

Star Trek: Independence

Nadir

By Dnoth

(nā'dār) n. – In astronomy, a point diametrically opposite of a star's zenith; the lowest point.

"Your highest revelations often come when you're experiencing your lowest circumstances." – Unknown

PROLOUGE

Stardate: 54287.7 (27 Aug 2377)

**Starbase 17, Internal Docking Bay Two, Observation Level
Porrima System**

Captain Sintina Aurelia stood with her arms crossed. She wore her jet black hair in a single ponytail. Her petite, yet athletic body stood only 1.6 meters. She was born in Honduras, but she had several Spanish features. Her skin was smooth and youthful. Her eyes, on the other hand, were aged and worried.

Her eyes were focused on the hulk that was her ship. Repairs hadn't yet begun on the *Steamrunner* class ship. Outside of the Dominion War, she'd never seen a ship in such shape. Its hull had holes and gashes almost everywhere. Most of its port nacelle was gone. Its starboard side looked like it had gone through a grinder. She couldn't even fully read the name and registry. It read: "-SS IND—ENDE--E NC---7-91."

The *Independence* and her crew had been the talk of the starbase ever since they arrived in tow by the *Bluefin*. Even under 'normal' circumstances, a ship being towed into port was a mild disgrace. Aurelia knew people were talking. She didn't care. As luck had it, Command was making sure everyone involved keep a tight lip about what happened. Her crew had been ordered not to discuss it. A few people outside her crew knew the truth, but only a handful.

The admiral in charge of the hearing about the matter, Admiral Sitak, had summoned her. Aurelia had a few minutes before the meeting. She found herself spending hours here, looking out the large window. Her battered ship looked out of place in an otherwise glorious city of lights and smooth surfaces.

Lieutenant Jonin Faltyne, an Andorian male – and her impromptu first officer now that Commander bin Nadal was dead, approached her. Her chief engineer, Ethan Windslow, was technically next in line, but he was completely pre-occupied with planning repairs.

It had been 10 days since he stunned her. He did it for a good reason, she internally accepted. She was so full of intense rage, she was about ready to blast a hole into an already decompressed chamber to prevent a Section 31 agent from escaping. She understood his reasons. To make it worse, she probably would have done the same thing had their positions been reversed. But for good or ill, Sintina once crossed, rarely forgave. Her brain wasn't upset with her security chief, but her gut still was. The two had reached an uneasy compromise.

"Captain," he began professionally, "The Chief of Starfleet Personnel of this sector just called. He said, due to 'continuing shortages,'" he sighed slightly, "The *Independence* crew is going to start being reassigned."

Sintina's face was deadpan. She was expecting this, though, not this soon. The refit and repair of the *Independence* would take several months. Starfleet didn't like having that many personnel sitting idle. Even two years after the Dominion War, personnel shortages still plagued the fleet.

Faltyne also added, "The admiral said he'd be willing to try to reform the command crew, once repairs are complete."

Aurelia didn't respond.

"If you'd like," he supplemented.

She placed her hands behind her back, "Thank you, Lieutenant."

The Andorian began to walk away, but suddenly turned back, "Ma'am, I never apologized for..."

The Latina quickly interrupted, "Don't."

Jonin realized that was as much as a concession as he was going to get. In fact, it surprised him that he got that much from her. It was understood that the issue had been dropped. She would not pursue any charges against him.

The captain's gaze returned to the dismembered ship out the viewing port.

The security chief knew there was nothing left to be said. He moved off.

CHAPTER 1

Supplemental Starbase 17, Sector JAG Office Porrina System

As the door parted, Sintina's first thought was how large the admiral's office was. To her left, was a series of transparent aluminum windows; beyond them, the stars. To the right, was a very spacious sitting area with couches, chairs, and a coffee table. Directly ahead, was the Vulcan officer, sitting at her desk.

Admiral Sitak was a light-skinned, Vulcan female. Her black hair was in the traditional style. The rank on her red collar had two enclosed pips, indicating a rear admiral, upper half. Her expression was, of course, stoic. She stood, "Captain Aurelia, greetings. Please sit." She gestured to the nearby sitting area.

The captain took up residence at the far end of one of the couches. She sat rigidly, not feeling comfortable enough to cross her legs or utilize the armrest.

The Vulcan woman brought a padd from her desk and sat in a chair facing her guest. She too, sat stiffly, though, she probably always did. Sitak began without preamble, "I have reviewed your deposition. It makes some...extraordinary charges."

Aurelia was in no mood to lie or worry about the ramifications when she wrote the report. She included everything. Well, maybe not everything. She did, however, not hold back about Lore and the battle with the *Philadelphia*. "I stand by my statement, sir," she said.

The admiral cocked an eyebrow, "Do you? Interesting." She scrolled through the document for a moment. "So you allege, a ship confirmed destroyed last month, was, in fact, not destroyed, attacked you, and was destroyed again. You further allege an android that is confirmed currently disassembled and sitting, in pieces, in the Robotics Department at the Daystrom Technological Institute is, in fact, assembled and operational. How can you resolve these apparent disparities?"

Sintina tried, but failed to stop her jaw from dropping. She thought she could explain the *Philadelphia*, but the revelation about Lore...she had no idea. She

stumbled, but managed, "As I said in my report, the *Philadelphia* was using some type of phasing cloak..."

"Yes," Sitak interrupted, "That is another of your accusations. Do you have any evidence?"

The captain shot back quickly, "There were sensor logs that picked up the ship. The android was on my vessel. Surely, security monitors recorded his presence."

The admiral dismissed the mild outburst. She rejoined, "Unfortunately, there is not. Your computer core had some type of malfunction. No sensor data of any kind, internal or external, was stored in the computer's memory during the time frame you allege these events occurred."

Aurelia huffed in disbelief. She sat forward and began to rub her temples. Lore could've done more sabotage than they realized. She kicked herself again for letting that imposter roam the ship freely.

The Vulcan went on, "The malfunction and its timeliness raises unavoidable questions, Captain. Did you intentionally erase the data or order its erasure?"

The Latina looked up from under her brow with resolve, "No sir."

Sitak contemplated for a moment. "You see my dilemma, Captain. You give me testimony that I cannot verify. Your crew, of course, supports your account, but crews often have a sense of...loyalty to their captain. I cannot take it at face value." She stood and began to pace, "There are only so many options from my perspective. One is that you believe you are telling the truth, even though; there is evidence to the contrary. If that is the case, a psychological evaluation is in order. The second option is that you and your crew have fallen victim to some type of elaborate deception, perhaps some Vuke technique we are unaware of." She stopped walking and turned to Aurelia, "Or you have falsified your report and have ordered or intimidated your crew to do the same."

Sintina could do little, but shoot daggers at her.

It didn't faze the Vulcan, "Perhaps your fragile human ego was wounded by being outmaneuvered by the relatively primitive Vuke forces."

Aurelia had enough. She stood and stared down the admiral. The captain knew she was posturing out of a knee-jerk reaction. She wasn't going to strike the admiral, but it felt good to go through the motions, none the less.

Sitak observed her response with curiosity. She continued calmly, "I do not have evidence, however, to support any of these theories."

Both women stood motionless for several seconds.

The admiral suddenly came to a decision, "As of this moment, you are on medical leave. You will not return to duty until you successfully pass a complete psychological evaluation. Do you understand, Captain?"

Having her mental state called into question hurt more than if the admiral had just dishonorably discharged her. It wasn't fair. She told the truth. She defended her ship. She tried to stop criminals. She did her best. Her eyes began to water. She immediately stiffened up and stood at attention. She wouldn't let this cold-hearted Vulcan wench see her cry, "Yes sir."

CHAPTER 2

Supplemental Starbase 17, Commerce Section 5, “Anchor’s Away” Lounge Porrima System

The “Anchor’s Away” restaurant was one of dozens, perhaps hundreds of similar establishments throughout the mammoth starbase. It was clean, well-maintained, and orderly.

Lieutenant Junior Grade Kimula sh'Somachanar, an Andorian female, sat at one of the many dining tables. She was alone sipping on some cabbage soup. The blue-skinned woman was reading a padd.

It was a newsletter from the USS *Voyager*. Well, it wasn’t really from *Voyager*. Ever since it was discovered the ship was stranded in the Delta Quadrant, people from around the Federation wanted to know more about them. A monthly newsletter was now being published to satisfy that curiosity.

She sensed someone reading over her shoulder. She looked behind her. Standing there, slightly closer than socially acceptable, was a smiling, grandfatherly looking man. The top of his head was bald, though, he had surprisingly thick hair on the sides and the back of his head. His skin was light pink. ...And he was a four ‘star’ admiral. She nearly knocked into him as she stood at attention. “Sir.”

He smiled warmly, as he protected his cup of coffee. “At ease, lieutenant.” He gestured for her to sit back down.

She did so.

“May I join you?” he asked.

A lieutenant doesn’t refuse an admiral when he asks to sit down. “Of course, sir.”

He sat across from her and began, “Please excuse me. I didn’t mean to leer over you. I just couldn’t help but notice what you were reading.”

“The *Voyager* newsletter?”

He grinned and nodded. “My team and I have a hand in making that.”

Her antennae went up, "You're a writer, sir?"

The elder human took a sip, "Not exactly. I'm in charge of the Pathfinder Project."

The Andorian was nearly awestruck, "You're Admiral Paris?"

He nodded.

She was thoroughly intrigued now, "It fascinates me how you...your team was able to use the cyclic pulsar to amplify the signal strength." She was so exited she made a slight breach of protocol as she rambled off questions, "How much is the data degraded? What's the compression rate? How do you adjust the signal from the MIDAS array to keep up with *Voyager* when you don't know their exact position?"

He held up a friendly hand, "You must be our biggest fan."

She turned a darker shade of blue, "I'm sorry, sir. I'm a communications specialist and the newsletter is written for a general audience. I was just curious."

He repeated, "You're a communications specialist?"

"Well," she began, "I studied psychology at the academy, but early on in the war, we lost our com. officer. I was field trained, but I am certified, sir."

He leaned back and crossed his arms, "A counselor and a com. officer, impressive." He leaned in, "You know, we could use someone like you. What's your current assignment?"

Her eyebrows went up as she smiled, "I'm actually waiting for new orders, sir."

Paris said, "I usually don't do this, but the job's yours if you want it."

Kimula wanted to jump at the chance, but then thoughts of Aurelia entered her mind. She'd been part of Sintina's crew ever since she graduated the academy. For two years, Aurelia was her executive officer on the *Midas*. Then, after Captain Camar died, Sintina assumed command. Kimula had stuck with her ever since. Four years, in total. She owed her captain a lot. On the

other hand, with Karim gone; the “trio” was gone too. It wouldn’t be the same even if she tried to stay with Sintina. The moment was bittersweet for her, but this was a rare opportunity. She couldn’t let it go by. Finally, she extended a hand, “I’d be honored, sir.”

He took her hand in his, “Welcome to the Pathfinder Project, Lieutenant. My transport is heading for Earth tomorrow. I’ll reserve you a seat.”

CHAPTER 3

Supplemental Starbase 17, Medical Section 3, Med Lab 12 Porrima System

Doctor Zo’Kama Do’Matar, an Arkonian, sat with her face in a visor of a microscope. She wore a blue trimmed uniform and bore the rank of full commander.

Arkonians were reptilian humanoids first encountered by Humans before the founding of the Federation. They weren’t founding members of the Federation, but it didn’t take long for them to join. Arkonians were fairly unique in that their physiology wasn’t water-based, but was based on a brown liquid, called *tarratt-aash*. They had another interesting ability, their saliva acted as a natural dermal regenerator. The Arkonians, of course, had all the liabilities of reptiles, including being exothermic.

Zo’Kama wore no isolation suit even though the corpse of a Vuke laid behind her. She had determined the H’Kan Plague – which was ravaging the Vuke species – would not infect any Federation species. That fact, itself, was mildly odd.

The doctor heard the door slide open. She looked toward it with her yellow eyes. A Bolian rear admiral, lower half, with blue trim entered. Zo’Kama recognized the female as the Chief of Medical Officer of Starbase 17, Admiral Homchu.

The Arkonian stood and regarded the superior officer, “Admiral, how may I help you?”

The Bolian’s blue skin had several wrinkles in it. Her eyes lingered on the cadaver in the room. She was downtrodden, “I’m afraid I have bad news from Medical Command.” She now focused on Zo’Kama, “They’ve decided to terminate your research regarding the H’Kan Plague.”

Her tan scales turned a shade darker, “What? Why? I don’t understand.”

Over the last week or so, the admiral and Zo’Kama had developed a very good working relationship. Homchu was a caring, good-hearted woman. Informing her newfound colleague of Command’s decision was obviously uncomfortable for her.

The Bolian answered, "It was an...unusual deviation for Command to order a mission like yours in the first place. The Vuke are a pre-warp civilization. Normally, the Federation wouldn't intervene."

"During our briefing," added Zo'Kama, "We were told Starfleet wanted to use this opportunity to show our good faith to the Vuke."

Homchu nodded and finished her line of thought, "To get out ahead the future problem the Vuke could be once they achieved warp drive. I understand Starfleet's reasoning, though, I don't agree with it. The Prime Directive is there for a reason." She paced a bit, "And now, it seems the Federation has come back to that view. The H'Kan system is under quarantine again." She sighed, "So you see, there is no need to continue your research."

Zo'Kama objected, "Admiral, I'm so close to isolating this virus. After that, it's just a matter of finding the correct chemical reactions to neutralize it."

Homchu's motherly voice became a bit more stern, "You're not listening, Commander. Even if you find the cure, Starfleet will not give it to the Vuke."

"But sir," she began.

The admiral stopped her, "The Vuke had a chance to accept Federation help. They slapped our hand away. You were there."

The Arkonian rejoined without thinking, "According to the Vuke, we shot first."

The Bolian walked away and ran her hand over a hairless head, "You're not supposed to discuss that mission, Commander. You know that." She walked around the autopsy table and continued, more softly, "Look, I don't know what happened. I don't want to know. I do know you have a lot invested in this; a lot of research and work. I don't like leaving a project unfinished, either."

"Sir, there is no indication this plague will stop. Millions have died. Billions more will die. We have to stop it."

