

# Star Trek: Independence

## The Toltec

By Dnoth

*"For that one fraction of a second, you were open to options you had never considered. **That** is the exploration that awaits you. Not mapping stars and studying nebulae... but charting the unknown possibilities... of existence." – Q, TNG "All Good Things..."*

### PROLOGUE

**Stardate: 53593.7 (5 Aug 2376)**  
**Starfleet Stockade**  
**Jaros II**

All the inmates wore the Starfleet desert uniform. It was a simple design: a white shirt with a single colored strip indicating division, white pants, and white boots.

There were no ranks at Jaros II. Pips were not worn, not even by the guards. No one could attempt to pull rank or say, "You can't do this to me. I'm an admiral!" Such protests were ignored here. Everyone was the same...and everyone bore a security anklet.

Ethan Windslow was in his cell, behind a forcefield. He looked at his reflection. His short, terra cotta hair had grown thinner and grayer. He rubbed his goatee absently.

Today was the last day of his four month sentence. He packed up what little personal items he had: a holo of his family, some engineering journals, and some other small things.

The forcefield dropped and a guard showed up. The young man, only known to Windslow as "Joe," said politely enough, "You ready, Windslow?"

The inmate nodded, "Yeah. Yeah, I'm ready."

As they exited, another prisoner called out from an adjacent cell, "Ethan."

It was Ivan Cherenkov. He and Windslow often talked from across the hall. Sometimes, they pulled duty together. He arrived about a week after Windslow. He would be released soon as well. Both were reserved men, but incarceration has a way of opening people up. Misery loves company, after all.

Ivan curtsied, "Take care, Ethan."

"Thanks," he responded, "You too."

Windslow reached the final checkpoint. He knew his wife and sons were waiting for him outside. They had arranged temporary lodging on the planet while he served his sentence. Once a week, they were allowed to visit him. Nothing of any real substance was said during those short reunions. Ethan felt like he couldn't look them in the eyes, not after what he'd done. He was amazed his wife, Susan, stuck with him. He wasn't sure if he'd do the same if the roles were reversed.

"Put your right foot on the platform," ordered the guard.

He did so. A moment later the anklet unlocked and dropped off.

The security officer continued as if he'd done this a thousand times before and grew tired of it, which was probably true. "Put your thumb on this padd."

Ethan complied.

"You will still be considered on probationary status for an additional six months. Your rank effective today is Lieutenant Commander and you'll be reassigned to the USS *Independence* as first officer." He handed over a padd, "Here is your travel itinerary. Our records indicate you have no personal items in stockade storage. Is that correct?"

Windslow was a bit surprised by the impersonal nature of it all. He rejoined, "That's correct."

"Very well," continued the guard, "As of stardate 53593.74, you are hereby discharged from our facility."

A set of heavy nearby doors opened. Beyond was a waiting area. Susan, Paul, and Jeff were there. A joyous moment, it was not. Ethan didn't know which would be worse, the time he spent here, or having to face his sons everyday.

He walked hesitantly through the threshold.

## CHAPTER 1

The *Interceptor* class ship, resembling a compact, mean-looking *Intrepid* class, was lit by the blue light coming from the nearby star.

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**Stardate: 53605.3 (9 Aug 2376)**  
**USS *Independence*, Main Bridge**  
**Regulus System**

“D’nas, come here. Look at this,” prompted science officer Tang Zian.

The Tamarian helmsman looked back, “But I’m manning my station.”

Tang examined the bridge. The only other person there was Lieutenant Chase. She was at operations. The blonde woman chuckled to herself and said to D’nas, “Don’t worry. I won’t tell.”

There was no denying it was quiet. Captain Aurelia was in her ready room. Bin Nadal was pulling double duty as acting XO and security chief. He was in his office. The only other person on the ship over the rank of lieutenant was Doctor Zo’Kama and she was in sickbay.

Cautiously, the Tamarian exchange officer got up and walked over to the science station. It provoked another round of chuckles from Chase.

“Have Tamarians ever seen a star like this?” asked the Asian officer.

D’nas studied the display. “That blue giant is spinning extremely fast. It fully rotates in 15.9 hours.”

“Exactly,” confirmed Tang. “If it were rotating only 16% faster, centripetal force would overcome gravity and the star would tear itself apart.”

“Amazing.”

“It’s going so fast, it’s flattened out a bit.”

The young Tamarian’s natural curiosity took over at that point, “Is there any life in this system?”

“Regulus II has some plant and animal life. Regular bloodworms are still used for medical procedures on some worlds.”

D’nas somberly observed, “Intelligent life won’t be able to develop here.”

“Nope,” agreed Zian, “This blue giant will fizzle out before that happens. I doubt Regulus will last another 10 million years.”

“That might be enough time for sentient life to evolve from the point it’s at now,” suggested the Tamarian.

Morbidly, Tang retorted, “Yeah, just in time to see their sun blow up in their face.”

Lieutenant Commander bin Nadal suddenly joined the two. He looked over Tang’s shoulder. “I was under the impression Regulus II’s magnetic field isn’t strong enough to block all the radiation the star is emitting. That’s why most life lives underground.”

D’nas was caught off guard. He snapped to attention, “Sir, I apologize for abandoning my post. I...I...”

Karim’s brow crunched up. He looked at the Tamarian, then at the empty helm station, and back to D’nas. “I’ll let it slide this time.”

“Yes, Sir.” Despite the commander’s playful tone, D’nas felt the need to return to flight control.

Karim continued on. He shared a grin with Tang and a wider grin with Chase. She returned it and raised him a blown kiss. His smile grew even more but he didn’t return it and he didn’t stop to socialize with her. They had agreed to keep duty time duty time and personal time personal time. Besides, which, the captain summoned him.

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### **Supplemental USS *Independence*, Captain’s Ready Room Regulus System**

“You wanted to see me?” Karim started informally.

She didn't object to his familiarity. It was their normal interaction. "Yeah," the dark-haired, Latin American woman said. "Two things; we have our new marching orders." She spun the computer screen around so he could see, "It appears a Federation gallicite mine has been damaged by Nausicaan raiders. The *Rhode Island* was dispatched to clean the mess they made and we're supposed to provide security."

The Persian glanced at the information, "The Maluria system, huh? That's only about three light years away." He straightened back up, "Any idea why the Nausicaans attacked it?"

She shrugged, "The gallicite, I'd guess. It's used for refitting warp coils. Since the war, it's become even more valuable than it was." She added, "Besides which, the Nausicaans never really accepted the Federation presence in that system."

"I can see why," commented bin Nadal, "Their homeworld is only five light years away."

"I researched the system," elaborated the captain, "Maluria VID is the moon where the mining facility is. It has a compliment of about 50 workers." She made eye contact, "No one was killed in the attack, thanks for asking."

Helpless, Karim lifted his arms.

Sintina continued, "And supposedly, there's a human colony on the second planet."

"Supposedly?"

"Yeah, they don't really keep in contact with the Federation. The last official contact with them was in 2316."

"Sixty years?" Bin Nadal went on, "Well, it's not that uncommon for colony worlds to be rather independent." As an afterthought, he added, "...but being so close to the Nausicaans..." He let the implication drift.

She leaned back, "I think it's time they had another visit. Just to make sure they're still alive and kicking."

"Not a problem. When do we meet the *Rhode Island*?"

"Tomorrow afternoon we need to be at the mining facility."

"Warp seven should do it. I'll get us underway," he said as he began to exit.

Sintina stopped him, "I said two things."

He did an about face, "So you did."

Her expression became one of disappointment, "The *Rhode Island* is also bringing back Windslow."

Bin Nadal wasn't sure how to react. He simply said, "Oh."

"Yeah," Sintina blankly commented.

"Hey, that's ok. It'll be nice to get more sleep again. I'm sure Zo'Kama will feel the same."

Aurelia shook her head, "I really don't want to deal with him again."

He shrugged, "Who knows, maybe it did him good."

"I doubt it. People don't often change."

Karim didn't feel the need to add his opinion.

She concluded with, "I just hope he got his head out of his ass."

