"Is it a crime to spend a holodeck session with friends?" He chuckled again.

Hydroponics Lab

USS Aldebaran

The couple walked among the plant life, the captain plucking a Kaferian apple, his sweet tooth starting to get the better of him. Before he could take a bite, Rozi asked, "How was your session with Counselor Banyan?"

Anticipating the question, and dreading it a bit, Awokou said, "You've both talked me out of resigning, if that's what you meant. But the nightmares....there's not much he can do about those."

"I know," she wrapped her arm around his and pulled him closer. She rested her head against his bicep. "It's just going to take time."

He nodded, his desire for the apple suddenly evaporating. He didn't want to waste it however so he began quietly munching on it. They walked in silence while he ate. After he threw the core into a receptacle, Rozi said. "I'm here for you."

"But what about the new orders?" Awokou asked, "Command needs skilled first contact officers for upcoming missions."

"Well there are incoming droves of refugees from the Delta Quadrant, perhaps Aldebaran will be assigned to one of those and I can stay aboard."

"It's just as likely they won't assign Aldebaran to any more first contact missions," Awokou said darkly. "They see me as unpredictable now."

"How can they punish you for saving the Eonessan people?" Rozi was disbelieving.

"Who knows how the politics will shake out?" Awokou replied, "And certainly the Satie Administration has been reluctant about taking on new responsibilities, even though they have been forced to. I just gave them a new headache."

Rozi squeezed his arm. "All for the right reasons."

"But still," Awokou shook his head, "I can't help thinking some higher up now thinks I will add create more headaches and want me out of the way. I might not even keep Aldebaran."

"They won't do that to you," Rozi promised, though there were cracks in her confidence, "Not after all you've done, all you've sacrificed."

"I just don't know," Awokou said, unable to hide his sadness. "All my life I've journeyed into the unknown, but this is one trip I don't want to take."

THE END