Homchu looked down for several seconds. Then replied, "You know, as a scientist and a doctor, you have to have a certain about of...separation from your patients. Yes, the Vuke will experience a die off." She stepped closer,

“But there have been extension events on nearly every populated planet. It is a natural cycle. Who are we to intervene?”

The doctor contemplated for a moment. She looked at the admiral with vigor, “We are part of the universe. We share sentience with the Vuke. How can we not intervene?”

The Bolian grimaced. “I guess we’re not going to see eye to eye on this, Zo’Kama. I’m sorry, but I’m ordering you to discontinue your research. You are to dispose of the Vuke body and vacate this lab. I’m sure it won’t take long for you to get a new assignment.” She placed a hand on the reptilian’s shoulder, “You’ll see, once you get to your new posting, it will be easier.”

The admiral walked out.

Zo’Kama sat back down. She sat there, staring at the deck for some time. Eventually, she looked through the viewer again and went back to work.

CHAPTER 4

Stardate: 54291.3 (28 Aug 2377)

Starbase 17, Internal Docking Corridor 23, Currently Attached to USS *Kitzingen*

Porrima System

As Lieutenant Junior Grade Tang Zian reached the threshold of the long, mostly transparent corridor, he paused to take in the beauty of his new ship. It was a *Norway* class.

Tang read up on them last night after receiving his new assignment. *Norways* were almost as massive as *Steamrunner* class ships. Both ships shared a non-traditional design. The Asian science officer had a fleeting thought that the ship kind of looked like a giant shovel with warp nacelles.

The major distinction between the *Independence* and the *Kitzingen* was their function. Both were well-rounded vessels, but *Steamrunners* leaned toward the combat side of things, while *Norways* were geared for scientific and humanitarian duties.

He suddenly felt a presence standing next to him. He looked over to see a young – and very cute – humanoid female. The spots on the side of her face indicated she was a Trill. She wasn't looking at him, but the ship; just as he was a moment before. He couldn't see her rank, but she wore the same blue uniform he did. Her skin was pale. She had the most silky-looking brown hair. It ran down well passed her shoulders. Her eyes were like emeralds.

It took several seconds for her to realize him. She was jolted away from the *Norway* class ship and finally acknowledged him. She seemed surprised to see him, "Oh, um...hello. Do I know you?"

Zian shook his head, "Um, no." He noticed they shared the same rank. "I was just looking at my new assignment."

She pointed to the ship out the large windows, "The *Kitzingen* is your new assignment?"

"Yes..." he was going to say something else, but stopped himself. He settled on just, "Yes."

She seemed genuinely excited, "It's my new posting, too!" She extended a hand, "I'm Ashana Zwen." She light-heartedly informed him, "I'll be in charge of keeping you healthy from now on."

He took her hand and rejoined, "So you're the CMO?"

"Yeah, I just finished my residency aboard the *Crockett*."

He nodded and introduced himself, "I'm Tang Zian. I'll be the chief science officer."

Still shaking his hand, she said, "Oh, the science officer. We might be working together often. Do you know anything about medicine?"

"Um...not really, no."

"That's ok. Neither do I."

He withdrew his hand and looked shocked at the admission.

She looked at him for a moment and then broke out into a large grin, "I'm kidding!"

Tang sighed in relief and joined her in the joke, "You got me."

She gestured down the corridor, "Shall we?"

Supplemental
USS *Independence*, Captain's Quarters
Docked at Starbase 17, Porrima System

It was always odd for Sintina to look out her windows and not see stars. Her quarters were lit only by the many lights from the starbase outside. It was still cold onboard. The captain was out of uniform. She wore a smooth, black leather jacket; a plain white undershirt; denim jeans; and black, leather boots.

She was packing her things. As she stuffed some clothing in a case, she noticed something on the deck, half under the bed. She investigated.

It was her pistol replica. It was a working replica of a .45 caliber *Springfield Armory* pistol. She had replicated bullets, a cleaning kit, and everything she

needed to make it lethal. It was silver with a black grip. The weapon must have fell from its display during the battle with the *Philadelphia*.

This gun saved Karim's life once. Nicole Chase, a Section 31 operative, had disabled all the phasers on board when she attempted to kill the crew. This weapon did more than save Karim's life, she realized. It saved all the survivors from the *Interceptor* class *Independence*, including her own.

She picked up the pistol and examined it, as if looking at it would force more memories of her friend to her mind. After a moment, she placed it in her case.

The door chime sounded.

"Come in," she said quietly.

"I just heard," said Kimula, as she walked in. "It's not fair."

Sintina didn't look at her immediately. She agreed, surprisingly calmly, "No. No, it's not." She turned, "You know, the last two years have been the hardest in my life; even harder than the war."

The Andorian approached her and laid a hand on the captain's shoulder, "I know, Sintina."

The captain seemed very distant.

"Sintina," Kimula ventured, "You are coming back, right? You're just going on vacation, right?"

Aurelia walked to a nearby couch and plopped down, "I never thought I'd even consider leaving Starfleet, but..."

"But?"

"With all this Section 31 crap, Starfleet isn't what I thought it was. I'm not sure...I'm not sure I can still do it."

"You still didn't answer my question," she pressed.

The captain looked at some random spot on the bulkhead, "For now, yes. I'm just going on leave, but beyond that – I don't know."

Kimula sat next to her, "Come with me to Earth. It's your home planet. You'll feel better..."

"No," sharply rejoined the captain, "I have no desire to go to Earth."

The counselor surmised, "Because of your father?"

Sintina didn't respond.

Kimula pressed, "You never told me why you dislike him so much."

Still, there was no elaboration. She did, however, change the subject, "It'll all be different now, won't it? You're going to Earth. Karim's gone."

Suddenly, the Andorian felt so guilty. She was abandoning her friend when she needed her most. She began, "Sintina, I'm so sorry for..."

Aurelia actually reached for Kimula's hand. The counselor could hardly believe it. It was the first time in four years that Sintina had initiated familiar physical contact with her, or anyone else that she could think of, for that matter.

Sintina said, "You don't have to apologize, Kim. It's a once in a lifetime thing." Slowly, she got up and resumed packing.

Kimula held back tears. "Where will you go?"

"I don't know," was the reply, "Somewhere far away from Starfleet."

CHAPTER 5

Supplemental USS *Kitzingen*, Bridge Docked at Starbase 17, Porrima System

After boarding, Tang and Zwen made their course for the bridge to report in. As the lift doors parted, they got their first view of the command center.

The layout was not entirely typical. They entered from the most aft part of the room. Directly in front was an alcove with a circular systems table. Once they walked around it, the bridge opened up significantly. On the starboard side, was the science alcove; opposite that, the engineering niche. The center of the bridge was the command dais. It had a three chair configuration. Right from the command kiosk was tactical. There was a sister station on the other side of the bridge that handled internal security. The forward section was home to mirror stations that functioned as operations and flight control. In the forward corners of the room were environmental and life-support consoles. The holographic main viewer was currently deactivated. The color palette consisted of light tans and blues.

After taking in the geography, Tang noticed his new co-workers. The person manning security was a Coridan male. The Coridan wore some type of decorative faceplate. The only feature Zian could make out was the almost scale-like skin on the man's head. The faceplate itself was elaborately designed and appeared to be composed of some type of alloy. Its color was dark chrome. It was actually quite impressive looking. Luckily, the Coridan didn't see – Tang was sure how he 'saw' anyway, the plate appeared to cover the eyes as well – the science officer gawking.

An African woman with short hair was at operations.

Next to her, at the helm, was a very short...something. After a moment, Tang realized it was an Evoran female. She was wearing a grey cadet uniform with red shoulders. Evorans were one of the most recent Federation protectorates. The species achieved warp drive only three years ago. This cadet must be logging starship hours as the abridged academy training dictated.

Tang then identified the ship's executive officer. He...she...it was some type of reptile, or maybe an amphibian. He was ashamed to admit to himself that wasn't familiar with the species. The skin was a dark green and smooth, but

leathery. There were ridges and spikes ringing the back of the head. The forehead jetted over the completely grey eyes dramatically. The mouth created an upside down 'U.'

Ashana gestured to him. It was time to introduce themselves. They approached the commander in lock step.

The executive officer remained in the off-center seat. The alien looked up at them.

Zian started off, "Lieutenant Junior Grade Tang Zian reporting, sir."

Zwen reported a second later.

The executive officer's face didn't show any expression. Or maybe he/she was, but the Trill or Human couldn't relate.

It blinked and then said, "Acknowledged. The captain is in his ready room. Report to him as well." At that, the XO returned its attention to the padd in his/her hand.

The two young officers glanced at each other for a moment.

Zwen mouthed the word, "Ok." She looked around a moment and found a portside door leading to the ready room.

The two made their way to it. Their presence initiated the enunciator.

"*Come on in,*" came from inside.

As they passed the threshold, they discovered a human male sitting at a desk. He was probably about 60 or so. His hair was grey with bits of white and black mixed in; it was longer than most males. His bangs extended to his temples. The captain had a light skin tone and striking, blue eyes. His expression was welcoming and content. He spread his arms out wide and smiled to them, "Welcome to the *Kitzingen*. Please, have a seat."

The junior officers assumed some chairs near them. It was only after they sat, that both seemed to realize you're supposed to report in the position of attention.

The captain, however, didn't seem to mind the breach of protocol. He looked at Zwen, "I presume you are my new chief medical officer."

She confirmed, "Yes, sir. Um, Lieutenant Junior Grade Ashana Zwen reporting, sir."

Then he addressed the Asian, "That would make you Tang Zian, correct?"

He nodded, "Yes sir."

The middle-aged man got up and moved to a replicator built into the wall, "Can I get you two anything to drink?"

Once again, it was clear the new officers didn't know how to reply. Both stumbled a "No, no sir."

"Suit yourself," said the captain. He ordered, "Grape juice, concord, chilled." He immediately took a sip. Then, he reached out a hand to both of them, "I'm Captain Issac Musgrave. Nice to meet you."

He sat down and continued, "You deserve to know a little about your new CO, so here goes the speech: I'm a function over form type of guy. As long as you do your job, I don't care if your shoes are polished. But don't mistake being casual with being unprofessional. Understood?"

"Yes sir," the younger officers chirped.

He leaned back, "So, now that that's over, tell me a little about yourselves."

The Trill indicated to Tang that he should start.

"Well sir," he began, "I was born in Wuhan, China. I served on the *Galaxy* during the war and two ships called *Independence* after the war."

Musgrave took another drink, "I've heard some very impressive things about the *Galaxy's* crew during the war." He looked at the Trill, "And you lieutenant?"

"I've only served on the *Crockett*, sir."

"Are you joined or unjoined?" asked the captain.

With a wave of the hand, she answered, "Oh, unjoined, sir. I've never had any desire to have other people's memories inside me. Not to mention a large slug."

The comment caused Issac to laugh out loud. Tang grinned wide as well.

"I can't say that I blame you, Lieutenant," offered the captain. "Well, I suppose I should let you get acquainted with your stations. If you have any questions, just ask Commander Ewm. I also have an open door policy, if you feel the need. Dismissed."

The two stood and began for the exit, but Tang paused and asked, "Sir, what species is Commander Ewm?"

"She's an Ariolo, Lieutenant."

The science officer continued, "I'm not familiar with that species, sir."

"You should ask her," he suggested.

He shared a mild look of concern with Zwen.

Musgrave smiled as he noticed it. He knew what troubled them, "Don't worry about her...abrasiveness. That's just how Ariolos act. I'm afraid their culture doesn't observe the social niceties. Don't take it personally."

Tang nodded, "Yes sir. Thank you, sir."

The newest members of the *Kitzingen* exited the room.

CHAPTER 6

Supplemental USS *Veram* Troop Transport, Passenger Section En Route to Sol System

The transport cruised at warp 6.5. So, the trip from Starbase 17 to Earth would take over eleven days.

Luckily, Kimula and the admiral were getting along famously. The older man seemed to see something in the Andorian. He assumed a grandfatherly relationship with the young woman.

Lieutenant Kimula sat opposite Admiral Paris in a lounge area off the passenger cabins. The room was full of people, mostly Starfleet personnel, coming and going. The two sipped on drinks and continued their conversation.

The balding admiral asked, "So, what got you interested in the *Voyager* Newsletter in the first place, Lieutenant?"

She grimaced at the question. Obviously, it had triggered something uncomfortable in her. "Actually sir, it wasn't *Voyager* that got me interested in reading the newsletter. It was the *Equinox*."

At the mention of the *Nova* class ship, Paris glanced into his cup of coffee.

Kimula continued, "I...I was friends with someone on board. We met at the academy. He was a senior. I was a freshman. You understand."

"Of course," he offered gently.

"Anyway," she continued, "There was a mention of the *Equinox* in the newsletter. It said the ship was discovered, but suffered a warp core breach shortly after *Voyager* found her. It didn't really go into details," she added purposely, "but you already know that, sir."

Paris rapped his cup, "There are some things we decided to keep out of the public knowledge, you understand."

The Andorian nodded, albeit reluctantly.

He leaned in, "Who was it you knew on the *Equinox*?"

"Edward Regis, sir."

Paris remembered, "He was an ensign, wasn't he?"

She acknowledged.

"Let me just say this, Lieutenant: he died defending his ship. For that, you should honor his memory."

She managed a grin, "Yes sir."

Supplemental
Starbase 17, Medical Section 3, Med Lab 12
Porrima System

The reptilian doctor examined a display in the bulkhead as she sipped some thick, brownish liquid. It showed a magnified image of a virus. This particular virus, the H'Kan Plague, was oblong in shape and had several 'antenna' sticking out of it.

"Computer," began Zo'Kama, "Increase magnification one-thousand times."

The image zoomed in passed the protein coat and focused on the RNA and DNA of the virus.

The Arkonian looked for a moment, took another sip, and ordered, "Computer, scan the nucleotide sequence of this organism and identify any genes associated with reproduction."

The disembodied voice rejoined, "*Processing. Please stand by.*"

The transparent double door slide open.

A very annoyed looking Admiral Homchu entered. "Commander, I've been very patient with you, but this is enough. Your transport to Starbase 39 – Sierra leaves tomorrow. It's time to pack up and get out."

Zo'Kama pleaded, "Admiral, I've isolated the virus. I'm mapping out its genetic code as we speak. It's only a matter of time, now."

"Time you don't have," Homchu reminded her.