## CHAPTER 2

### **Supplemental USS *Rhode Island*, Crew's Quarters En Route to the Maluria system**

The Windslow family had been given, what would politely be called, the cold shoulder from the *Nova* class crew. After beaming aboard, an ensign escorted them to their quarters. There was no smile, no tour, no “welcome aboard.”

For basically the whole trip, the four stayed in their cramped quarters. That would try the nerves of a happy family, to say nothing of the current dynamic of the Windslows.

The golden-haired, German woman had just put the twelve and six year old to sleep. She emerged from the darkness of the boys' room. She paused for a moment as her eyes met her husbands. It was the first time since the conviction that they were alone. Susan tapped the door shut to the kid's bedroom and joined Ethan on the couch. She could remember a time when he was the best husband and father anyone could ask for. It seemed like a lifetime ago.

The moment hung in the air like smog.

“I know you don't want to talk about it,” she began.

“You're right,” he coldly confirmed.

Susan Windslow had an almost infinite amount of grace and patience. There was an aura of calm and acceptance that surrounded her, most of the time. It served her well in her role of teacher and mother. She didn't often succumb to her emotions. She couldn't. Susan had to be strong for her family. Recent events, however, had strained her serenity. For two years, her family had been incomplete.

In January 2374, Ethan accepted an assignment that he wasn't made for. He took command of the *Bismarck* and took it to war. Susan didn't want him to take it at the time. Not because she didn't think he could handle it, but because *he* didn't think he could handle it. Of course, he never said that out loud. He was a builder; not a destroyer.



As the tide turned in favor of the Federation Alliance, Ethan reacted as a man a peace; not as a starship captain. During a relief mission on a recently subdued Cardassian colony, his away team came under fire. Instead of coordinating his team and fighting back, he ran. He left them.

The real crime occurred later. Captain Ethan Windslow returned to the ship, rejoined the main fleet and acted as if it didn't happen. Two weeks later, his ship and crew were destroyed in a skirmish with the Dominion.

A log from his first officer was recovered from the flotsam. If it hadn't been discovered, he might still be a captain.

Then, events turned surreal. Ethan was contacted by Admiral William Ross. Ross gave certain assurances to him, if he just kept his mouth shut. The admiral made mention of a ship he wanted Ethan to captain. Reinforced by those promises, the Celtic man didn't cooperate with the investigation.

During this time, a temporarily demoted, Windslow served as first officer of the *Independence*. Physically, Susan's family had been reunited. Ethan, unfortunately, wasn't the same. He was distant and aloof. She assumed it was the burden of war and the atrocities he had seen. She tried to talk to him about it, but she didn't want to press him too fast.

The investigation was ready to be closed until survivors from his mission on the Cardassian colony were discovered in a Dominion prison camp. They changed the game. Ross, and the hope he offered, disappeared.

Shortly after, Ethan was sent to Jaros II.

Once again, Susan's family was reunited...but it still was not whole. Ethan's deception was exposed. Guilt and self-pity had replaced anxiety and subterfuge.

Finally, she pressed, "We have to deal with this."

Ethan brooded and shifted his weight. He asked indignantly, "What do you want from me?"

She moved closer and responded, "I want the real you back. I want you to be happy again."

Her gentle plea forced his eyes to water. He sucked it back. He said nothing except, "I'm still used to sleeping alone. I'm going to sleep on the couch."

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**Stardate: 53607.3 (10 Aug 2376)**  
**USS *Independence*, Main Bridge**  
**In Orbit of Maluria VID**

The image of a *Nova* class vessel with an ice covered moon in the background filled the main viewer. The gunship was only thirty meters longer than the science – in this case, repair – vessel.

Captain Aurelia uncrossed her legs in the center seat and looked over her shoulder to communications, "On screen."

The *Rhode Island* captain, Jason Killian, nodded out of respect before starting, "Captain Aurelia, good to see Starfleet didn't skimp on the firepower."

She grinned at the observation. Captain Killian was a rather old looking, light-skinned human. His wrinkled face didn't obscure bright eyes and a good-natured smile. Sintina jibed in return, "We do enjoy the pulse phasers over here."

Killian let out a belly-laugh, "I bet. It's hard to believe I once commanded one of the first *Ambassador* class ships when they came off the yard and it was top of the line. Now, it's two generations old."

The mention of the forerunner to the *Galaxy* class prompted another smile from Sintina. "I'll have you know, sir, my first command was an *Ambassador*. They're damn fine ships." As she spoke, she assumed Captain Killian was recalled out of retirement to support the war effort. He had a certain casualness that implied it.

"That they are, Captain. That they are." He nostalgically sighed, "Well, we should get down to business." He leaned in and said without fanfare, "I don't really know who's technically in charge here, but I'll make a deal with you. We'll focus on getting the mine up and running and you cover our butts however you think is best."

Sintina decided she liked the man at that moment. Besides that, she had no desire to oversee the repairs of the facility. "Sir, you have a deal."

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**Supplemental**  
**USS *Independence*, Transporter Room Two**  
**In Orbit of Maluria VID**

The Windslow family materialized on the dais. Ethan was in his red-trimmed, duty uniform. Each held a bag of some sort. Most of their belongings were still in their quarters aboard ship.

Lieutenant Commander bin Nadal met them. He offered a reserved, yet respectful nod to the returning first officer. "Commander Windslow, Mrs. Windslow, welcome back."

"I wanna go back home now, I'm tired," complained the six year old, Paul.

Susan placed a hand on his shoulder, "We'll be there in a second, sweetie. Hold on." She smiled at the security chief, "Thank you, Karim." She and the boys stepped down, "How has Jennifer managed with the kids?"

"To be honest," he said, "I'm not sure. I know Ensign Macías has been helping out when he can."

"I wonder if they'll let me teach again," she joked.

Karim rejoined, "I'm sure they'll be happy to let you take the led again."

"Mom," unenthusiastically requested Jeff, "Can we go now?"

She relented as she looked back at Ethan, who still stood apathetically on the pad, "Alright, alright. Let's go." She regarded her husband, "Will you be along soon?"

His answer was a practiced excuse, "I'll be home after my duties are done."

Mild, but expected, disappointment filled Susan's face. "Sure, ok." She ushered the boys out of the room.

A sudden subdued anticipation permeated the transporter room. Windslow – the coward, the disgraced captain, the liar – was back. How much respect did

he garner? What would the role here be? Would anyone follow out his orders without second guessing them?

Finally, bin Nadal offered evenly, "I've sent you copies of all the division reports, crew rosters, and other reports since you've been gone to your office, sir."

Windslow found himself nodding, "Good." He stepped down, "I...ah...I'll go report to Captain Aurelia."

The security chief simply said, "Aye sir."

## CHAPTER 3

### **Supplemental USS *Independence*, Deck One In Orbit of Maluria VID**

Windslow had a good idea of what this tour – and the rest of his career – would be like from the walk from the transporter room to the bridge. If he was lucky, the crew members he passed avoided eye contact. If he wasn't, they glared with disgust. He discovered his own eyes began to watch the carpet.

He stepped onto the bridge. A few heads went up...and quickly went back down. Captain Aurelia wasn't there. D'nas was at helm. Tang manned the science station. A blonde woman, who he didn't know, was at ops. The captain's Andorian friend, Kimula, approached him with a warm smile. It was then he remembered she was also the ship's counselor. His stomach fell as he wondered if she was going to insist on seeing him. He had seen enough so-called counselors at Jaros II.

"Commander Windslow," she said, "Welcome back."

He managed a hollow, "Thank you, Lieutenant." Before she could guide the conversation, he asked, "Is the captain in her ready room?"

"Yes sir."

The former captain strode to the office without delay.

Kimula spoke up, "Sir."

He reluctantly paused.

She closed the gap and continued quietly, "Sir, I'd like to suggest we resume our sessions."

Ethan fidgeted and promptly blew her off, "I'll consider it. Excuse me."

He tapped the enunciator and entered a moment later.

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Sintina lowered a padd she was reading in an unimpressed manner and looked up at Windslow as he entered. The doors shut behind him and he assumed a ridged stance.