The reptilian began to protest again when a human Starfleet officer walked in. The human was female and had dark tan skin, similar to Captain Aurelia's. Her hair was also black, but was slightly curly. Her green eyes stood out against her darker features. She appeared to be about the same age as her former captain as well. She wore a blue-trimmed uniform and bore the rank of Lieutenant Commander.

The human's eyes immediately fell upon the Bolian admiral, "Sir, am I to understand you diverted a shipment of Fostossa virus vaccine from Draken IV?"

The Bolian sighed and crossed her arm. "Not now, Commander Wenera."

The admiral's comment didn't deter her, "The entire population has to be inoculated before this becomes an epidemic, sir. Diverting the shipment is entirely irresponsible!"

Homchu answered her tersely, "Commander, the Golana colony also has an outbreak."

Wenera rebutted, "The Cardassians are the only ones capable of producing the vaccine. Golana is a Bajoran colony practically on their border. But, in this quadrant, there is no other supplier. It's ridiculous to send the shipment back..."

The normally agreeable Bolian had had enough, "At ease, Commander!"

Wenera grimaced, but complied. She ceased talking and put her hands behind her back.

Homchu elaborated after calming herself down, "The logistics just didn't work out, Commander. I'm sorry."

The Hispanic woman started, "But sir...",

"No," the admiral snapped, "This discussion is over." She then, turned on Zo'Kama, "And you, if you're not out by 20:00 hours, I'll have security escort you out." The female Bolian looked at each officer again, just to emphasize the point that it was the last word on their respective subjects. Satisfied with their silence, she walked out.

The two doctors were left alone in the room. There was a short quiet between them. Then, Wenera asked sardonically, "So, what are you in trouble for?"

CHAPTER 7

Supplemental **USS *Independence*, Main Bridge** **Docked at Starbase 17, Porrima System**

The bridge still hadn't been totally cleaned up since the battle with the *Philadelphia* and the Vuke. There were scraps of plasticized mesh and optic cables littered on the deck. It was quiet, except for someone operating a console.

She looked to find Lieutenant Commander Ethan Windslow at the engineering station. Windslow had once been a captain until it was discovered he had panicked and abandoned some of his crew during the war. He probably never should have gone into the command division in the first place. However, he was one hell of an engineer. The human had light skin and graying, terra cotta colored hair with a goatee.

He noticed her, "Captain, is there something I can do for you?"

Sintina frowned and shook her head. "No." She rounded the helm and ops consoles, "No, I just wanted to take a look around before I go." She made her way to the center seat and rested her hand on it, "I'm...glad Command put you in charge of the repairs."

Windslow turned in the chair. Pleased at the complement, he rejoined, "Back at Utopia Planitia, I used to oversee new ship construction. It'll be easy compared to that."

She managed a mild grin.

Ethan and Sintina never really had a warm relationship. They were coworkers. That was the extent of their interactions. Even so, he ventured, "Where will you be going, Captain?"

She looked up at him. For some reason, it seemed she didn't expect – or want – the question. For a moment, it looked like she might snap at him. Then, it passed. Aurelia finally responded evenly, "To see a friend."

Windslow didn't press for details.

She changed the subject, "I haven't heard where Faltyne will be going. Have you?"

"No ma'am, I haven't seen him lately."

She nodded silently.

Ethan took a breath. He half-lied, "Well, I'm needed in engineering."

Aurelia appreciated the falsehood. She wanted to be alone.

The engineer entered the port lift.

Once he was gone, she slowly walked down a short corridor to the ready room. She went into her old office. She was tempted to sit in her chair, but decided against it. Sintina took a deep breath and walked back out. She made her way toward the turbolift and paused in front of it. The captain took one last long look.

Sintina realized something a few hours ago. She thought long and hard as to what to do, where to go, who to see. Then she realized, she had three people that she truly thought of as friends. One was going to Earth. One was dead. And, one...one was a renegade in the eyes of many in the Federation. There was only one thing to do, one place to go, one person to see. It would take over a month to get there using civilian transports.

It was time to look up her old academy roommate. It was time to find Ro Laren.

Supplemental Starbase 17, Medical Section 3, Physician's Lounge Porrima System

Nearly everyone in the lounge area wore blue. Their uniforms were in various states. Some looked clean and pressed, while others were stripped down to their blue undershirts.

Wenera and Zo'kama sat at a table next to a large window. Several vessels loitered in the void beyond.

The Hispanic woman leaned in and continued the conversation, "I still can't believe Starfleet is stopping your research. I mean, I understand your ship's

mission with the Vuke went bad, but as far as I'm concerned, that's all the more reason to give them the cure. It would go a long way to repair relations."

The Arkonian jerked her head to the right, the gesture indicated her agreement, "You're singing to the chorus."

The human grinned, but didn't correct her.

Zo'Kama added, "I thank you for your interest in my problems. But, I know so little about you. I didn't even get your full name."

She took a sip of coffee, "Wenera. Ashley. But my friends call me Jane. I was the CMO on *Eagle* until I had Coby. That's my two year old son, and a really long story," she said in the kind of tone that made it obvious that it was not a subject she wanted to dwell upon. "Right now I'm attached to the Medical Advisory and Assistance Division. It's where I started my Starfleet career. It kinda made sense coming back to it considering the high demand after the war."

"I'm familiar with that program," offered the reptilian. "It focuses on planetary medical assistance."

"That's right," she confirmed, "We work on both Federation and non-Federation worlds." She went on, "Coby and I travel to wherever they need us."

"Ah, I have offspring as well. My son is currently chief of security on the USS *Mantis* and my daughter is nearing her age of independence."

Ashley asked, "Wow, how old is she in Earth years?"

"Fourteen," she replied, "Next year, she will be allowed to choose her own path."

Wenera's mind returned to the years she had spent working with M.A.A.D. She said, "I can't count the times my team has been forced to evacuate a planet because Command said it was too dangerous for us. How many lives could we have saved if we would have been allowed to continue our work?"

The question hung in the air.

She continued, "The sick and the starving have to endure those conditions." She looked up with aggravation, "But it's too 'hazardous' for us."

Zo'Kama completely understood, but wasn't sure how to respond.

Wenera added, "I joined Starfleet to help people regardless of who they are. People are people and it shouldn't matter if our governments are at war or if it's politically inconvenient."

The reptilian sighed and fiddled with her cup. "It seems Starfleet Command sometimes does not live up to the ideals of the Federation."

"Uff," came from Ashley. "I won't argue with you on that." Then, she took a drink.

The conversation seemed to stall. Neither one wanted to be the first to say what they were both thinking.

"You know," Wenera finally gambled, "I traveled here on the *Meharry*. She's a medical ship...and right now, the ship is nearly abandoned due to a refit."

Zo'Kama's eyes perked up. "Is that so?"

"In fact," she went on, "the *Meharry* has couple of runabouts in its shuttlebay."

The Arkonian commented, "There is so much transporter activity in the area, transporting my medical equipment might go unnoticed."

Wenera supplemented, "We'll need a level 7 security clearance in order for flight control to clear us."

"That's not a problem," said Zo'Kama, "I have one. Of course, an inaccurate flight plan would have to be filed."

The level of excitement in their voices heightened.

Ashley informed her, "It'll take nearly three days to get to the H'Kan system in a runabout. Do you think we can produce a cure – or at least a vaccine – by then?"

"I believe so."

Then, there was nothing left to say. The point from talk to action had come. There was a short silence. It had to be done. Millions were suffering.

Zo’Kama stood, “We should prepare our children for the trip. I’ll meet you in the transporter room down the hall in one-half hour.”

Wenera rose as well, “We’ll see you there.”

CHAPTER 8

Supplemental **USS *Meharry*, Bridge** **Docked at Starbase 17, Porrima System**

The *Olympic* class bridge was most definitely not designed for combat. The only station forward of the center seat was the helm. Various consoles lined the aft bulkhead. The bridge was fully lit.

The only occupant, a human female, seemed focused on a display. She sat at the engineering station. The woman's completion indicated she originated from the Indian sub-continent. Commander Anchal Sidhani needed to file some last minute reports before the ship's overhaul began.

'*Beep beep*,' broke the stillness.

The commander stood and quickly identified the source of the alert. It was coming from ops.

It repeated, '*beep beep*.'

She approached the console and discovered the cause of the klaxon. Someone had begun a pre-flight sequence on the *Banda*, one of two *Danube* class runabouts on board.

"What the hell?" she said to no one. Then, she dashed for the turbolift.

Supplemental **USS *Meharry*, Main Shuttlebay, Runabout *Banda*** **Docked at Starbase 17, Porrima System**

The aft section of the runabout was full medical equipment. The dining area would have to be converted to an ad hoc medical lab. Luckily for the children, the corpse was concealed in a cylindrical container.

In the cockpit, Wenera had just finished securing Coby in the chair next to the science station. The boy had a thick head of dark hair. Zo'Kama was powering up the vessel at ops. Her daughter, Zo'Kala, sat idly behind her at the engineering console.

The younger Arkonian posed, "*Go'chama*, will we get in trouble for this?"

The human looked over to see how the question would be handled.

Zo’Kama didn’t take her eyes off the station, “I most likely will, yes. But, do not concern yourself with that. You will not be held responsible.”

“I was not concerned for myself, *go’chama*.”

At that, the mother looked back and held her hand for a moment.

Coby could be heard asking, “Momma, we going?” He repeated it twice before she had a chance to respond.

“Yes honey, we’re going,” she said as she assumed the helm.

“Opening shuttles door,” reported the reptilian.

The massive door began to slide up as warnings sounded in the bay.

The two doctors were focused on their stations.

Unexpectedly, Zo’Kala said, “*Go’chama*, who’s that?”

“I told you, this is Ashley Jane Wenera and her offspring, Coby.”

“No,” she corrected, “Not them, her.” She pointed out the forward transparent aluminum.

They looked up to see a red-trimmed Starfleet officer. It appeared she was a commander. The Indian stood directly in front of the forcefield protected exit.

“Aw, crap,” came from Wenera.

“Mamma, say bad word,” could be heard in the background.

The human ignored the observation from her son and looked to Zo’Kama, “Any ideas?”

The Arkonian immediately rejoined, “I’m not going to hurt anyone.”

“We could just fly around her.”

“And how far would we get if we did that?” Zo’Kama responded.

The former *Eagle* officer gazed down and silently agreed. She said, “Well, that was a short trip.”

CHAPTER 9

Supplemental USS *Meharry*, Main Shuttlebay Docked at Starbase 17, Porrima System

A few moments later, Commander Zo’Kama and Lt. Commander Wenera exited the craft to confront their fate.

The *Meharry* first officer immediately challenged them, “Who are you two and what the hell were you doing with our runabout?”

Zo’Kama, being the senior officer, stepped up, “I am Commander Zo’Kama Do’matar and this is Lieutenant Commander Wenera. We intended to use the runabout to travel to the H’Kan system.”

“The H’Kan system,” she repeated. “That system is under quarantine.”

Wenera chimed in, “We know, sir. We...we were going there to attempt to cure the H’Kan plague.”

“I know you,” said Sidhani. “You came with us from the Cardassian border.”

“Yes sir.”

In genuine confusion, the first officer shrugged her shoulders, “Even if that’s true, why take the *Banda* without authorization?”

The two doctors fidgeted slightly.

The Arkonian admitted, “Because, Command has ordered me to discontinue my research. Our mission is not sanctioned by Starfleet.”

Sidhani huffed in disbelief, “So you two – by yourselves – decided to go there and help them anyway?”

Before they could rejoin her, Commander Sidhani noticed movement from the runabout’s cockpit, through the forward windows. It was another Arkonian, but much younger. Zo’Kala quickly ducked down once she realized the XO caught sight of her.

It didn't take long for Sidhani to figure out what was going on. "Oh this just keeps getting better." She addressed Zo'Kama, "So you think it's a good idea to bring your kid into hostile space on an illegal mission?"

The elder Arkonian stiffened up, "Zo'Kala is nearly an adult. She must learn about the importance of conviction and the courage to act on it."

For a moment, the XO seemed almost content with the answer.

Then, in a horrible act of serendipity, Coby's young voice called out, "Momma, momma...momma...."

Sidhani's jaw dropped and she began to glare at Wenera. Her expression demanded an explanation.

Ashley cleared her throat, "That's um...my son, sir."

Anchal's face still clearly revealed her displeasure, "Uh uh."

"Momma..."

"Hold on, sweetie," she yelled back. Then, she returned to the XO. Her tone was respectful, but no nonsense, "Look, sir, where I go, he goes. When I was with the Medical Advisory and Assistance Division, I went to Avenal VII, Rondac III, even Cardassia Prime for humanitarian missions. Coby went with me to all of them. I knew groups like the Crimsom Shadow were in operation on those planets. I knew Starfleet Hospitals could be targeted. I knew the danger I was – I am – putting my son in."

The Indian stepped back and shook her head. "From what I know of the Vuke, their intelligence is matched only by their viciousness. There is no way I can let you go, especially with your children."

"Please," stated Zo'Kama, "You must. Millions of people are dying a horrible death. We can do something about it. We can stop it."

"I understand." She added, "Hell, I sympathize. If I were in your shoes I might..." She let the sentence fade, not wanting to finish it.

Wenera saw the gap in the XO's shields. "Commander, we are willing to risk our lives to help millions. In the end, isn't that what Starfleet is all about? We

risk our lives everyday in order to help others. It's what we did in the Dominion War."

Sidhani had carried her own demons from the war. Whether the doctor knew it or not, evoking it was powerful for the commander. She paced a bit. Then, she replied, "At least let me take care of the children while you do this."

The terms were too much for Wenera, "I told you, sir. Where I go, he goes."

Sidhani shook her head again, "I can't. I can't let you go. Power the runabout down. Go back...to where ever you came from."

The Hispanic woman began to protest, but the XO shot back quickly, "No. The discussion is over. You're lucky I don't report you to security. But I swear to you, if you two don't get off my ship right now, that's exactly what I'll do. Understood?"

Their hopes dashed, both replied with a "Yes sir."

Zo'Kama informed her, "I'll have to access the runabout's transporter to get my equipment back to the starbase."

"Fine," was the harsh response.

On board the *Banda*, Zo'Kama manipulated the controls of the transporter unit.

Wenera came up behind her, "I'm sorry. At least we can say we tried." Then, she noticed the transport coordinates. They were off. She wasn't locking on to inanimate objects. She was isolating a lifeform. She realized what her counterpart was doing, "Zo'Kama, are sure that's a good..." It was too late.

The Arkonian had beamed Commander Sidhani to another location.

"Where did you beam her to?"

The *Independence* doctor strode to the aft compartment and retrieved a small canister and hypospray. "To my lab on the starbase. It's locked and isolated."

"But what's to keep her from calling for help?"

She gestured to the hypo, "This." She preset the device to disperse its contents into the air in five seconds. She placed it on the pad and it disappeared in the transporter effect. "That should keep Commander Sidhani sedated for nearly twenty hours."

"Zo'Kama, do you know what you've just done?"

The reptilian ticked her head to the side, "Yes, I've assaulted and illegally detained an officer." She looked at Ashley, "It is not too late for you and your son to stay here. I would not hold it against you."

Wenera smirked, "In for a penny; in for a pound."

"What does that mean?"

The human doctor assumed the helm, "It means let's get going. I have a feeling we'll need all the head start we can get."

CHAPTER 10

Stardate: 54293.8 (29 Aug 2377) USS *Kitzingen*, Briefing Room En Route to Arbazan System

The Briefing room on *Norway* class ships was on deck one. Unlike *Galaxy* class ships, the large, arching room was set forward of the bridge. The stars streaked by as the ship traveled several multiples beyond light-speed.

"Now that we're underway," began Captain Musgrave as he rounded the polished oak conference table, "I can tell you our mission and why we're pushing the engines so hard." He found his seat, sat, and faced his division heads. "We need to be in the Arbazan system 16 days from now; which means keeping the warp engines steady at 9.5 for the duration."

A Bynar pair acted as co-chiefs of engineering. More accurately, though, they were something akin to conjoined twins, since individuals didn't really exist in their society. The Bynars had become a type of cyborg; linked together in pairs in order to function. Physically, they were smaller than humans. Their heads were enlarged with a single exposed implant near their temple. Their skin was a purplish gray. Both displayed the rank of Lieutenant Commander. The one on the right began, in their normal rushed speech, "Maintaining warp 9.5 for such an extended amount of time..." The other cut in, "...is not recommended, sir. The warp plasma coolant..." The right one finished, "...would not have sufficient time to recycle and cool to proper levels."

Commander J'ro Ewm leaned in with her dark milky eyes, "Could we do something to enhance the cooling process?"

Tang piped up as the Bynars were communicating to each other in a high-frequency sound, "Sir, we could run the coolant through a Bose-Einstein condensate. We could use super-cooled helium. That would help."

The twins stopped communication, "We agree...the lieutenant's suggestion is...the best course of action for now."

"All right, then," said Musgrave. "Start on that when we're done here."

Two simultaneous "Aye sir" came from the pair.

The captain continued the briefing, "As many of you know, Arbazan is one of the most core-ward Federation planets. We are not, by far, the closest ship. They requested me, because I helped their government a few years back."

Ensign Sabra Okoro, the African Ops officer, asked, "Why sixteen days, sir? What's the rush?"

"Because Ensign, in sixteen days an unknown vessel will reach their system. They've tried hailing it without success. To make matters worse, the Arbazans have little in the way of planetary defenses."

"With respect, sir," commented the Coridan, "Why send us? If this unknown is hostile, there are better equipped ships to handle it." His voice was slightly distorted through his faceplate.

"It goes back to my history with the Arbazans, Lieutenant," replied the captain without malice. "They want me to make first contact with this unknown and hopefully resolve the situation peacefully." He added, "If I can't, there will be two other starships in the area on hot standby."

Musgrave glanced around the table, "Are there any other questions?" His eyes settled on his two new officers. "Of course, where are my manners?" He gestured to them, "If you haven't met them already, this is our new CMO, Lieutenant Zwen, and science officer Tang." Musgrave introduced the rest of the crew. He started with the Evoran, "Cadet Bolar back there is on loan to us from the academy."

The short statured female nodded her head in greeting.

Then, the captain went to the dark-skinned human woman, "Ensign Okoro had the fortune – or misfortune – of getting her first posting with us."

She smiled and said, "No comment, sir."

"Good decision," he jibed, "These are our chief engineers. Their true names are 010011..." He thought a moment, "...and 101100, right?"

"The designations were correct..." started one. "But," continued the other, "I am 010011 and he is 101100."

"Ah, I stand corrected," commented the captain, "Luckily, they tolerate being called 'Zero' and 'One' or if you want to address both of them, call them 'Zerone.'"

Musgrave continued, "The man behind the iron mask is Lieutenant Ishok."

Ishok corrected him light-heartedly, "We've been through this, sir. It's not iron."

The captain grinned and raised his hands in a mock apology, "Sorry, sorry." He gestured to the Ariolo, "And this is Commander Ewm. She'll be keeping you in line from now on."

The leathery-skinned humanoid said dryly, "Indeed."

He finished, "Welcome to the team Lieutenants Tang and Zwen."

They both said, "Thank you, sir."

The human with long, whitening hair looked around a second time, "I think that takes care of all the official business for now. But before I let you go, I want you all to know my wife will be starting up her tai chi chuan classes again tomorrow morning." He looked to his new officers, "You're more than welcome to attend, but don't feel any pressure."

Tang spoke up, "I'd like to, sir. My family used to practice tai chi everyday when I was growing up. Though, I haven't done it in years."

"Sounds great," the captain said with genuine pleasure. "We'll see you there." He addressed the room one last time, "Ok, I'm done. Dismissed."

Supplemental USS *Kitzingen*, Turbolift One En Route to Arbazan System

Tang and Zwen entered the aft turbolift together after the briefing.

The Trill spoke first, "Deck eight."

"Deck Three," ordered Tang.

As the lift began its decent, Ashana asked, "So what do you know of the Arbazans?"

The Asian searched his memory, "Standard humanoids...I do remember hearing a rumor that they are a very sexually repressed species."

She laughed softly, "Coming from a human, that's saying a lot."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Zwen elaborated, "Well, at least compared to Trill, humans are very...reserved, sexually."

Tang felt the need to defend his race, "Not necessarily."

The Trill got a mischievous gleam in her eye, "Oh?" The petite brunette woman glided closer to him. Her voice lowered. It had just a hint of sensuality, "So if I lean in to kiss you..." which she began to do.

Zian instinctively took a step back.

"See?" She said; all pretence in her voice gone. "Sexually reserved."

The science officer was speechless. Inside he was kicking himself. "But...see...no...I was just..."

"Just what?" she pressed too innocently.

The lift stopped at deck three and the door slid open.

Still not having found a proper defense for himself, he slowly headed to the exit. He did manage, "I'll...see you later."

She smiled as the lift door closed again, "Ok."

CHAPTER 11

Stardate: 54296.7 (30 Aug 2377)

Runabout *Banda*

En Route to the H'Kan System

It had been ten hours since the *Danube* class vessel left Starbase 17. Escaping their parameter proved to be easier than either of them assumed. It was a good sign that no one was looking for them, yet.

The doctors managed to impel the engines to speed up to warp 5.22, but the H'Kan System was still 50 hours away. The craft was on autopilot. Coby was taking a nap in one of the cramped cabins. Zo'Kala was in the cockpit, hopefully not messing around with the controls.

Wenera and Zo'Kama were in the aft compartment. Their impromptu science lab had been fully established. The Vuke cadaver was on a table in the center of the room. The bulkheads were lined with various medical equipment, displays, and scanners.

The Arkonian examined a screen that had been hastily leaned up on a bench near the aft of the ship, "The computer is having difficulty distinguishing the virus DNA from the host's."

"Not a problem," commented the human. She reached inside an already opened container and retrieved a handheld device, "I'll just use a detronal scanner and manually input the sequences." She hovered the device over the dead Vuke. It emitted a ray of soft red light.

The Vuke themselves were physically an interesting species. They looked like something that might have evolved from velociraptor-type dinosaurs had they not been wiped out on Earth 71 million years ago. This particular specimen was male. The reptilian skin was surprisingly smooth and consisted of various shades of green. The head was crowned with long, brown and black feathers. The eyes were cat-like.

Wenera asked as she continued to scan, "Are there any significant differences among the Vuke population?"

The other doctor responded, "Yes. The females are much more colorful."

She laughed at the observation.

Zo’Kama joined her in a giggle as she realized the miscommunication. She elaborated, “No, I mean that literally. Females have tan scales similar to mine and their plumage is much more colorful. Their feathers are a combination of reds, blues, yellows, and purples.”

“It sounds like they’re quite beautiful. It’s a shame they’re so hostile.”

“There is more,” the Arkonian informed her, “According to the Vuke I worked with, the royal line actively manipulates their genome to produce golden scales with white plumage. It is a supposed sign of their divinity.”

“Interesting.”

Zo’Kama spun on her stool to face Ashley. “Commander Wenera, I want to thank you for...sticking with me. It was more than I would have expected.”

She finished scanning and began to upload the information, “Well, to tell you the truth, this isn’t the first time Starfleet Command and I haven’t seen eye to eye.” She sat on another stool, “...and call me Jane. I always liked my middle name more than my first.”

“Very well, Jane.” She tapped on the display a few times. Then, returned to her counterpart, “So how did you come to be critical of Command?”

The question caused Jane to go silent. She examined the deck for several seconds.

The Arkonian backpedaled, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bring up unpleasant memories.”

“No,” she said, “No, it’s alright. Just a lot happened there.”

“Where?”

“Have you ever heard of a planet called Tiaita?”

The reptilian ticked her head to the left, indicating ‘no.’

Wenera wasn’t quite sure what the gesture meant, but she continued, “Starfleet made a deal with their so-called government three years ago. The Tiaitans had just barely achieved warp drive. But what was worse, they were

pretty much in the middle of fighting a bloody civil war between the ruling class and a serf class which barely enjoyed any rights whatsoever. A great number of people in Starfleet conveniently turned a blind eye to all that.”

“This was during the war?” observed Zo’Kama.

“That’s right,” she confirmed. “At the time, Starfleet appeared more interested in securing an ally against the Dominion and get their hands on more resources than taking notice of the plight of millions of subjugated inhabitants.” She looked at the *Indy* doctor with fire in her eyes, “We were at war. Helping those who needed our help the most was not tactically advantageous. So we made a deal with the devil instead.”

The other doctor allowed a silence. It seemed appropriate.

Jane continued, “I stopped being so...unquestioning after Tiaita.” She seemed to travel light-years away for several moments. Finally, she snapped herself out of it, “So what about you? When did you start looking at Starfleet with a critical eye?”

“I’m sure part of it is that I received my doctorate from a civilian university. I only joined Starfleet afterwards and even then, I was assigned to the Vulcan Medical Academy for five years.”

“Really,” she asked with a grin, “I got my doctorate from the University of Sydney. I guess we both joined Starfleet at a relatively late age. The indoctrination must not have been quite as effective on us.”

“Apparently not,” agreed Zo’Kama.

CHAPTER 12

Supplemental **USS *Kitzingen*, Deck 6, Gymnasium Two** **En Route to Arbazan System**

The gym would have been rather barren had it not been for the many personal touches the captain's wife made to it. There were potted plants in the corners, several instructional posters were hung on the bulkheads, and the deck had been lined with bamboo mats.

There were over a dozen students. Some wore the traditional tai chi garb; others simply wore loose-fitting clothing. The notable people in attendance, included: Tang Zian, Tactical Officer Ishok, and Captain Musgrave.

The instructor, Evelyn Musgrave, had long, dark hair with streaks of grey. Her face was joyous and her eyes were amber. She finished leading the class through a form and ended with a wide motion of her arms. Her hands came together above her head and slowly made their way down to her abdomen. She addressed the class, "Remember, your breathing. Don't breathe from your chest. Feel the air fill your body all the way to the lower stomach." She gestured to a Benzite female, "Except you, crewman, you want to fill your air bladders on your thighs."

The blue-skinned alien nodded.

"Alright, everyone," she concluded, "That's it. Have a good day."

As the class filed out, the elder woman approached Zian. "You must be Mr. Tang." She extended a hand, "It's good to meet you."

He accepted it, "And you too, Mrs. Musgrave."

She grimaced slightly, "Oh, don't do that. Call me Evey."

The science officer relented, "If you say so, Evey."

"Your movements were very fluid. You've done this before."

The Asian confirmed, "Yes, my family practiced every morning at a local park in Wuhan."

The captain came up next to her. He obviously overheard the conversation. He jumped in, "It's more than that, Evey. Can you believe our new science officer was raised to be a performance acrobat?"

"Oh really?"

It became apparent the comment caught the junior officer off guard.

"I'm sorry," said the captain, "I didn't mean to embarrass you. I just read it in your file."

"It's not that, sir," offered Zian. "It's just...my mother and I had something of a falling out over it. She wanted me to continue the tradition."

"I see," he simply said. "I didn't mean to bring up unpleasant memories."

He straightened up and said with sincerity, "It's not a problem, sir."

After a short silence, Evey redirected the conversation. "Well, you certainly move gracefully. It seems you're now one of my best students." She added with a laugh, "I wish I could take credit for it."

"Well," started the CO, "We'd best get ready for the day." Issac smiled sympathetically and nodded in farewell, "Lieutenant, see you on the bridge."

On her way out, Evey placed a friendly hand on Zian's shoulder.

As he watched the couple leave, Tang couldn't help but feel a little bit more at home. It was complete with loving surrogate parents.

Stardate: 54299.4 (31 Aug 2377)

Runabout *Banda*

En Route to the H'Kan System

The renegade doctors were nearly two-thirds of the way to their destination.

Over the last 24 hours, Zo'Kala had become a *de facto* babysitter. She didn't mind, really. It was interesting to interact with the two year old human. His language and intellectual skills were behind in Arkonian terms. But she understood humans developed slower than her own race. Replacing the diapers proved to be particularly unappealing.

Coby's mother had checked in every hour or so at first, but then, her visits became more and more sporadic. Zo'Kala took this as a sign of the female birth-giver's confidence in her.

In the last several hours, she had hardly even seen the adults. Whatever they were doing back there, they apparently were very involved in doing it.

The younger Arkonian held the boy in her lap and she read from what Jane described as a "Fairy Tale." She had no idea Terran pigs had any engineering skills, though there was obviously a learning curve.