With as much dignity as he could muster, he stated, "Lieutenant Commander Ethan Windslow reporting, ma'am."

She leaned back and rapped the edge of the padd against the desk a few times before tossing it down. "Before you left, I said I don't want to deal with a clinically depressed first officer." She stood up and rounded the desk, "I don't care about your personal life. I don't care about your guilt. The only thing I care about is your ability to do your job. Can you do it or not?"

Still at the position of attention, Windslow's eyes shifted. He could feel Aurelia was beginning to see his uncertainty. He rejoined, "I will serve to the best of my ability..."

"That's not what I asked, Commander," she interjected with malice. The petite woman stepped right up to the taller man. The size difference only steeled her resolve. "I've already put in a request for another XO. Unfortunately for both of us, Starfleet doesn't consider reposting you a high priority. Frankly, I think they're having a hard time finding a command that'll have you."

The depression in his face was obvious. In desperation, he uttered, "I said I'd do my best..."

"I don't trust your best, Commander!" she snapped. "I don't trust that you'll put the well-being of this crew above your own. I trust your judgment at all." She backed off a bit and went on, "You ran and lied about. You abandoned your people. You let them die to save your own ass!"

His chin began to shudder as he forced himself to maintain his façade.

She continued her diatribe, "How can I trust what you put in a report? How can I trust you'll give me good advice?" She paused and added with emphasis, "And how can I possibly trust you with an away team?"

He hoped his watery eyes wouldn't produce a tear. He began to see how impossible the task ahead of him was. She had absolutely no sympathy for him. Maybe that's how it should be. His torment was meant to last for the

rest of his life. He deserved it. His voice no longer held any trace of confidence, "I don't know, ma'am."

"You don't know," she repeated indignantly. She returned to her seat, looked at the poor excuse for an officer in front of her, and shook her head. She calmed down a bit before continuing. Windslow was still at attention. She had no intention of easing him. Sintina informed him in a tone that disqualified debate, "Here's how it's going to work. The mundane tasks of a first officer are yours, but you will not lead any away teams."

Windslow could have debated her on the regulations, but he knew it would only provoke her. He couldn't dissuade her and he accepted his fate, "Yes ma'am."

"Your dismissed, Commander."

He acknowledged and walked out a broken man.

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**Supplemental**  
**USS *Independence*, Security Office**  
**In Orbit of Maluria VID**

Karim's face lit up when Nicole entered. She had a playful expression on her. He had seen it several times before.

He smiled, "We're not off duty yet."

The light-skinned woman seductively walked around his desk, leaned down and kissed him gently, but passionately. She purred, "Lucky for you, I'm here for a purely professional reason."

"It doesn't look like it," he joshed.

Chase offered, "Just because I'm on duty don't mean I can't be really...", she sat in his lap, "...really nice."

He mock-considered, "Since you put it that way..." They kissed again.

A few moments later, Karim prompted, "So is there an actual reason for you coming here?"

“Actually,” she started, “There is.” She stroked his hair as she elaborated, “Tang told me that Federation colony is on the far side of the star from our position, so we’ll have to take the ship there if we want to check it out.”

“We can’t leave the mining station or the *Rhode Island* here alone,” observed the security chief.

She continued to stroke him, “I’m just delivering the message.” She lean in, pecked him, and joked, “I just love giving you more things to worry about; that’s all.”

The Persian chuckled, “So that’s why you came down.”

Nicole grinned, “Now, you’re getting it.”

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### **Supplemental** **USS *Independence*, Captain’s Ready Room** **In Orbit of Maluria VID**

Aurelia placed Captain Killian’s coffee in front of him and she returned to her seat, “So how are the repairs coming?”

Killian only had a few strands of color left in his hair. He reached for the cup, but decided it was too hot for the moment. He sat back, “Oh, not bad. A few of the miners are requesting to leave.”

With a mock ignorance, Sintina commented, “Why? Don’t they think its safe living next to the Nausicaans?”

He chuckled, “Imagine that.” The elder human went on, “So we’re behind schedule. We could use any engineers you’re willing to let go of.”

“Sure,” she said, “I’ll have a team report to your XO.”

“Thank you, Captain. That certainly would help us out.”

She added, with some trepidation, “In fact, my XO was once an engineer. He even worked on the Defiant Project, I’m told. I could send him over...”



"I appreciate your situation, Captain Aurelia," Killian cut-in. His care-free expression faded. He knew full well her intentions. She wanted him out of his hair as much as anyone. He continued, "But I have no desire to have my people work with that man."

Her attempt to pawn him off failed. She nodded in understanding.

The old captain offered, "Dealing with characters like that is never easy. I don't envy you."

Aurelia's brown eyes examined her drink for a moment. She spoke her thoughts, "If it weren't for the war losses, I wouldn't have to deal with him." She took a sip, "It's an injustice. He led..." She puffed ironically; 'led' implied leadership. She changed it to, "he left... all those people to their deaths; but he lived."

The off the cuff comment caused Killian to be introspective. After a moment of silence, he spoke, "As I said, I don't envy you."

## CHAPTER 4

### **Supplemental** **USS *Independence*, Executive Officer's Quarters** **In Orbit of Maluria VID**

The weight of the room – the very air – was made dense and thick as Ethan entered his home. The boys had been playing on the floor with some type of board game. Upon seeing their father, they paused.

Jeff, the oldest boy, got up. "I don't want to play anymore. That game is stupid anyway." He just barely glanced at his dad as he turned and retreated to the isolation of his room.

The six-year old, Paul, remained. He looked up at his father with innocent, blissfully ignorant eyes.

Ethan knew what would come next. Paul would ask him the same question he asked nearly every time they crossed paths. 'Wanna play with me, Dad?' He dreaded the question. He wanted to reply, 'You don't want to play with me, Paul. I'm a horrible person. You don't want to have anything to do with me. You don't want to be like me. Find yourself another role model.'

Paul asked the question.

The *Independence* XO uttered, "I uh...I don't know how to play, sorry."

"It's an easy game," the boy persisted. "I'll teach you."

"Not now."

Paul fussed and crossed his arms. He mumbled in protest, "You never play with me." His eyes began to water. The six year old made a good effort to hold the tears in.

He wanted to comfort Paul. Ethan crouched down and reached for his son, but stopped himself before making contact. Instead, he pulled away. His eyes began to water as well. He offered, "I'm sorry, Paul." He stood and looked down at the boy, "I'm sorry for a lot of things."

Ethan walked out.

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**Supplemental**  
**USS *Independence*, Deck Five**  
**In Orbit of Maluria VID**

For a few minutes, Windslow wondered the ship. He hoped to walk it off. It didn't work. The stares he got, the incriminating glances. They all seemed to say, 'You're worthless! You disgust me! Pathetic. What the hell are you doing in that uniform? Why do you deserve to live? You killed them. Do us all a favor...'

His track turned. The former captain went down a rarely used corridor. It led to the port nacelle control room. The area usually didn't require manning.

The shielded hatch to the control room slid open. The lights turned on as he entered. The area had two levels. He stepped slowly up the ladder to the upper platform. Once he reached the top, he went over to a computer panel inlaid in the bulkhead. When he touched it, a second, heavily shielded door opened in front of him. A warning klaxon sounded for a moment.

Beyond the door, Ethan looked upon a cavernous area, which was the interior of the warp nacelle. A stream of super-heated plasma flowed just below him and down the entire length of the nacelle.

It wouldn't take much, he thought to himself. Just release the forcefield and take a step. It wouldn't even be painful. The nerves wouldn't have time to relay the pain impulses to his brain. The plasma would reduce him to atoms in a fraction of a second.

He stared blankly at his escape. Could he do it? Sure the boys would miss him for a while, but they'd get over it. Hell, he'd barely been in their lives for the last two years anyway. In the end, it'd be better for them.

His mind grew numb as he watched to flow of violet, glowing plasma.

An irksome sound forced him back. The sound of his wife followed, "*Susan Windslow to Ethan Windslow.*"

She hailed him a second time.

Finally, he tapped his compin, "Yes."

*"I was just wondering when you were coming home. The boys are about to go to bed."*

He thought...felt for a few seconds. "I'm just finishing up. I'll be there in a few minutes."

*"Ok."*

Slowly, Ethan turned to the control panel and shut the shielded hatch. He said to no one, "I am a coward." After a long sigh, he climbed back down the ladder and exited the room. The lights faded as the door closed behind him.

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### **Supplemental USS *Independence*, Security Officer's Quarters In Orbit of Maluria VID**

Nicole Chase's quarters hadn't been used in a month. She could be found in Karim's quarters during most of her off hours.

She woke up. The sheets next to her were ruffled, but no one was there. The blonde groggily got up. It was cold once she got out from under the covers, so she grabbed Karim's uniform jacket and put it on her bare body. She didn't bother zipping it up.

Nicole had a bad case of bed hair. She saw a light from the living room and found Karim reading a book on the couch. He saw her and smiled gently. She crunched up her brow and asked, "What are you doing?"

"I couldn't sleep," he began. "I some times have insomnia, so I read to focus my mind."

She walked up to him gratified that he seemed to appreciate her attire, or lack thereof. She cuddled next to him, "So what are you reading?"

"Oh," he looked at the relatively modern reprint. The art of making actual books hadn't quite died, yet. "It's the Tibetan Book of the Dead."

"Sounds lovely," she jested. She leaned closer and read a passage,

“To the Divine Body of Truth, the Incomprehensible, Boundless Light;  
To the Divine Body of Perfect Endowment, Who are the Lotus and the  
Peaceful and the Wrathful Deities;  
To the Lotus-born Incarnation, Padma Sambhava, who is the Protector of all  
sentient beings;  
To the Gurus, the Three Bodies, obeisance.”

She looked to Karim for an explanation of what she had just read.

He had never really let her into this part of his life, or anyone else for that matter. It wasn't something he shared, not even with Kimula or Sintina. They knew he was a student of religion and spirituality. They didn't know his motivation. It was more than simply academic curiosity. The search was his...just his. He placated her with, “It'd be difficult to explain.” He closed the book and kissed her. “Besides,” he continued, “Seeing you in that jacket makes me think it's time to go back to bed.”

She grinned coyly, “You like it, do you?”

“Let me show you how much I like it.”

He leaned her back on the couch.

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**Supplemental**  
***USS Independence*, Executive Officer's Quarters**  
**In Orbit of Maluria VID**

The dark of his quarters parted as the light from the corridor flooded in. The light ended a moment later.

Ethan surmised everyone had gone to bed. It was quiet. He could hear the hum of the warp core. He crossed his arms and walked toward the windows. He couldn't see the moon they orbited from this side of the ship. The infinite void greeted him. It didn't judge him; nor did it console him. It was simply there.

He heard footfalls. It was Susan. He didn't confirm his suspicions by looking at her.

“I was wondering when you would come in,” she said quietly.

Still, he didn't look at her, "I didn't mean to wake you."

"You didn't."

Somehow that darkness and the stars had calmed both of them. There was no tension in the room.

Susan breathed softly. "Well," she began, "good night."

"How would you feel if I left Starfleet?" he blurted.

The bluntness of the question caught her off guard. After she recovered, she asked, "Is that what you want to do?"

"Something needs to change," he said. "I can't go on like this."

Susan, wearing a nightgown, walked closer, "I suppose we could go back to Earth. I'm sure there are several civilian organizations that could use your engineering skills." She added, "If that what you really want."

Ethan entered the academy when he was seventeen. His whole childhood revolved around building starships. It was all he ever wanted to do. Starfleet granted him his wish.

His happiest years were at Utopia Planitia. He was married to a wonderful, loving woman full of life; Jeff was born there; and he was living his dream. He tried to get reassigned there, but the current CO denied his request.

He looked over to Susan. For the first time he became aware of how tired she looked. Sure it was late, but it was more than that. Some of the life he so loved in her all those years ago had faded. He, he realized, was the cause.

Ethan recalled, "There are some civilian shipyards in orbit. I could apply to them."

"You could," she concurred, but she wasn't convinced he was seriously thinking about it. She found a way to prompt him, "Maybe you should sleep on it."

He got her message. "Alright. I'll be there in a minute."

Not sure whether to add another point or not, she paused. Then, Susan returned to the bedroom.

Again, Ethan stared out at the stars. He was truly torn. The only thing he knew for sure was, something deep inside him was about to break.

## CHAPTER 5

### **Stardate: 53609.2 (11 Aug 2376) USS *Independence*, Conference Lounge In Orbit of Maluria VID**

Captain Aurelia walked in with a glass of orange juice. Her senior staff paused their loitering around the table. She greeted them with, "Ok people, let's get to it."

They all assumed their seats.

Sintina took a sip; then, ordered, "Report."

The briefing opened up with the security status. Bin Nadal informed them, "At the moment, I've detected no other vessels in the system other than the *Rhode Island*. But that could change quickly. There are several ships, including Nausicaan, within five light years."

The young Vulcan engineer, Jinal, took his turn, "The repairs to the mining station are now on schedule, Captain. They should be complete in five more days."

"Some of the miners," volunteered Kimula, "on the other hand, are still demanding to leave and are effectively on strike."

Aurelia shrugged indifferently, "Not our problem. Those are civilian workers."

"I've read," began Jinal, "Starfleet is beginning to reprogram Emergency Medical Holograms to mine. Perhaps that could be a solution in this case."

Still apathetic, the captain, offered, "You can make that recommendation to Captain Killian. He's taking the lead in that department."

"Yes, ma'am."

The Arkonian doctor chimed in, "There were a few minor injuries to our engineering detachment, due to a cave-in. The details are in my report."



Aurelia scrolled down on the padd for a moment. The brief silence emphasized that fact that Windslow had said nothing so far. He seemed to understand how little his opinion carried weight and so, didn't offer it.

The captain looked to bin Nadal, who was no longer her first officer, "What about that colony on the second planet?"

The Persian made a quick glance at Windslow before responding, "Well, we have two options: wait to investigate it until the repairs are complete, or take a shuttle."

The disgraced first officer spoke while examining the glass table, "I recommend waiting. There's no need to take the risk of a chance encounter with a Nausicaan raider."

The observation was valid and prudent. However, the source immediately nullified the suggestion in Aurelia's mind. Outwardly, she ignored the remark. Again, she looked to Karim, "What do you think?"

He shifted his weight slightly, "There is a risk, but I think it's manageable. If we take the *Luger*, we should be able to outmaneuver them, should we encounter any raiders. We can also deploy a communications buoy, since we'll be on the far side of the star."

"I don't think we should delay, Captain," voiced the reptilian doctor, "If the Nausicaans hit that colony, we have to determine their needs as well."

Aurelia considered, but truth be told, her prejudice toward Windslow soured her judgment. "I'd rather multitask if I can. Besides, we have a schedule to keep. Karim, take the runabout to the second planet."

Bin Nadal nodded in acknowledgement and added, "I'd like to have a small team. We'll treat it as a reconnaissance mission."

"Fine, who do you want?"

The security chief saw an opportunity. He knew Sintina wouldn't like it, but he couldn't help but feel guilty. Windslow shouldn't be snubbed like this, he thought. "I'd like to take Doctor Zo'Kama and Commander Windslow."

The captain shot daggers at her friend. He was trying to make another of his goddamned points...or was he just trying to get him out of her hair for a few

days? She looked around at all the expectant faces. This moment would indicate to them how Windslow would be treated under her command. The first officer, himself, acted as if he were totally ignorant of the ensuing power play on his behalf. She crossed her arms and leaned back. In the end, she relented, "Leave as soon as you're ready." She glanced around, "Anything else? No; then, dismissed."

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### **Supplemental Runabout *Luger* En Route to Maluria II**

The preflight and launch were done with a minimal of talking. Bin Nadal sat in the pilot's seat, Windslow in the co-pilot's, the doctor sat at the station aft of the XO. It didn't take long, however, for Doctor Zo'Kama to cut to the quick.

She observed quite matter-of-factly, "I'm impressed by your actions Commander bin Nadal. Standing up for Commander Windslow took duranium plated testacies."