"...and the big, bad wolf..." she stopped reading mid-sentence. She heard a sound coming from one of the consoles.

A moment later, the computer voice alerted her, "*Vessel approaching.*"

Zo'Kala requested, "Identify vessel."

"USS *Chaka*, *Saber* class patrol vessel."

She immediately called to the aft section, "*Go'chama!*"

CHAPTER 13

Supplemental USS *Chaka*, Main Bridge In Pursuit of the Runabout *Banda*

The *Saber* class bridge was small, but efficient. Commander Anchal Sidhani sat on the edge of the center seat. She had been waiting for this moment ever since she woke, locked in a medical lab with a pounding headache.

Unfortunately, the vessel she served on as first officer, the *Meharry*, was too far along in repairs to leave spacedock. Captain M'Bira was halfway to Cait for shore leave. Most of her crew was likewise scattered.

Once extricated from the lab, she notified starbase security. However, she didn't leave it at that. Anchal went to the base commander.

Starbases usually have a couple of smaller ships like *Mirandas*, *Sabers*, or *Novas* at their disposal. *Starbase 17* happened to have the *Chaka* with a skeleton crew on standby.

After reassuring Admiral Haskins for a solid ten minutes that this wasn't about revenge, he grudgingly authorized her to take the patrol ship out to intercept the rouge doctors.

She had nearly convinced herself.

She gazed at the aft section of the runabout on the main viewer. Both ships were still at warp. "Match course and speed of the *Banda*."

"Aye sir," came from the young helm officer. Sidhani hadn't learned his name yet. She hadn't asked, either.

An Efrosian male, Lt. Ra-Goran, was the only other officer the commander had been able to rally from the *Meharry*. He served as tactical officer on the medical ship. A role he was reprising on the *Chaka*. He reported, "We're within weapons' range, Captain."

The Indian woman rose from the seat, "Understood. Maintain yellow alert." She looked over to him, "What's their status?"

Ra's long, white hair bobbed as he checked his console, "Their shields are active. Weapons are not powered."

She nodded and faced the viewer, "Open a channel."

Supplemental
Runabout *Banda*
En Route to the H'Kan System

Both doctors' jaws dropped as they saw the face on the screen. Jane glanced to Zo'Kama as if to say 'I hope she doesn't hold a grudge...but she probably does.'

The Arkonian bit her bottom lip before starting, somewhat clumsily, "Hello, Commander."

Sidhani was obviously not amused. "*Commander Do'Matar, ...*"

Arkonians only used family names in very formal settings like rituals. None the less, it seemed appropriate to Zo'Kama.

"...Commander Wenera, you will immediately lower your shields, drop out of warp, and surrender that vessel."

Zo'Kama examined Jane's eyes, trying to see any lack of resolve. She found none. She sighed deeply, "What happens if we don't?"

Now, it was time for Sidhani's jaw to drop. Her amazement at her brazenness was soon replaced with indignation, "*You're facing charges of unauthorized use of Starfleet equipment, filing an inaccurate fight plan, disobeying direct orders from a superior officer, unlawful detention, and assault. Do you really want to tack on more charges?*"

The reptilian's voice was now steady and confident, "I would gladly sacrifice my career and my freedom in order to save millions of lives."

"Here, here," seconded Wenera.

At this, Sidhani's face stiffened. "*Do you really want to watch your children grow up from behind a forcefield?*"

As the possibility set in, Jane began to look like she had been punched in the gut.

Zo’Kama wasn’t affected as much as her counterpart. But she understood the feelings she must be experiencing. She realized it might be time finally end this. She looked to the screen, “Stand by, Commander.”

The *Chaka* captain injected just before the channel was closed, “*You have sixty seconds to decide.*”

Wenera didn’t say anything immediately. There was a slight redness around her eyes, now.

“Zo’Kala,” said the *Indy* doctor, “Take Coby to one of the cabins. We’d like to talk alone.”

With some hesitation, she scooped up the child and walked out of the cockpit. The toddler fussed some, but quieted when the adolescent reptilian offered, “Would you like to hear the fairy tale of the comatose woman and the seven small humanoids?”

Back at the forward controls, Zo’Kama began, “I will take full responsibility. I will even testify that I coerced you to assist me.”

Jane shook her head, “No. No. In a few more hours, we’ll have this vaccine nailed down. You’re right. It’s worth it.” She repeated herself with more self-assurance, “It’s worth it. If we can just get there and give it to the Vuke...”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, yeah I’m sure.” She wiped her eye and half-joshed, “Besides, giving up on a noble cause just because the going gets tough is a terrible example to set for a child.”

Zo’Kama smiled and returned to her station, “Well, it might be a mute point. I don’t see how we can evade the *Chaka*. There’s nothing between us and the Vuke system but empty space.”

Wenera started brainstorming aloud, “We can’t outrun them. We defiantly can’t outgun them.” She shook her head, “I don’t know. Our only hope is that Commander Sidhani sees things our way.”

“Considering how annoyed she seemed, I find that unlikely.”

Jane cocked her head in concession, “Yeah, me too.”

CHAPTER 14

Supplemental **USS *Chaka*, Main Bridge** **In Pursuit of the Runabout *Banda***

The ship's chronometer indicated one standard minute had past. There was no word from the doctors. Staring at the back end of the runabout stolen from *her* ship for the past few minutes had done nothing to quell her anger. "Their status?"

Ra-Goran told her what she already knew, "No change. They're holding steady at warp 5.2, shields are up, weapons are not powered."

Sidhani grinded her teeth. "Raise them."

"On screen."

The Arkonian doctor's face filled the viewer.

The temporary *Chaka* captain demanded, "This is your last chance, Doctor. Surrender the *Banda*."

"I won't do that. If you wish to follow us to the H'Kan system, we will provide the vaccine to the Vuke people and surrender ourselves after that."

The impudence was too much for Sidhani, "You won't get to H'Kan! This is not a negotiation! Surrender now or I'll disable that ship."

Zo'Kama visibly prepared herself for the impasse, *"Then it appears we have nothing left to discuss."*

The screen reverted to the forward exterior view.

The *Meharry* first officer was a Dominion War veteran. She found herself mentally preparing for battle. "Red Alert! Shields to full. Power forward phasers."

"Yes sir," came from tactical.

She continued with purpose, "Target their port nacelle and fire."

There was a pause and no phaser fire.

She spun around, "Lieutenant?"

His eyes were wide.

"Lieutenant, is there a problem?"

Glances were shared by crew all around the bridge.

Ra-Goran offered with some trepidation, "Captain, perhaps phasers should be reduced to 30% power before we engage them."

She now noticed the looks she was getting from the crew. It didn't take her long to realize her orders were inappropriate. It would only take a few full power phaser discharges destroy the whole runabout; shields or not. To disable the ship, the phaser blasts had to be precise and adjusted to a narrow beam. Full phasers wouldn't have the finesse needed for a ship that small. She forced herself to calm down. She wasn't at war. She closed her eyes and repeated in her mind, *'I'm not in that situation anymore. It's not life or death. It's not kill or be killed.'* Sidhani opened her eyes, "Of course. Of course, Lieutenant. Phasers to thirty percent, narrow beam. Just target their shields." She found her seat and added to reassure the crew of her sanity, "Let's just tap them on the shoulder to get their attention."

The Efrosian confirmed immediately, "Aye sir, phasers ready."

"Fire."

Supplemental Runabout *Banda* En Route to the H'Kan System

The runabout buffeted as the phasers impacted the shields.

"I can't believe they fired on us," said the Latina doctor.

The reptilian observed, "Shields are at 92%. I'd say it was, as you humans say, a 'love tap.'"

"I wouldn't describe it that way," commented Wenera. She called aft, "Is everyone ok back there?"

The young Arkonian's head popped out of the hatch, "Yeah, what's happening?"

The ship jolted again.

"Don't worry about it," unrealistically suggested Jane, "You and Coby get into a cot alcove and shut the blind. It's the safest place for you right now."

"Alright." Zo'Kala's face disappeared again.

"Aft shields at 85%," reported the elder Arkonian.

Jane looked over, "They've called our bluff, Zo'Kama. They're going to keep on wearing us down, until our shields collapse. Then, they could just beam us out." She sighed deeply before admitting, "There's nothing more we can do."

Slowly, Zo'Kama began to nod. "I grieve for all those that will die." She continued, "But you're right. We will not reach H'Kan, no matter what we do."

Wenara offered, "At least we can say we tried."

They shared a silent moment of reverence and loss.

"Well," said the Arkonian, "It seems there is nothing left to do but to signal our surrender."

Supplemental
USS *Chaka*, Main Bridge
In Pursuit of the Runabout *Banda*

"A couple more hits and their aft shields will be down," reported Ra-Goran.

Sidhani, still much more reserved than she had been a few moments ago, acknowledged. "Come on people, give it up," she said to no one and everyone.

The Efrosian said unexpectantly, "Comman...Captain, we're receiving an emergency distress call from a civilian cargo ship named *Tarah*. It's an Andorian ship. They say they're being attacked."

She stood up, shocked, "This far inside Federation space?"

Ra offered, "It's not unheard of for rouge Klingons or Orions to make raids in this area."

She looked again to the viewer. *'Only a few more minutes.'* She addressed Ra, "How far?"

"Point six light-years away. It'll take us just over 2 hours to get there at maximum warp."

"Are there any closer ships?" the commander snapped.

"No sir. The next nearest would take 6 hours to get there."

Once again she focused on the image of the runabout.

"Captain," prompted Ra.

It really wasn't much of a decision. Knowing that didn't make it any easier for Anchal. "Damn," she said under her breath. She ordered, "Change course. Intercept the cargo ship, maximum warp." She sat back down, "Engage."

As the runabout disappeared from the viewer she added quietly, "Another day, ladies."

Supplemental Runabout *Banda* En Route to the H'Kan System

Both doctors saw the same thing on their consoles. The *Chaka* veered off. They looked at each other in bewilderment.

"What just happened?" asked Zo'Kama rhetorically.

Jane shrugged, "Maybe we have a guardian angel."

"I don't know exactly what that means," started the Arkonian, "but I think I like it."

CHAPTER 15

Supplemental

USS *Kitzingen*, Deck 3, Forward Section (The *Faltertrum* Lounge) En Route to Arbazan System

The *Kitzingen's* main lounge was distinctly divided into three sections: a living room-style lounge, a restaurant, and a bar. All along the large, forward-facing view ports, were a series of plush couches, chairs, and end tables. Behind them, were tables more suited for dining. Then, running the length of the aft bulkhead was the bar.

Seated around a dining table were Ensign Sabra Okoro, Tang, and Ashana Zwen. It was the first time the latter two had been in the lounge.

"The sign said 'The *Faltertrum* Lounge'" observed the young trill female. "What's that mean?"

The African woman rejoined in a heavy accent, "Rumor has it, once the captain was assigned this command, he visited the town in Germany that the ship was named after. He fell in love with it. Apparently, there is this crooked tower in the town. 'Faltertrum' is what the tower is called."

Both Ashana and Zian laughed at the revelation.

"Well," joshed the Asian, "At least it's more inventive than 'Three Forward' or something like that."

The three shared another chuckle.

"So," began Sabra, "Have you met Evey, yet?"

"Evey?" repeated Zwen.

"The captain's wife," Tang informed her. He answered, "Yeah, I met her yesterday morning, at her Tai Chi class. She seems really nice."

Okoro leaned in smiling, "Can you believe she's a retired Starfleet captain?"

"Really?" responded Zwen.

Zian was even more floored, "She seems way too nice to be a captain."

He got some odd looks from his crewmates.

"I mean," he started as he attempted to recover, but he gave up, "You know what I mean."

The ops officer, Okoro, wasn't quite ready to let him off the hook, "What, captain's can't be nice?"

He shrugged, "Of course, they can be nice, but...well, I've only served under two captains. The *Galaxy's* captain was all business. And my last CO, well... she wasn't exactly...approachable."

"I liked my CO on the *Crockett*," commented Zwen.

Bringing the topic back on track, Zian said, "I bet it's kind of weird having two captains on the same ship."

"Let alone being married to the other captain," injected the Trill.

Sabra cocked her head in agreement, "Yeah, but it seems like they make it work pretty well."

Tang ventured, "Does she throw her weight around much?"

Okoro dismissed him with a puff and a wave of a hand, "No." Then, her tone changed as she thought about it, "Well, hardly ever." She elaborated, "She serves as unofficial moral officer, event coordinator, counselor, and executive advisor."

"Executive advisor?" playfully asked Zwen.

The dark-skinned woman went on, "Well, she's kind of like a second first officer too. And if she asks you do something, I suggest you do it."

The comment caused the other two to raise an eyebrow.

"Like say," the ops officer continued, "she really doesn't impose very often. Though, I'm sure she and the captain talk about command decisions together."

Zian smiled and shook his head, "That sure would have its pros and cons."

"How does Commander Ewm feel about that?" came from Ashana.

Sabra grinned and responded, light-heartedly, "I don't think anybody on this ship knows exactly how she feels about anything."

Another round of chuckles followed. Afterward, there was a lull in the talking.

The ops officer stood with a yawn, "Well, it's late. I'm calling it a night."

"Thanks for showing us around," offered Zwen.

"Yes. Thank you, Sabra," added Zian.

She nodded. "Have a good night, Lieutenants."

She exited the lounge, leaving Ashana and Zian alone at the table. The lounge itself now seemed nearly empty. The conversation seemed to dry up as well.

Zwen did ask, "So, what's your opinion of our new ship?"

Maybe it was the alcohol in his system, but Tang was more comfortable than he had been recently. He looked around the lounge with a grin. All he wanted to do when he joined Starfleet was to explore space. He never got the chance on the *Galaxy*, due to the war. The *Independences* never really offered much opportunity, either. But now, he was on a ship designed for scientific missions and they were heading out to the farthest reaches of the Federation. To top it off, his crewmates were more than he could've asked for. He swelled up with joy. "I love it. I couldn't be happier."

Tang's bliss encouraged Ashana. She smiled playfully, "I wouldn't be so sure about that."

Mostly due to the liquid courage, he leaned in and said, "I promise not to step back again."

The Trill gently caressed his cheek with the back of her hand. "I sure hope not. I might take it as an insult this time."

She got closer and their lips met.