Karim smirked at the comment. Ethan didn't.

The first officer picked up on the point, "Why did you do that anyway? Pity?"

"Sir," he began, but his words failed him. He continued with, "I just don't think you should be treated like that. You are still a first officer and the rank deserves respect, even if the person..." He caught himself. Letting the sentence linger only made the omission more pronounced.

"...Even if the person doesn't," Ethan finished.

Bin Nadal unnecessarily rechecked his display.

"There is a saying on Arkonia," offered Zo'Kama, "Respect depends on the opinions of others; and often, the opinions of others isn't worth much."

Windslow swiveled backwards a bit and gave her a faint grin of appreciation.

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### **Supplemental**

## **USS *Independence*, Schoolroom In Orbit of Maluria VID**

There were only six children aboard the *Independence*, ranging from 3 to 15 Terran years old. The oldest, Elizabeth “Liz” Fulton, was the daughter of an enlisted engineer. Jeff and the doctor’s daughter, Zo’Kala, were roughly the same age. Paul made fast friends with Keagan Coulter, the only other child that had both parents on ship. Little Janie Calloway-Giles rounded out the group.

One good thing about a group this small was there was an adult for nearly every child. Susan was the only certified educator, but volunteering to help was encouraged. Ensign Juan Guerrero Macías, the head nurse, came in when he could. Keagan’s mother, who also served as the ship’s tailor and cosmetologist, was there, unless she had an appointment. A few other crew members assisted as their duties permitted.

Susan gestured Paul and Jeff to her desk. She explained, “I just got done talking to your father. He’ll be on assignment for the next few days.”

Immediately, the younger son protested, “Is he already gone? He didn’t even say bye!”

Jeff, on the other hand, was painfully stoic. He shrugged and went back to his studies.

Mrs. Windslow placed her hands on her son. She said, “I’m sure he was just in a rush, that’s all,” knowing it was a lie.

The boy wiped away a tear, “I just miss him.”

She hug him, “I miss him too, sweetie. I miss him too.”

## CHAPTER 6

### **Supplemental USS *Independence*, Counselor's Office In Orbit of Maluria VID**

Kimula listened to the trickle of the water with her eyes closed. She was in between sessions. She never found a better relaxation technique than to sit quietly and simply hear the constant flow of droplets fall.

Despite the serenity, her mind started back up again. Sintina had talked to her earlier. Her friend and captain dropped a not-so-subtle hint about evaluating Commander Windslow. Aurelia had a legitimate concern for the subject...but it wasn't concern for him that prompted her request. It was spite.

It put Kimula in an uncomfortable position. She knew Sintina wanted him deemed unfit for service...and maybe he was. If her evaluation didn't come to that conclusion, however, a frost would form on Sintina. It wouldn't be the first time Kimula had annoyed her, though. Their friendship had survived worse, but it wouldn't be pleasant for a week or so.

The familiar tones of the door chime sounded. The Andorian's eyes popped open and she sat up, "Enter."

Susan Windslow leaned in and offered a quick wave of greeting.

Kimula waved her in, "Susan, come in. Come in."

The German woman took a seat in one of the very plush chairs. She started with a sigh.

"How's things?" prompted the counselor. She recalled her two previous family sessions with the Windslows. It was like pulling teeth just to convince Ethan to participate. When they finally sat down together, Kimula could barely pry a few words out of the commander, or his oldest son, for that matter. Susan, on the other hand, seemed desperate to work through the issues. Some progress was made before Ethan's court-martial; but once it started, he distanced himself more than ever. She could tell from Susan's expression, that that pattern was continuing.

Mrs. Windslow looked defeated, at a loss. She said calmly, "Do you think I'm wasting my time?"

The Andorian leaned on the armrest, "I told you before, only you can answer that."

"I...I just keep hoping he'll get over it. That he'll become more like the person he was. He really was a great father and husband before the war. I...I know you've never seen that man." She drifted off for a moment and added, "I loved that man."

Kimula had come to understand a few things about Susan. She was driven. She was kind, perhaps to a fault. She was desperately trying to regain a sense of normalcy for her and her family. She also didn't like to admit defeat. The Andorian prefaced with, "I'm not saying we're to this point, yet; but I'd like you to consider something." She went on, "There comes a point of diminishing returns. When the effort you put into repairing something simply isn't worth it."

"Are you saying I should leave him?" asked Susan with an undercurrent of anger.

The Andorian raised a hand, "No, no. I'm not saying that." She reworded, "I'm just saying, as much as you want to fix it...as much as you need to fix it, you can't."

The comment was perceived as a near insult to Susan.

"There is only one person who can fix Ethan," continued Kimula, "and that's Ethan. He has to want to. We can try to persuade him, but that's all."

A single tear dropped from Susan's face and hit her blouse. She didn't like reality thrown in her face like that, but nor could she deny it.

Kimula pressed on, "You have to consider your own well being and those of your children."

Susan replied coarsely, "I know that."

The room was tight for a moment.

"Once Commander Windslow returns from his mission," stated the counselor, "I'm going to order – not request – him to see me on a regular basis." She went on, "I'd like to see you, Paul, and Jeffery separately first a few times and then bring you all together as a family. Would you be open to that?"

Looking at the blue carpet, she nodded.

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### **Supplemental Runabout *Luger* Near Maluria II**

The trip was a very long eight hours. Near the system's star, they deployed a communications buoy. If they did run into trouble, at least they'd be able to call for help.

Doctor Zo'Kama was running scans long before Lieutenant Commander bin Nadal guided the vessel into the planet's atmosphere. She detected nearly 6,000 human life signs. They were scattered between about a dozen small settlements, all within 100 kilometers.

Windslow discovered something more while the cabin began to light up red from the intense friction and fire outside. He ran the analysis again to make sure. He said, still not quite believing it, "There's a *Neptune* class ship down there."

The information was lost on the doctor, but the tactical officer looked back for a moment in astonishment, "An Earth Starfleet *Neptune* class?"

"Yeah," he confirmed.

The Persian didn't want to return to his controls, but forced himself. He commented, "There hasn't been a *Neptune* in service since the founding of the Federation."

A twinge of excitement could be heard in Windslow's voice, "And they could only go warp 2...2.3 at the most." He tapped in some data into his console, "It would've taken them nearly seven years to get here."

Karim added, "At warp seven, it'd only take a month to get to Earth from here." He shook his head, "The trip must have been awful on that small ship."

“Only the hull is left,” reported the first officer, “it’s been scavenged over.”

The inferno beyond the deflector shield ended, yielding to a clear, blue sky. Bin Nadal turned aft with a twinkle in his eye, “Permission to do a flyby, sir.”

Ethan couldn’t help but grin just a bit. The captain made it clear bin Nadal was to led the mission. It seemed the security officer had no intention of enforcing that order. Beyond that, he was an engineer. The chance to see a ship from 200 years ago would make any engineer giddy, even if it was just a hulk. He nodded slightly, “Granted.”

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### **Supplemental Near Human Settlements Maluria II**

As it happened, there was a settlement just about a kilometer way from the old Earth starship. The vessel had landed in a clearing. It probably hadn’t moved since then. Weeds grew up the landing struts. The crudely built ship was little more than a hull, rounded on the forward side, with two nacelles attached to it. One of them was missing. After spending a few minutes gawking at the simply designed vessel, the team pulled themselves away and began walking toward the nearest village.

They grabbed some equipment from the runabout before venturing forth. Windslow and Karim each took a type-II phaser, a tricorder, and a canteen. The Arkonian had a type-I phaser, a medical kit and a canteen full not of water, but *Ta’rat’ush*, a brown fluid that life on her planet was based upon.

The terrain was beautiful. Hills rolled lazily as far as the eye could see. All of it was covered in hip-high grasses. Patches of tress dotted the area as well. It was around 25 degrees Celsius with a moderate wind. In the distance, the away team saw a herd of what vaguely resembled woolly rhinos of pre-historic Earth.

Within a short time, they stumbled upon cultivated soil. Sprouts of some sort were growing in rows. All three Starfleet officers instinctively avoided stepping on the small plants.

They headed for an adobe-style house. As they approached, they noticed a man knelling down in the dirt. He was working in a much smaller garden. The man had his back turned to them. He was wearing a straw sun hat and what appeared to be hemp or linen clothing.

Bin Nadal gestured for Windslow and Zo’Kama to stop several meters away from the man. The Persian directed his voice to the man, “Wonderful day to do some gardening.”

The human male turned back. He was around sixty years old with a light complexion. His blue eyes twinkled with life and joy. He smiled widely upon seeing the Starfleet officers. There was no surprise in his face. He welcomed them like old friends, “Why, namasté, visitors!” He got to his feet and stepped forward. He bowed, as is custom in East Asian societies on Earth; though, he wasn’t Asian.

The tactical officer didn’t hesitate to bow in return. Windslow followed his lead. The reptilian doctor did so rather clumsily.

Commander Windslow introduced the team, “I’m Lieutenant Commander Ethan Windslow of the USS *Independence*. This is Commander Zo’Kama, our doctor. And Lieutenant Commander Karim bin Nadal.”

The man curtsied to each and said, “The name I use is Neale.” He walked up closer to Zo’Kama and examined her a bit. She didn’t give it a second thought and didn’t recoil. “I’ve never seen this type of body before. Does it serve you well?”

The odd phrasing of the question caused Ethan and Karim to share a look.

Zo’Kama, on the other hand, answered without missing a beat, “It does.”

Neale stepped back, satisfied, “Well, that’s desirable.” He gestured to the house, “Will you choose to consume a drink or some food?”

“Um...” began Windslow, “No...but thank you.”

“Just as well,” stated Zo’Kama, “food from this world is toxic to me.”

“Only to your body,” Neale gently corrected.



Again the wording Neale used caused them to hesitate. Windslow suggested, "Would you be willing to guide us to the...governing body of this colony?"

Neale cocked his head, "Well, there is no permanent government, really." He shrugged, "I will call a council meeting, if you desire."

"I don't know if all that is necessary," offered bin Nadal.

Windslow began to feel in charge again, "It'd be the best way to assess the needs of the colony." He looked at the middle-aged man, "How quickly could it organized?"

He responded with no sense of urgency, "The meeting could be held tomorrow morning." Neale added, "But we have no needs."

"Can you speak for the whole colony?" countered Windsow.

If the man took any offence, he didn't show it. He almost looked confused, "That we have no needs is simply an understanding of existence."

A perplexed look formed on the first officer's face. He gestured to Karim to take a few steps back to have a private conversation. The doctor smiled to Neale in reassurance and joined the other two.

In the small huddle, Windslow began, "I'm beginning to think this man is kind of the town hermit. We should continue on to the main settlement."

"Does that imply you question his mental state?" asked the doctor.

He didn't reply with words.

"Regardless," said Karim, "we need to see more of the colony."

Windslow stole a look at Neale. He was totally at ease. The fact that they were surely talking about him seemed to amuse him. He turned back to the officers, "Alright, we let him call the council and we'll see what comes of it. In the mean time, we continue on to the village."

## CHAPTER 7

### **Supplemental USS *Independence*, Conference Room In Orbit of Maluria VID**

"We will not be ignored!" blasted the miner representative.

"No one is ignoring you!" retaliated Captain Aurelia with just as much flare.

Her tone seemed to give the man, Jared Miller, pause.

The elder *Rhode Island* skipper took the opportunity to advance the dialog, "We have no doubt you have legitimate grievances. But Starfleet's mission here is to get the mine operational, not solve a labor dispute."

Miller crossed his arms, "The mine won't be operational without us."

The Saurian local manager leaned in. He addressed Miller, "I'm afraid the safety you want is impossible."

Jinal, the *Indy's* Vulcan engineer asked, "What do you mean?"

The manager, Junti, explained, "The miners are not complaining about the conditions of the mine itself. They are afraid of the Nausicaans."

"Well," huffed Aurelia, "There's not much we can do about that." She leaned back in dismissal.

Killian went into detail, "The Federation has tried to improve relations with the Nausicaans since its founding. The problem is you can barely find a regional government on Nausica, let alone a planetary body. There's been clan wars going on for hundreds of years. Once you make overtures to one faction, another takes offence. And of course, they all have their own agenda. That's why Nausicaans are so unpredictable."

Lieutenant Chase offered, a bit out of turn, "That's a good thing. If they ever got unified, they might be more than just an irritation to the Federation." Immediately after speaking, she wondered if she displayed more knowledge than her role allowed.

After a brief pause, Captain Killian nodded his head in solemn agreement.

“Still,” said Miller, “Gallicite isn’t worth dying over.”

“No one’s died,” observed Junti.

“Not yet,” added the miner.

Killian stole a glance from Aurelia. He got the distinct impression she had little interest in solving the labor situation. He offered, “The *Rhode Island* could hand over phasers and a shield array from one of our shuttles and install it on your compound. It would at least be some level of defense.”

“Nausicaans usually only attack soft targets,” added Chase, “A few phasers would probably be enough to deter them.”

Miller put his hand to his chin. He considered for a moment and spoke, “It’ll do until more permanent defenses can be installed.” He pointed at the Saurian, “And I want assurances better defenses *will* be placed there.”

Junti raised his hands in compliance, “Under the circumstances, I’m sure the foundation will approve of such emplacements.”

Killian looked at Miller, who nodded. Then, he stood, “Alright then, now that that’s settled, we can get back to the matter at hand.” He went on to address the more mundane details of the repair work.

Captain Aurelia was merely there. She didn’t really participate in the discussion. Kimula watched her from an adjacent seat. The counselor was a bit disappointed in her friend, for more than one reason. A confrontation would come soon.

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## **Supplemental Human Settlement Maluria II**

Neale offered to escort them to the village square. He walked to town, still with dirt on his knees. The trip was not long, only a few minutes.

The village was deceptively primitive. Most structures were earthen domes. The streets were paved with flat stones or bricks. Even though, Zo’Kama’s

scans detected electricity, powered by simple, but renewable techniques; an advanced sewage system, which helped irrigate the crops; and even, a wireless data network.

The people were dressed in equally simple attire. Each person who made eye contact with them smiled and bowed slightly. Many used the word *namasté* as a greeting. None of the away team was familiar with the term, however. The villagers were not scared or concerned in the least with the team's appearance or presence. There was curiosity, of course, but no malice at all.

As bin Nadal moved deeper into the village with the others, he noticed no distinct business establishments. Services and goods were being provided: a bakery, a tailor, food sellers, etcetera. The difference being, it was all done out of individual homes. No currency was changing hands. No barter was going on that he could determine. He decided to ask his escort, "What type of money system do you have here?"

The man looked back puzzled, "How can you place monetary worth on a full stomach or a sturdy roof? Besides, there is enough."

The tactical officer cocked his head, "Enough what?"

Neale smiled, "This should not be a foreign concept to you. The Federation uses no money as well." He added, "We may not appear to be aware of what goes on outside of this colony, but we are."

The reptilian doctor corrected him, "A system of debit and credit is still used in many areas."

"I'm sure that has its uses," commented the colonist. "We simply remembered it is not necessary."

Karim prompted, "Because there is enough..."

Neale stopped. He was tickled with the idea of teaching such a simple concept to the visitors. "There is enough bread for everyone. There is enough time to help others." He looked at Windslow with purpose, "There is enough compassion and understanding for us all."

In response, the first officer judged, "Sounds more like wishful thinking to me."

The farmer simply grinned and said, "If that's your choice." He gestured on, "The village center is not far. It will be an efficient place for you to observe the people of our village."

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### **Supplemental USS *Independence*, Ready Room In Orbit of Maluria VID**

"Enter," called Aurelia.

The conference meeting ended several minutes ago. Captain Killian returned to his ship and Aurelia just got the latest tactical scan of the area. The system itself was quiet. Around it, however, was a mish-mash of vessels from various species. Most of it was normal trade traffic. The trade routes were one reason why the Nausicaans found their niche as raiders. It was interesting, the raiders were always careful not to pillage enough to make it worth changing the routes. It was, after all, their mainstay.