CHAPTER 16

Stardate: 54300.8 (1 Sep 2377)

Runabout *Banda*

H'Kan System

After the incident with the *Chaka*, the doctors had a clear run all the way to the H'Kan System. Currently, they were in the system's Kuiper belt. The runabout was holding position near a mountain-sized chunk of ice and rock.

Jane Wenera held a vial of clear liquid. She regarded it with pride. It was the result of all their efforts. It wasn't a total cure, there was no way repair the damage to the organs and tissues. It would, however, stop the disease in its tracks and prevent it from spreading. It would also inoculate those not yet infected. She looked to her partner, "Do the Vuke have the resources to replicate the formula?"

The scaled Arkonian rejoined, somewhat hesitantly, "Well, they will need a detronal scanner."

Jane amused herself for a moment as thoughts of the Prime Directive entered her mind. It was a bit late to be thinking about that. "Now, it's just a matter of giving it to them with out getting killed."

"There's more than that," Zo'Kama said as her eyes left a covered viewer, "I've been going over some of the genetic sequences of the virus." She got off the stool next to the microscope, "Take a look at those ester bonds."

The human woman took a seat and brought her face to the viewer. She examined it a moment, "The carboxylic acids are different." She looked up with confusion, "Those acids are supposed to be uniform throughout a life form."

Zo'Kama nodded in agreement. Her expression seemed distant.

Wenera understood her concern. "Genetic engineering?" she ventured.

"That's the only explanation I can come up with."

"Who would have an interest in killing off the Vuke?"

The reptilian plopped down on a section of the parameter couch that wasn't covered in medical equipment. "Some of my former crew members talked about a secretive group in the Federation. They claim this group was responsible for the Founder virus as well, among other things."

"Do you believe that?" the Latina asked with a bit of doubt in her voice.

"I don't know," she said honestly. "But during the mission brief, Starfleet made it clear how much they feared the rapid development of the Vuke."

Wenera grimaced, "I can understand that, considering how violent they can be." She went on with a sigh, "But I find it hard to believe the Federation would stoop to such...abhorrent tactics." She quickly supplemented, "Don't get me wrong, the Federation isn't perfect, but to do this..."

"I don't want to believe it either, but this virus is not naturally occurring. That's for sure."

"But I don't get it," commented Jane, "You said your mission on the *Independence* was to help the Vuke find a cure – to foster good relations. Why would Starfleet send you there to help the Vuke if they were the ones that created the virus in the first place? It doesn't make any sense."

Zo'Kama had to concede the point, "You're right, it doesn't."

The two sat in silent contemplation for a moment.

"Well, genetically engineered or not," finally assessed Wenera, "we have a working vaccine. Now, we need to find a way to deliver it."

The Arkonian thought for a moment on the task at hand. "Of course!" She got up and headed for the cockpit.

Wenera followed.

Littered on the deck were puzzle pieces. Zo'Kala and Coby were laying on the floor putting it together.

Zo'Kama, a veteran parent, stepped over them without comment and assumed the pilot's chair.

Jane took up the adjacent station.

The *Indy* doctor began, “When we left – or rather, when the *Independence* was towed out of the system by the *Bluefin* – there was a Vuke carrier ship by itself. It was ordered to move away from their colonies because the ship had been overrun by the virus. There was a doctor on the ship I was working with.” She manipulated the sensor control panel, “If we can only find it again. It should still be alone.”

“That’d be perfect,” said the Human. She cocked her head in second thought, “Assuming they don’t fire on us.”

Supplemental
USS *Kitzingen*, Deck 5, Conference Hall
En Route to Arbazan System

The large reception room was usually reserved for diplomatic gatherings. It was a terrible waste of space – at least according to Evey Musgrave. When she came aboard over a year ago, she decided to celebrate a random crewmember’s culture each month. Last month, the ship honored Crewman Hiis by observing an age-old Tellarite tradition of insulting each other’s father until one participant couldn’t come up with a proper comeback. This month, Lieutenant Treum Ishok, the ship’s Coridan tactical officer, was singled out.

The room was lit only with an artificial fire in the center of the room. Various crewmembers sat around it. A woodwind-type instrument played gently in the background.

Most people were out of uniform. Evey sat snuggled in the captain’s embrace. Commander Ewm and the Bynar twins rarely attended these events. Ensign Sabra Okoro was in attendance. So was the Evora flight officer, Cadet Bolar. Ashana’s head rested lovingly on Zian’s shoulder. Their new relationship was obviously off to a good start. All eyes were on Lieutenant Ishok.

The Coridan’s intricately decorated chrome faceplate reflected the fire beautifully. He was dressed in little more than a loin cloth. He informed everyone before the ritual that his modesty was an ‘inauthentic’ part of the ceremony. His pebbly, tan-colored scales morphed into larger, darker ones on his torso.

Treum decided to share the *Talum* ritual with his crewmates. It paid homage to the time in Coridan history when stories were past down from generation

to generation around a camp fire. History was an integral part of his culture. The act of relaying history orally was a sacred one among the Coridan.

Ishok incorporated a form of dance as he spoke. The music accompanied the storytelling.

His digitized voice added to the uniqueness of the event, "In the age before the *Mavog*, the *Diung* warred between tribes. They fought with primitive, but brutal weapons. We killed each other over wood, water, and metals.

Then, amidst our strife, the *Mavog* came from the sky. They wore masks to protect themselves from our air. They said their home had been devastated by war and we were their only hope for survival.

Soon, *Diung* tribes began to make alliances with the newcomers. With *Mavog* weapons, a new type of war was unleashed; a war that razed entire cities to the ground. The *Mavog* were careful not to interfere.

It is now understood, the *Mavog* gave all *Diung* tribes terrible weapons. It is now understood, the *Mavog* quietly watched as the *Diung* killed each other. It is now understood, the *Mavog* wanted us to kill each other."

He paused for effect, "It is now understood, the *Diung* were at fault. We warred before the *Mavog*; we warred after the *Mavog*."

The fire crackled as Treum rounded it dramatically. "Then," he went on quieter, "We noticed the air beginning to change. It started slowly, then the pace quickened. All *Diung* began to grasp for air they could no longer breathe.

The *Mavog* no longer had to wear masks to walk among us. The space people, in false generosity, offered their favorite *Diung* masks so they could breathe on their own world again."

He breathed deeply through his faceplate and continued in a melancholy tone, "It is now understood, the *Mavog* changed the air to suit them. It is now understood, the *Mavog* only offered the *Diung* masks to enslave them. It is now understood, that was their plan all along. It is now understood, the *Diung* were at fault."

Ishok stood very still. He slowly placed his hands on his faceplate. With his thumbs, he began to pull it away from his chin. As the faceplate came off, there was an escape of gases. He pulled it away from his face purposely and

turned to everyone while obviously attempting to hold his breath. His bare face was pale, due to being covered so often. The eyes were almost silver; the nose consisted of a single nostril, covered by a scaly flap; the mouth had reptilian lips. He said in his native tongue, "*Ooh retapi changa ish Mavog – ooh retapi ishka ish Mavog*"

The translation came through, almost instantly, "We warred before the *Mavog*; we warred after the *Mavog*."

The Coridan *Diung* replaced his faceplate like it was a ball and chain. It sealed around his scales.

Everyone was taken aback to see this side of Ishok. Some suddenly became visibly uncomfortable. Zwen and a few others realized: that was whole the point.

Treum continued after the climax, "The *Diung* stopped their petty warring and united against the *Mavog*. It took nearly 100 years for the two species to live peacefully on Coridan. Today, we share the planet as equals. But what was done to the atmosphere could not be undone.

The masks now hide all *Diungs'* shame. Shame that we did not put aside our differences long before the *Mavog* came. Shame that it took our near extinction and enslavement to realize we are one."

The story was obviously over, but all that could be heard was the crackling of the faux fire. No one really knew how to react. *Clapping? Probably not.*

Finally, Issac spoke, "A well told story, Treum."

He bowed slightly, "Thank you, sir."

"Well," offered Zwen, in an attempt to lighten the mood, "I guess that explains the faceplate."

Ishok must have been smirking, "I knew you were just dying to ask about it."

It worked. The crowd broke into laughter.

CHAPTER 17

Stardate: 54304.5 (2 Sep 2377)

Runabout *Banda*

H'Kan System

"I've scanned the system," reported the Arkonian. She looked to her colleague, "I've found the carrier, but there is another, smaller vessel much closer to us."

Jane rested her arm on the seat back behind her, "Can you tell what type of ship it is?"

Commander Zo'Kama manipulated the console, "It's defiantly Vuke. The database says it's a science corvette."

"Perfect!" exclaimed the Latina, "Scientists would be more apt to let us help them."

"I hope you're right," said the reptilian. Her recent experience with the Vuke cautioned her optimism. The Vuke just barely tolerated the *Independence's* presence and that was before the *Indy's* apparent weapon's malfunction.

It only took a few minutes to rendezvous with the science corvette. The ship was little more than a metallic box with thrusters and antennas protruding out in various places.

"Do the Vuke use sub-space radio?" asked Wenera.

"No. Commander Windslow had to rig the holodeck to patch into the Vuke's communications system."

Jane looked over, suddenly concerned, "We don't have a holodeck."

She said at length, "No, we don't."

"Can we send a laser signal or normal radio transmission?"

Without looking up, Zo'Kama admitted, "We could, but I have no idea what frequencies they use, or what code they utilize, or even if they can receive such transmissions."

Jane blinked, "I foresee a problem, then."

"I...I hadn't actually thought about this part." She gingerly looked over and shrugged helplessly.

Wenera chuckled humorously and leaned back in her chair.

There was dead silence in the cockpit; a rarity over the past two days. Coby was napping in one of the two small cabins onboard. Zo'Kala was studying Federation history on a padd at one of the aft stations.

Suddenly, the younger Arkonian piped up, "Why don't you just beam one of them over?"

Both adults seemed embarrassed by the obviousness of the suggestion. They momentarily looked back at her.

"Good idea, Zo'Kala," managed Jane.

"Yes. Yes, indeed," added her *Go'chama* awkwardly. She re-focused on her panel. "Could you scan the ship for life signs, please," evenly came from the tan-scaled Arkonian.

Without comment, Wenera swiveled her seat to face forward. After a moment, she relayed, "Seven life signs on board." She glanced at the other doctor, "Is that right for that class of ship?"

The *Indy* doctor referenced a monitor, "No. That ship should have over 30 people onboard." She speculated, "It could be due to the plague."

"I don't think so," offered the Human, "All their life signs are strong. You'd think at least a few would be in a weakened state."

"Zo'Kala," said the elder Arkonian, "Go into the cabin with Coby and lock yourselves in."

The adolescent seemed put out by the request momentarily. But she quickly relented and did as her female life-giver instructed.

"I've locked on to who I think is in charge over there." She shrugged, "At least the person in the center of the bridge."

“Good enough,” concurred Zo’Kama. “We should arm ourselves.”

Wenera nodded and retrieved two type-two phasers from a small armory mounted in the bulkhead. She set them both to stun and handed one to her comrade.

Zo’Kama moved to the transporter controls. She checked to make sure Jane was at the ready. “Energizing.”

Within seconds, a one and one-half meter tall figure materialized. Its legs were bent like a bird’s. Its four fingers were long and tipped with short, but dagger-like claws. The avian-reptile wore a garment made of thick leather. The head was one of a predator. The Vuke’s scales were tan, indicating a female. The plumage on her head was a rainbow of blues, purples, and yellows. The eyes with vertical pupils radiated rage and confusion. She began to lunge for Wenera.

“Stop,” said the Lieutenant Commander as she leveled the phaser at the Vuke. Her tone gave no indication that she had any qualms about pulling the trigger.

Somewhat surprisingly, the Velociraptor-like humanoid froze in her tracks.

Zo’Kama quickly jumped in, “We have a cure for your plague. We are from the United Federation of Planets.”

The Vuke bobbed her head. Her voice was raspy, “We know of your empire. I have heard of your battle with the Queen’s Forces.”

The *Indy* doctor still hadn’t heard the whole story as to why the *Independence* opened fire on the Vuke ships. She wasn’t on the bridge at the time and Command debriefed the command crew individually. She first heard about the incident when she was talking with a Vuke doctor, Kudal was her name. It was apparently true that the *Independence* fired first, but she found that hard to believe. Captain Aurelia had a reputation for being impulsive, but attacking a tactically inferior force without provocation was beyond her nature.

It surely wasn’t a coincidence that the *Indy* engaged a stealth vessel of Federation origin shortly afterwards. Amazingly, the admiral that debriefed her didn’t ask about that part of the incident. Interestingly, the preliminary findings didn’t fault Captain Aurelia. In fact, it only stated that the Vuke were an unpredictable species and conflict was likely. It made no mention of the

stealth ship. Though, Zo’Kama knew it existed. She treated the wounded...and wrote the death certificates from the battle.

Clearly, there was more to that encounter than she knew. The entire mission had been deemed classified.

“That was...an unfortunate incident,” the Arkonian acknowledged.

“Then you’re not siding with us?” the Vuke asked.

The Starfleet officers shared a glance.

The Latina ventured, “Who’s ‘us?’”

She looked confused. “We know you’ve been observing us. Surely, you know about the resistance.”

“The resistance?” echoed Zo’Kama.

“Yes, we fight to bring an end to the rule of the Monarchy and free our people from her tyranny.”

Wenera looked to Zo’Kama, “This just got more complicated.”

CHAPTER 18

Supplemental Runabout *Banda* H'Kan System

The two officers had lowered their guard slightly, but only slightly.

"We were never told the Vuke are in the middle of an uprising," admitted Zo'Kama.

The bird-like humanoid went to step closer, but observed the phaser still aimed at her and reconsidered. "Our movement has been growing strength for years. It took a long time to gain...traction." Her head bobbed as if to plead for them to lower their weapons. It didn't work. She continued, "For almost our entire written history, the Johem Dynasty has controlled our society through manipulation and deceit. They withhold medical and genetic advances from the population. They put drugs in our manufactured food and water to keep us from thinking too much. Our society is set up into three levels: the royalty, which have turned themselves into near demigods; the military officers, which are given only the bare minimum; and everyone else, who are little more than cannon fodder and serfs."

This assessment took both doctors off guard.

The Vuke female did not try to take advantage of their momentary lapse.