The captain looked up to see the blue skin and white hair of her communications officer and counselor. She opened with a casual – and a tired, "What's up, Kim?"

The Andorian had a stern demeanor. She was here for business. She didn't sit. "I've considered your request to have Commander Windslow evaluated. I'll order him to see me once he gets back, but not to see if he's fit for duty or not. I'm ordering him to see me for his own sake and the sake of his family; not because his CO is an *eketha*."

Sintina's face soured, "That had better not mean what I think it means."

"It's a hardwood tree," explained Kimula, "it's brittle and inflexible, and often breaks in the wind."

Surprisingly, the captain's expression was one of mild relief, "Not as bad as I thought." She leaned back, not as flustered as Kimula had anticipated, "It doesn't matter. It won't take long for him to resign. He doesn't handle pressure well, if you hadn't noticed."

The Andorian became calculated in her tact, "What annoys you so much about him?"

“He betrayed the trust of those under his command...” her tone had an artificial passion in it.

Kimula jumped in, “That’s a practiced, expected answer. There is something else behind it for you.”

Sintina puffed bitterly, “You’re an empath now?”

“No,” she said, “But I know how to read humanoid body language...and I know a little something about you. Granted, not much considering I’ve known you for three years.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Counselor Kimula finally sat, “Karim and I are arguably your best friends, and we really don’t know that much about you. You don’t talk about yourself. I know your mother died when you were young, but I don’t even know your dad’s name or if you have any siblings.”

In an over-the-top, placating tone, Sintina said, “Alejandro. One younger brother, Javier. Happy?”

“Not really.” Her antennae twitched as she considered taking the next step. She had come to realize, however, confrontation was often the quickest way to the truth. She began, “We tolerated your...hostility during the war. Hells, all of us needed something to sustain us during that time. You had your hate, so did a lot of others.” The counselor noticed Sintina’s jaw clenching and her face started to flush with anger. Despite that, she went on, “The war’s over and you still have it.” She cautiously ventured, “I’m beginning to wonder if you had it all along.”

Her voice was almost a growl, “Drop it, Counselor.”

The warning did not deter her, “What happened to make you so bitter?”

Aurelia rose to her feet and blasted with all her might, “I said, drop it!”

Kimula achieved her short-term goal. It was now time to let Sintina alone with her thoughts. She stood as calmly as the situation would allow. “Permission to be dismissed?”

The response was a quick, “Yeah, get out.”

## CHAPTER 8

### **Supplemental Human Settlement Maluria II**

The village's center was a park. It was well landscaped with a shallow creek running through it. A small, pedestrian bridge crossed over the water. Several people loitered in the green grass or on large stones. Small groups, of all ages, were being tutored in various fields of study, each led by an elderly person.

Neale stopped near an old woman and a young girl. The away team paused with him. The two females were silently sitting barefoot on the grass. Their eyes were closed. Neale gestured to the team to be quiet for a moment.

Windslow crossed his arms and sighed impatiently. Bin Nadal placed his hands behind his back and began observing everyone in the park. Doctor Zo'Kama sat and began remove her boots.

Ethan looked at her with mystification, "What are you doing, Doctor?"

The reptilian's scaled feet were exposed; each toe had a two centimeter, black claw. She gazed up with an indifferent face, "We have a saying on Arkonia. 'When in Yew'hala, act as the Yew'halans do.'" She added, "Besides, I go barefoot any chance I get."

The tactical officer stifled a chuckle.

Windslow wasn't amused, but didn't try to dissuade her.

Each female gave out a long, deep breath. The elder addressed the child, "Describe what you became aware of."

The girl, about 10, searched for the words, and said, "It felt like...I was in a room with really good friends, but I didn't see any people. It was...smooth and silky...and bright, but...soft." Then, she pointed to Windslow, "When he came, it became darker."

The first officer's face became defensive.



"Yes," the older woman observed, "His energy is vibrating slower relative to ours. He allows his ego to define him. As do the other visitors, but to a lesser extent."

"Why does he do that?" asked the girl as only the wisdom of a child can.

"Ask him."

She made eye contact with the disgraced, former captain, "Why are you so unaware?"

The very question was incomprehensible to Ethan. He felt like he was being judged and labeled incompetent or inferior. He began to take offence.

The old woman prompted, "That one is not ready to accept his own abilities. In his mind, he believes you are attacking him. The ego is protecting itself. Do not judge his choices. Simply understand this is what his Oneself has decided to experience."

"Yes, Sempai," said the girl.

Windslow fumed, still believing his was being berated by a child.

The two females stood. The mentor greeted Neale, "Namasté."

He returned the salutation and introduced the visitors, "These individuals are here to assess the colony's condition: Ethan, Karim, and Zo'Kama."

"It is not often Starfleet comes to Tollen." She remembered, "My form was an adolescent when last they visited." She looked them over, "I preferred the red uniforms with the shoulder strap, however." She smiled.

The comment served to lighten the mood of the away team.

Windslow offered a hand, but was still somber, "I'm Commander Ethan Windslow, first officer of the USS *Independence*. You must be Sierra. Neale says you're as close to a village leader as there is."

She took it and dismissed the title he assumed of her, "I am simply recognized as one with many experiences and understandings. I've served as a sempai for many years."

"I've heard of that title," said Karim, "It comes from Japan on Earth. It's like a teacher or mentor."

"We find to term useful," said Sierra. "Though, the traditional meaning isn't totally accurate in our case." She explained, "Sempai do not claim superiority over their students, or kohai; only more experience. And each kohai chooses their own mentor, or mentors."

Windslow commented, "So there are no teachers or classes per say."

Sierra grinned, "We are all teachers...and all students."

He wasn't impressed with her 'fortune-cookie' response. He pointed at the girl, "Where are her..."

She informed him, "Heather."

"...Heather's parents?"

Sierra shrugged, "I'm not sure."

Neale offered, "I think they went hiking in the Western Hills."

"So you're her guardian?" pressed Windslow.

"Guardian?" she repeated. "What an interesting choice of word." She said, "We are all responsible for each other."

The first officer's mind began to process the answer, "So, the parents aren't obligated to raise their own child?"

Neale answered in bewilderment, "Obligation? That concept implies a lack of choice. It is a false idea."

Windslow shook his head in disbelief. His mind didn't see the irony of the judgment he was making.

Bin Nadal picked up the conversation after a lull, "You're colony is near Nausicaan space. Do you have much trouble with them?"

"'Trouble' is a label given by the mind," said Sierra.

The Arkonian repeated the security officer's question, in a more clinical manner, "Do the Nausicaans ever steal or...cause damage to your colony."

Sierra nodded, "I understand your meaning. We simply strive to be accurate with our words and thoughts. I can see how it might be...frustrating to individuals not accustomed to it." She went on, "Small groups of Nausicaans raid our colony every few months."

"But never the same Nausicaans twice," added Neale.

"Why's that?" came from Karim.

Both Neale and Sierra thought before responding. The woman answered with, "They soon discover we have nothing they desire."

The Persian continued, "Even if your technology doesn't impress them, Nausicaans have been known to trade slaves to the Orion Syndicate. They've never tried to kidnap anyone?"

Neale confirmed, "Some did intend to."

"What stopped them?" prompted Windslow.

Sierra replied cryptically, "They...changed their mind."

## CHAPTER 9

### **Supplemental Raider Ship *Raaik* Traveling at Low Warp near the Maluria System**

Nausicaans were arguably the most intimidating looking species in the Alpha Quadrant. Their long locks, row of forehead spikes, and evil-looking mandibles were the things of nightmares.

*Juhin* Wi'jawk slammed his fist on the metal table when he heard the report from *Shikikan* Maniv. "The Kyluk Empire will not go unpunished for this insult!"

The *shikikan*, or commander, just relayed the findings from another ship allied with the Hi'ought Shogunate. Their scans confirmed a vessel from the Kyluk Empire, a chief rival, was the one that attacked the Federation mining station.

*Juhin*, roughly translated: quartermaster, Wi'jawk continued, "We should contact Junti and explain the situation."