"I had no idea," said the *Independence* doctor.

Jane was silent, but no less distressed by this new information.

The rainbow-plumed Vuke continued, "A group of us established a village on our outermost colony, Va'rak. We established our own society. One based on cooperation and mutual consent." Her head drifted down, "Our concept was spreading all over the planet when the plague came. Luckily, a few of us were using this ship to transport banned materials to our colony."

Suddenly, Zo'Kama had a look of terrible lucidity. "Va'rak, you said?"

"Yes."

The Arkonian looked to her counterpart with concern, "Kudal, the lead healer I was working with said the plague first appeared on Va'rak."

The implications slammed Wenera, "Oh god."

The Vuke nodded and confirmed their suspicions, "The royalty feared attacking us outright. They thought it might expand the unrest."

Jane picked it up, "So they engineered this virus to wipe the whole colony out. They could blame it as an act of nature."

Finally, Zo'Kama found the nearest chair and plopped in it. "But the virus spread beyond the colony. They lost control of it."

"You said you had a cure," said the Vuke refugee, "Please, let me give it to my people."

There was a cold silence as Zo'Kama and Jane attempted to gauge each other's reactions.

"Will you distribute it to everyone? Not just to your...faction," asked Wenera deliberately.

The Vuke's persistent blinking gave away her intentions.

The forward windows lit up with a violent bright light - an explosion in space. All three attempted to observe without being momentarily blinded. Fairly quickly, the ignited gases dissipated. The Vuke science corvette had been reduced to drifting debris.

"What have you done!" shrieked the Vuke.

Wenera assumed the pilot's seat and scrambled to determine what had happened. "We didn't fire," she reported.

"The Queen's forces?" injected the refugee.

Zo'Kama wanted to assist her comrade, but was present-minded enough to keep her weapon trained on the Vuke. She might decide to blame the Starfleet officers at any moment.

"No," reported the Terran doctor. "I'm not detecting any other vessels in the area."

"Then who..." began Zo'Kama.

Her unfinished question was answered as a Federation transporter confinement beam appeared in the cockpit. An instant later, a humanoid figure dressed from head to toe in dull, black combat armor materialized. The person had some type of snubbed rifle at the ready.

Before anyone could say anything or react, the figure aimed at the Vuke and fired. The last refugee was immediately vaporized. There was no scream.

To her credit, Zo'Kama got a shot off. The beam even hit its mark, but obviously the armor was designed to absorb phaser energy.

Instead of firing at her, the figure closed the distance and wrenched the weapon from her scaled hand. Instantly, the black figure pulled her up between him and Commander Wenera.

She was still sitting, but had her phaser pointed at them.

A muffled, but clearly heard, "Stop," came from the helmeted man.

Wenera hesitated.

Zo'Kama, now being used as a shield, had little ability to fight back, either.

A calmer, more rational, "Stop," was repeated. Slowly, the man let go of her hostage and stepped back. Though, he still had his rifle leveled. With one hand, he removed his black helmet. He was human; a light-skinned man with light-brown hair and matching eyes. "I'm with the Federation. I'm no threat to you."

Zo'Kama was the first to blast back, "You just killed a sentient being! I highly doubt you are no threat."

"Who are you?" demanded Wenera, her phaser still on him.

"I'm here to help you fulfill your mission, Lieutenant Commander Wenera."

"Am I supposed to be impressed you know who I am?"

He shrugged, "I really don't care if you're impressed or not."

"You're Section 31, aren't you?" asked the Arkonian.

The man lowered his rifle, "I think who I am is beside the point. We've been monitoring your 'mission' since you left Starbase 17. We simply want to make sure you carry it out."

Jane huffed, "So why did you just destroy that ship and kill that man?"

He was surprisingly casual and straightforward, "We couldn't risk you giving the vaccine to the resistance. They might start curing people and become more popular. And, no doubt, they'd begin informing the populace the truth about the virus."

"That's it's a weapon unleashed by their own government," coldly said the Latina.

His reaction was indifferent.

"But you do want us to give the vaccine to the Queen's forces, why?" asked Zo'Kama.

He smiled. "Normally, I wouldn't bother explaining this, but I doubt you'll continue on with out some explanation." He sighed, "The Directorate projects the Vuke will achieve warp drive in about 10 years. Their weapons are already impressive, given their level of advancement. Even assuming no Federation help, it's projected the Vuke will catch up to our level of technology in about 50 years. It's been said before: the Vuke are as vicious as Klingons and as intelligent as Vulcans." He began to pace as if he were lecturing in an academy classroom, "Having said that, wouldn't you rather they be on our side?"

The response was quick from Wenera, "You haven't answered her question, why the Queen's forces?"

"The monarchy is more stable. If the resistance prompts a civil war, it's hard to tell what government, what type of society, the Vuke will become." He added as if it made a difference, "And besides, projections indicate the resistance movement won't be able to stand up to the entrenched dynasty."

"Oh my god," said Wenera at length. "You explain it so...casually. Even though, the resistance is fighting for self-determination, for basic sentient rights...you don't care, do you? That's not part of the equation for you, is it?"

The Section 31 agent stood taller, "The security of the Federation is paramount, Commander."

Zo'Kama took up the torch, "And all the things we grew up hearing about what the Federation stood for: democracy, freedom, the rights of the people...it's all lip service."

"Don't judge me," began the man, "You have no idea what Section 31 has done, even before the Federation." He said with resolve, "If it wasn't for the Directorate, Earth and most other Federation worlds, would have been conquered several times over by now. You are able to have your idealism thanks to the blood spilled by people who history will never know. We die so you can take your moral high ground, doctors."

Stillness persisted for several moments.

The copper-skinned woman looked at the deck, "I think I'm going to be sick." She looked to the agent, "It's still all a charade, a theater, for our benefit."

The man seemed to truly understand her concern for a moment, "Trust me, ignorance really is bliss. Those values still exist, doctor, but they need to be tempered with reality."

"Is that what you tell yourself each night?" came from Zo'Kama.

He stiffened up again, "We're obviously not going to convince each other, so I suggest we get to the matter at hand. All I'm asking you to do is go to that carrier ship and give them the vaccine."

"Wait," said the Arkonian. "This still doesn't make sense. Our original mission on the *Independence* was to work with those same Vuke to create a cure. Why did Section 31 sabotage that mission?"

He cocked his head, "A relevant question. The short answer is 'priorities.' You remember your "passenger?"

"Clayton Easton. Yes, he said you were after him. He said he had worked for you, and he had taken refuge aboard our ship."

He nodded, "He was a priority target. That and the fact your Commander Windslow was dangerously close to penetrating our phasing cloak."

"Priority target," Jane repeated. Her eyes were empty.

"You killed many of my crewmates," said the Arkonian with quiet rage.

The man returned to a professional tone. It was obvious he had no intention of entertaining any more questions. "I'm not about to justify to you the actions of the Directorate. You will continue on for that Vuke carrier and instruct them on how to replicate the vaccine."

Slowly, Wenera's eyes found his, "What makes you think we'll be your puppets?"

"Because, despite everything I've said, despite everything you now know; you are both still doctors, and I doubt you'll allow millions of people to die just to spite me."

"Why don't you just do it?" asked Zo'Kama.

Wenera fielded the question, "People like him never do things for themselves. They just set things in motion from the shadows. People like him never come out into the light."

He smirked, "Not if we can help it." He stepped back and prepared to transport back to whatever hidden ship he came from. Right before he disappeared, he added in an insincere tone, "Oh, and due to the potential danger of what you're about to do, I've taken the liberty of transporting your children to my ship until your mission is complete. I wouldn't want them to be injured."

Both stood in a fury, but it was too late. He had beamed away.

CHAPTER 19

Supplemental USS *Chaka*, Conference Room Porrina Sector

Unlike many other contemporary ships, the *Saber* class conference lounge lacked large, sweeping portals giving magnificent views of the expanse of space. However, embedded in the forward bulkhead was a large display. It currently showed the Andorian freighter, *Tarah*. It still had a sphere of debris around its port nacelle where it had battle damage.

Lieutenant Ra-Goran, the ship's temporary first officer, had just given his final report on the raid.

Commander Anchal Sidhani rounded the oval-shaped table in the center of the room. "Let me get this straight - they didn't get any sensor readings on the attacker, nothing was stolen, and there is no sign of where the attacker went?"

The Efrosian's long, white hair bobbed, "That's correct, sir."

Her frustration came out, "So someone came out of nowhere, shot them, and disappeared again."

"I wish I had more to give you sir. I went over their sensor logs myself. There is nothing to indicate who the attacker was, what they were after, or where they went. I'm sorry."

She leaned back on the table, "And what about the analysis of the damage itself?"

He hesitated for just a moment, "There were unusually high concentrations of weapon's grade plasma in the surrounding space."

"That's not unusual for species in this area to use plasma weapons." She added silently, *So why do you have that look on your face?*

"It's highly refined warp plasma. It was more pure than anything any raider might have. It bet it's more pure than what's on this ship."

She gazed down. Then, back up, "Why would warp plasma be in weapons' residue?"

Ra-Goran's eyes seemed heavy. "I can't be sure..."

"But..." she prompted.

"But, phase cannons, like those mounted on *Defiant* class starships, shunt warp plasma into the energy bolts to make them more powerful."

She almost seemed offended by the revelation, "What are you implying, Lieutenant?"

He stiffened up, "I'm not implying anything, sir."

Anchal knew that of course. Ra was a professional. She immediately regretted her tone. He is not the type to jump to conclusions. He simply followed the evidence. She went back around the table and sat down. "I'd hate to think pulse phaser technology has fallen into the wrong hands." After a second, she added, "Is there any way to confirm it was pulse phasers?"

"As I said, I can't be sure. The concentration of warp plasma could be due to some malfunction in the attacker's ship. The high grade of the plasma could be due to the raider stealing it from someone else."

She nodded slightly, "Thank you, Lieutenant. I'll send our findings on to Command." She leaned back, "Is there anything else we can do here?"

"Not much, sir. The wounded have been treated and released. Engineering teams have repaired essential systems and the freighter captain is ready to get underway."

Sidhani commented, "I don't like loose ends. I just wish we had an identification on the attacker – or at least a warp trail to follow."

The Efrosian could offer little to ease her mind. Finally he said, "Course, Captain?"

The Indian woman grinned ever so slightly, "Let's see how our doctor friends are doing."

"Yes sir."

Supplemental Runabout *Banda* H'Kan System

Jane pounded her fist on the empty cot her son was lying in a few minutes before, "No!" She howled between her tears.

Zo'Kama stood in the open doorway. Her eyes were cast down, unable to comfort Wenera or herself.

Amongst the sobs, the Latina doctor admitted, "I would've done it anyway. I would have done it anyway. They didn't have to take him!"

"I'm sorry," said the Arkonian evenly. "I was foolish...and selfish. I should have never pursued this, let alone ask you to help me. It's my fault. I'm so sorry."

The human snuffled and looked up with red eyes; not just because she had been crying, but because they were filled with hate. "They did this, not you." She wiped her face and began to catch her breath. "Can we find them?"

"Let's try," suggested Zo'Kama.

Both officers took up positions in the cockpit. They were suddenly intently focused on the task at hand. Grief and given way to determination.

Jane was still in the process of fighting back tears, but reported, "I'm scanning the area with every sensor we've got." She smacked at the console, "Nothing."

"I'm not sure how the *Independence* was able to detect the other stealth ship," offered Zo'Kama. "We are limited by the sensor suite on the runabout."

"I'm going to try an antiproton beam," said Wenera, "the Dominion used it to detect cloaked ships early in the war."

"From what Commander Windslow said at the staff meeting, Section 31 doesn't employ traditional cloaking devices. They use a..." she searched her memory for the exact phrase, "an interphasic cloak. It pushes them slightly out of our reality, making them invisible."

Without taking her eyes off her controls, Wenera remembered, "That 31 agent seemed to think whatever Windslow was doing, he was getting close to penetrating their cloak. Do you remember what he was planning to do?"

The reptilian grimaced, "I'm sorry, I don't."

The human sighed, "I'm not getting anything out of these sensors."

Zo'Kama surmised, "They're probably monitoring us right now."

There was a long, deep silence between them. Each contemplated their situation and the situation of their children. *Would they hurt them? Will they kill us all once we're done? How many people will die if we don't act? Will we be helping a dictator cement their power? I have to protect my child. Is that selfish? I don't want them to win.*

Zo'Kama came to a dark conclusion, "We have to do as they demand."

"What?" came from Jane. "They just kidnapped our..."

"I know," she interrupted. "The best chance of getting our children back is to comply. The best chance of saving the lives of the Vuke is to comply."

In her heart, Wenera knew it was their best option, but her mind wasn't ready to accept it yet. "Isn't there some way of getting the vaccine to the Vuke rebels..."

"Not without that hidden ship knowing about it."

"We might still be able to find the ship and beam our kids back, with..."

"Then what? I doubt we could outrun or outgun them."

The Central American woman leaned back with a frustrated grunt. She ran her fingers through her black hair.

A few seconds later, Zo'Kama said quietly, "I'm setting a course for the Vuke carrier the *Independence* encountered before. They are isolated and appear to be drifting about 1.3 A.U.'s from our location."

She looked over and anticipated an objection. Jane didn't acknowledge her. It seemed she had reluctantly reined in her mind.

Solemnly, the Arkonian tapped the control, “Engaging impulse engines.”

CHAPTER 20

Supplemental Runabout *Banda* H'Kan System

Barely a word had passed between the Latin doctor, Ashley Wenera, and her reptilian counterpart.

Though the pair seemed stoic, under the surface both were overflowing with anger, guilt, and a deep sense of injustice. All they wanted was to help the Vuke. Their intentions were noble. Now, they were caught in mechanizations of hidden agendas and covert operations.

Zo'Kama had risked her career to get to this point. It was a sacrifice she would gladly make, but it had gone beyond that. She couldn't help but think how stupid it was to take her daughter along. How criminally inconsiderate it was to recruit Wenera and her son to assist.

Recruit was too strong a word. Jane, as she liked to be known, knew what she was getting into – no scratch that.

Neither one of them knew they were being manipulated and observed by Section 31 every step of the way.

And now, those shadowy *resholits* had taken their children as insurance. The Arkonian looked over to her co-pilot, sympathizing with her pain, her anger, and her frustration knowing there was little they could do about.

Zo'Kala began to realize the Vuke carrier was visible in the distance. It quickly grew in size and detail. Though it was as large as an *Excelsior* class ship, its design was extremely antiqued by Federation standards. The gunmetal grey vessel was basically rectangular with various arrays and weapons platforms on every axis. Bulky ion engines propelled it.

The former *Independence* doctor asked, "How do you want to proceed?"

Wenera's voice had immense focus in it, "As quickly as possible. I think we should just get within transporter range, beam the vaccine over with any equipment they'll need to reproduce it and get out of here. Once that stealth Section 31 ship out there confirms we gave them the vaccine..." She let the sentence fad, not wanting to speak the rest.

"...then they'll return our children and we can go back to Starbase 17," Zo'Kama finished in her mind. *"Hopefully,"* she darkly added. "Alright," she said aloud, "I'll prep the equipment and beam the items over." She left the pilot's seat and moved to the transporter controls.

"They've detected us," reported Jane. She engaged the shields and began evasive maneuvers. "They've launched missiles."

The reptilian Starfleet officer didn't seem terribly concerned as she loaded the transporter dais, "Our shields should protect us. The *Independence* was under sustained attack before they were worried about shield failure."

The inertial dampeners strained to adjust for the sudden movement of the runabout.

"Two problems with that," retorted Wenera with an unusual mix of sarcasm and gravity, "a starship has much stronger shields than a runabout..." she input a new set of commands, "and when I say missiles, I mean fourteen missiles."

"Can you avoid them?"

Her dark hair bobbed as she glanced at the tactical display. "I'm trying. I'm a doctor, not a combat pilot."

Zo'Kama reassumed one of the forward stations. "I'll try to target them with phasers." She consulted her own monitor. A mass of red dots, indicating the threats, were now about 150 kilometers away and closing fast. Their relative position shifted wildly as the runabout attempted to evade them. Unfortunately, it seemed the missiles had an efficient tracking system. Each time the computer established a lock, the runabout altered heading and it was lost. "Can you hold it steady for a second?"

Wenera eased off the controls and glanced at her readout: seventy-two kilometers.

A lock on tone filled the cabin a moment later. The Arkonian hit the initiator, "Firing."

Out the window, a lance of red phased energy sliced into the distance and two, no three explosions lit up the surrounding space for a moment.

"Eleven targets. Fifty kilometers," came from former *Eagle* CMO. She offered, "Can you adjust the phasers to a wide beam and get them all?"

She looked over for a moment and admitted, "I don't know how."

With that, Jane resumed her maneuvers.

"Twenty," said Zo'Kama as she managed to hit two more. "Ten kilometers."

Wenera realized at least four of the missiles had them dead to rights. No amount of course changes would make a difference. The shields might hold.

"Brace for impact!"

It seemed as if the whole craft would tear apart at the seams as it jolted. The doctors could feel the first missile discharge its immense energy mere meters outside the cabin, one after another slammed against the small ship's shields. There was nothing they could do but hope the next one wouldn't overwhelm their only defense and annihilate them.

The shaking settled down. Smoke began to fill the air from the burnt out EPS conduits. Multiple klaxons told them how very precarious their situation was.

"Shields holding," sighed Zo'Kama. Her tone quickly turned somber, "...at eight percent."

Wenera absorbed the information without expression. She consulted her instruments, "The other four overshot us." A second later, she said despondently, "Oh no." She turned to see her partner, whose scales had turned pale, "They're turning around and reacquiring us."

Zo'Kama felt like she was repeating some bad dream as she reported, "Thirty kilometers out." She didn't have time to have a specific thought about Zo'Kala, her daughter, but simply a feeling of love, gratitude, and pride.

An even-toned, "Ten," came from Wenera who was no doubt experiencing similar emotions regarding her toddler son.

"Incoming fire!"

"I know."

“No,” elaborated Zo’Kama, “pulse phasers just destroyed the remaining missiles.”

“Can you locate from where?”

She manipulated the controls, “I’m not sure.”

Jane leaned back a bit, “Well, it would’ve been nice if those bastards would’ve done that a few minutes ago,” referring to the hidden 31 ship monitoring them.

CHAPTER 21

Supplemental Runabout *Banda* H'Kan System

Wenera looked over to Zo'Kama after allowing her heart to slow down a bit, "Let's get this over with."

The Arkonian nodded and continued preparing the supplies for transport.

The human answered the unasked question, "I'm not detecting any more missiles."

"It may take them some time to reload their launchers," her partner offered.

"Let's hope so. How much time do you need?"

"Just a few moments."

Jane found herself staring at the distant Vuke vessel on her monitor. "I hope you put it to good use."

"Energizing," reported Zo'Kama as the pile of equipment disappeared from the transporter pad.

There was a brief moment of silence as the two absorbed a little bit of what has happened over the last few days. Both wondered if they'd done the right thing; both taking stock of their mistakes.

The tan-scaled doctor finally spoke, "It's done."

Wenera acknowledged, "I'm setting a course out of the system, full impulse. Can they pursue?"

"No," responded Zo'Kama flatly, "They can't travel that fast."

"Good, one less thing to worry about."

The minutes seemed to drag by as they made their way to the star system's Kuiper belt. It would be necessary to transit the debris of rock and ice at sub-light speeds, before going to warp. The trip would take less than an hour, but

it was an eternity of not knowing when or if they would see their children again.

"I'm not leaving this system until we have our children back," Jane declared.

"Agreed." A second later, she added, "If they don't return our children by the time we reach the Kuiper belt,..." She was about to make a threat, but then realized to her horror, there was no threat she could make good on if Section 31 decided not to return them.

The trip to the belt was torturously slow and dismally uneventful.

Two hours later, the tension Wenera experienced felt like a ton of bricks on her chest. But there was nothing to say, nothing to do. No leads to follow. No where to go, nothing but rage and the hope of seeing her son again. She began to weep quietly.

Zo'Kama placed her hand on Jane's shoulder. She was going to say something, but everything she thought of, seemed hollow or naïve. She decided silence was best for the moment.

Suddenly the door to one of the aft bunk alcoves opened. A dreary-eyed Zo'Kala exited and casually said, "How long have I been asleep?"

"Zo'Kala!" Her *go'chama* shot up and embraced her.

Jane darted past them and into the alcove and there, sleeping soundly, was her little boy. She nearly collapsed on top of him and hugged him tightly. His eyes opened and he looked at her as if to say, 'What's that for?' She ran her fingers through his thick, dark hair and kissed him profusely. She continued to weep for sometime.

Supplemental Vuke Carrier Three H'Kan System

Vuke ships were normally kept humid. Normally Alpha Kudal, the lead healer of the fleet, found it rather nice, like her home march. Now, the stench of decaying bodies sullied the air.

She mostly stayed in the command center now. After all, she was the most senior still alive on the doomed ship. Her crew strength was down to six

percent. After spotting the Federation of Planet's craft, she attacked it as best she could. With such a minimal crew, however, there was no way to continue the attack.

Part of her had wanted the Federations to destroy them. Only a month ago, she even worked with one of those Federations in an attempt to cure the plague.

It turned out to be a ruse, however. Their superior ship attacked them. Their healer claimed ignorance, but she would not be fooled again.

Kudal's breathing was labored, she would die within weeks. This ship was a tomb.

She became startled when she saw a blue light near her. It disappeared quickly, but there was now a pile of containers where the light was. It had the signs of the Federations all over them. She wondered if it was a bomb.

Curiosity, it seemed, became more powerful than fear in the face of death. She began to examine the crates. It held medical equipment. She had used some of these devices before when working with that ... Zo-K-Ma creature.

She picked up a padd that had detailed instructions and explanations in her language. Slowly, she began to realize what she was reading.

Kudal's feathers shifted as she frantically opened another, smaller container. She took a small vile of clear liquid out of it and held it gently.

"It may be too late for me," she said to no one, "but our race is saved." She grasped the vile next to her scaled chest.

"Prepare to send a message to the homeworld," she snapped to the only other person in the room. "Queen Johem and her dynasty will honor our memories forever."

Stardate: 54306.1 (3 Sep 2377)

Runabout *Banda*

Enroute to Starbase 17

The stars seemed to speed passed the runabout.

Wenera sat at the co-pilot's seat. Coby was on her lap, curled in her arms.

Zo’Kama was manning the pilot’s seat, but her chair was facing aft to talk to her daughter. Since the craft was running on autopilot, it wasn’t an issue.

“So you have no memory of leaving the ship?” the Arkonian asked her offspring.

The younger reptilian jerked her head to the left, indicating ‘no.’ “I never would have known had you not told me.”

“I’m not about to defend what they did,” started Jane, “but at least they kept their word.”

Zo’Kama’s eyes were focused on some nonspecific point on the bulkhead. “Only because we cooperated. Only because our goals and theirs were the same. I hate to think...”

The proximity klaxon sounded.

She turned the chair forward again. Her voice almost sounded amused, “It’s the *Chaka*.”

“The *Saber* class ship from before?” questioned Zo’Kala. Her mother confirmed with a few ticks to the right.

Wenera sighed, “I guess it was hoping too much for Commander Sidhani to forget about us.”

“We did give her our word,” Zo’Kama reminded her.

“So we did,” she rejoined. “It’s time to face the music.”

The adolescent asked, “What do you think Starfleet will do to you?”

“I’m not sure,” answered her birth-mother, “but we will accept and endure it.” She tapped on the console. “All stop. I’m signaling our surrender.”

EPILOUGE

Stardate: 54310.3 (4 Sep 2377)

Starbase 17, Medical Section 3, CMO's Office

Porrina System

Admiral Homchu glared at the two doctors as they entered. Both Commander Zo'Kama and Lieutenant Commander Wenera were careful to stand at perfect attention and formally report.

"Sit down," the middle-aged Bolian woman ordered. After they did so, she leaned forward in her chair and rested her arms on her desk, "Well, you two have ruined my whole week." She made eye contact with each of them as she rehashed the charges. "Unauthorized use of Starfleet equipment, filing an inaccurate flight plan, disobeying direct orders from a superior officer, unlawful detention of a fellow officer, assault of an officer, resisting arrest, child endangerment." The blue-skinned admiral leaned back again, allowing the magnitude of the situation to set in.

The doctors knew better than to say something in their defense.

She stood up and continued, "Unbelievably, Commander Sidhara was close to not pressing charges against you." Homchu supplemented, "I convinced her to file them." She rounded her desk, "Don't get me wrong, I like you two. Despite your willfulness, I know you are both good officers. But you simply can't do things like this in today's Starfleet and get away with it!"

Wenera and Zo'Kama remained stoic.

"Now, I feel some of these charges go beyond an Article 15 and require a courts-martial." She paused for a moment as if to gather her strength to say, "However, the base commander has decided to exercise his authority in this matter and supercede my judgment. He talked Commander Sidhara out of filing charges and he's restricted Captain M'Bira or me from filing them in her stead."

The two shared a glance at each other, though it was one more of confusion than relief.

"So," she went on, "per his orders, both of you will be restricted to quarters when not on duty for 30 days," she rolled her eyes, "or until you receive new

assignments, which ever comes first. Your flight privileges will also be revoked."

They were dumbstruck. It was the proverbial slap on the wrist. Zo'Kama had at least expected a reduction in rank. Jane imagined far worse than that.

Admiral Homchu ordered, "Attention." They immediately stood. The Bolian leaned toward them to ram home the point, "I don't know who have up in the ranks looking after you two, but you should thank the gods you do. You both could have lost your commissions over this. Now, I have no doubt both of you will be cut new orders within the week; but until then, you had best do nothing to annoy me. Dismissed."

The commanders smartly exited the room without delay.

Once the pair had left the Admiral's antechamber and they were safely in the corridor, Zo'Kama asked, "What just happened?"

"We were let off the hook," she rejoined, but she was no less befuddled.

"Do you think Section 31 intervened on our behalf?" offered the Arkonian.

"I hope not," was Jane's quick response, "I'd hate to be grateful for anything they've done for me."

They began walking, each lost in their own thoughts.

"When I begin to think about how we were manipulated, my thoughts go to the Vuke. Section 31 is manipulating the entire Vuke culture. They're solidifying a tyrant because it's more advantageous to Federation interests."

"I know," commented Wenera, "Something's changed in the Federation. I don't like it."

Zo'Kama huffed, "I just had a terrifying thought: What if nothing has changed except Section 31 has become too overconfident and more sloppy?"

Jane took a few steps and considered it. "In an odd way, I hope you're right. Pride comes before a fall, Zo'Kama."

She ticked her head to the right to affirm.

“And I’ll tell you one thing,” Wenera said, “Whether they eased our punishment or not, we have a lot of unfinished business with Section 31.”

They took a few more steps in silence.

Wenera repeated with resolve, “A lot of unfinished business.”

Stardate: Unknown

Location: Unknown

It was a small cell no more than two square meters. It was well lit. The walls, the deck, the door, even the bench which contained the head, were all a pleasant tan color.

At least he remembered thinking it was pleasant when he first got here. Not that he knew where exactly ‘here’ was. He wasn’t sure how long he had been here, either. He could have been in stasis for months, for all he knew. Time was irrelevant anyway. Something had to change for time to matter. Nothing had changed here since he arrived. Except, maybe his beard, he guessed it was at least a week’s worth of growth.

He sat curled up on the bench, still in his soiled, red-trimmed, commander’s uniform. He could no longer sense how offensive he probably smelled.

There were no demands, no interrogations, no voices on an intercom. There was nothing indicating other people were anywhere around him. Once a day, a bowl of rice mixed with a green paste and a cup of water materialized in his cell. It was beamed out again a minute or two later. At least, he assumed he was being feed once a day.

He had supposed the food was transported automatically and there was no one outside. His mind remembered from no where his ancient history class from school. The word ‘dungeon’ can be traced to a French word, meaning “the forgotten place,” or “to forget.” Maybe he had truly been forgotten.

The lights were always on. There was no time. It didn’t matter. Something has to change for time to matter. Nothing changed here. There was no hum of a warp core, nor footfalls outside. No noise from a ventilation system. Nothing but the tan walls.

Karim bin Nadal decided to call out like he sometimes did, “Get it over with! Do something! Anything!” Despite himself, he began to sob again. He pleaded under his breath, “Do something. God, do something.”

THE END