"Impossible," explained the commander, "Starfleet was called in to repair the damage. They might intercept it."

For all intents and purposes, the *juhin* of a ship was in charge. The only exception was in matters of combat and tactics. In those situations, the *shikikan* was the ultimate authority.

Wi'jawk sat and brooded, "The Syndicate will not be getting their gallicite this month."

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### **Supplemental Human Settlement (Tollen) Maluria II**

The setting sun gave way to unfamiliar stars. It cooled, but it was still comfortable. The winds picked up.

Inside an earthen dome, there was a central fire pit with an open chimney a few meters above it. It seemed a primitive way to heat one's home, but it worked well. Wooden furniture adorned the perimeter. Sierra and Neale sat on a padded, wicker love seat. Windslow and bin Nadal rested in rocking chairs. The reptilian doctor opted to sit on the warm, sandstone floor. Heather slept in a nearby alcove.

"Thank you for offering your home for us to stay in," said Windslow again. Though, he obviously wasn't comfortable there.

She grinned and warmly corrected him, "It is mine only in that I currently inhabit it."

The first officer grimaced. He was getting rather tired of all this semantic bull crap.

Neale explained, "You see, we don't claim ownership over material things. The closest we come to that would be what you call 'stewardship.'"

"That's not such an odd idea," commented Karim, "Many human traditions advocate that type of thinking."

"Very true," said Sierra, "Our ideas are nothing new. In fact, they are millennia old. Unfortunately, the ideas never really caught hold on Earth."

"Hence, your ancestors founded this colony," stated Zo'Kama.

"Exactly."

After a moments silence, Neale started, "I'm curious, Karim. How do you define yourself?"

"How do I define myself?" he repeated. It's not often he got asked such a question. Despite that, he decided to humor him. He shrugged, "I'm a Federation citizen, a Starfleet officer, a human."

The middle-aged man leaned in with genuine curiosity, "So, you believe you are defined by your physical form and the labels others in your society give you?"

"I suppose I do," he admitted. "I mean, I live within the bounds of that society, so why not?" He thought more on it, "But if you mean in a more abstract sense, I guess I subscribe to Descartes' supposition, 'I think therefore I am.'"

"So," gathered Neale, "You believe you are your thoughts and your mind?"

"Ultimately, yes," confirmed the officer.

The two Tollen colonists gently smiled at each other. Neale continued, "May I make a suggestion to that theory?"

Windslow was not engaged in the conversation. He considered these people little more than cultists. Zo'Kama, on the other hand, was riveted.

"Sure."

"What if, instead of 'I think therefore I am;' 'I am the awareness that perceives the thoughts.'"

The tactical chief came back with, "Kind of seems like splitting hairs."

"Oh no," said Neale softly, "It is the difference between being asleep and being awake."

"How so?" asked the Arkonian.

Sierra spoke up, "Let me put it another way." She asked Karim, "I assume from your previous answer that you do not believe you are your body?"

The Persian nodded, "I suppose that's true. Many philosophies think the body is a tool the *real* you inhabits."

"I see," she said. "So, the body is a physical construct."

"I can see that."

Sierra took it a step further, "What if the ego and the mind are just other tools; mental constructs."

It was in Karim's nature to be open to possibilities. He thought of it logically. "If you are not your body...and you are not your mind, what's left? Spirit?"

She replied, "That word has too many false ideas attached to it. But to answer your question: consciousness, pure awareness, is what is left."

At this point Windslow jumped in. He surmised, "It sounds like you're talking about God."

"Again," she said calmly, "The word 'God' is burdened with many inaccurate thoughts, but..."

This was the proof that these people were delusional. "But you believe you're God," he persisted.

The elderly woman smiled wide at his accusation. She purposely used his own wording, "Not only am I God, but so are you...and so is everyone else."

The first officer stood and puffed indignantly, "Such arrogance. If you're God, smite me down were I stand."

His theatrics only served to embarrass his officers. Neale and Sierra observed the drama indifferently.

"What you think of as God does not smite. Punishment is an illusion of the mind. That is the prime reason why that word is too tainted to use. We prefer using 'Being.'"

Ethan refused to listen to any more. He headed for the exit. "I'm going to sleep in the *Lugar*. We leave right after tomorrow's meeting." Then, he was gone.

As calm as ever, Sierra looked to Neale, "That one is close to a greater understanding."

"What do you mean?" asked Karim.

The man stated, "Times of great turmoil are favorable situations to gain a higher awareness."

Bin Nadal shook his head, "I still don't understand."

This time, it was Zo'Kama that provided the insight, "No one soul searches during good times."

## CHAPTER 10

### **Supplemental** **USS *Rhode Island*, Galley** **In Orbit of Maluria VID**

The Latina captain placed the fork and serrated knife on the empty plate. The skin of a sweet potato and small blobs of fat littered it. She leaned back in satisfaction. "I haven't had a real steak since I was a girl."

Her silver haired counterpart smiled, "Well technically, it's not Terran bovine."

She scrunched up her brow, "What was it?"

Playfully, he asked, "Did you like it?"

"Yeah."

"Then don't ask," he suggested.

She grinned and cocked her head, "Fair enough."

Most of the tables in the dining area were empty. Most of the crew had already eaten. It was a matter of pride for Captain Killian to eat after the majority of his subordinates. He sipped some type of ale and began, "Now that the laborers are cooperative, the mine should be up and running by Tuesday. The phaser turrets will be ready tomorrow; the shields, the day after."

Sintina rested her elbows on the small, utilitarian table, "I not sure what I think about dismantling a shuttle and giving these people weapons."

The older captain leaned back, "Well I admit, I'm a bit of an old fashioned C.O. Some in Command don't like us simple starship captains making those kinds of decisions anymore. The leash is much shorter for your generation."

Aurelia brushed a lock of her jet black hair out of her eye and stated, "With respect captain, we command starships. We're not diplomats or negotiators."

Jason Killian laughed out loud. "Is that what they're teaching these days?" He caught his breath and became much more somber. "I have twenty years of



command experience. In that time, I have been a diplomat. I have been a counselor. I have been a mentor. I've been a babysitter. And occasionally, I have been a fighter. A captain is all these things and more, regardless of what you've been told."

She stated, "I don't think so. Decisions like that are better left to the politicians. A captain could get into a lot of trouble for making those types of calls. As for the rest," she took a sip, "I don't like playing mommy."

Killian rebutted without sounding accusatory, "Good, bad, or indifferent, that's part of the job."

"Maybe, but not much. We have counselors and diplomatic officers that deal with most of that," she rejoined.

He sighed, "Well, as I said, I'm from a different generation."

She asserted, "The war forced the younger captains to be a bit less...soft."

The veteran captain wanted to laugh again at his naïve counterpart. He started with, "You know, the Cardassian Wars weren't exactly a walk in the park."

She backpedaled, "I didn't mean to say..."

He waved her off, "Oh I know. Don't worry about it." He sighed, "I agree with you. The culture in the fleet has certainly changed in the last few years." His face betrayed his unspoken sentiment: '...and it's not for the best.'

\*\*\*\*\*

**Supplemental**  
**Nausicaan Raider *Raaik* (Affiliated with the Hi'ought Shogunate)**  
**Traveling near the Maluria System**

Wi'jawk's beaded locks clattered as he reached the display. "Are you sure it's the same ship?"

Maniv pointed to the warp signature. "It is the same Kyluk ship that attacked Junti's mine." The *shikikan* then asked, "Have you told the Shogun?"

His eyes met Maniv's. They had no fear as he stated, "If we contact him without the shipment from the Orions, we are dead."

The *shikikan* nodded in solemn understanding. He barked to his helmsman, "Intercept that ship!"

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Supplemental Human Settlement (Tollen) Maluria II**

Karim bin Nadal looked up silently at the stars a few meters away from Sierra's home. The Perseus Arm of the galaxy could easily be seen in the night sky. Insects sang in the tall grass nearby.

The tan-scaled doctor walked next to him.

He commented as she approached, "I forgot how beautiful it looks from behind an atmosphere. I'm not used to seeing the stars twinkle anymore."

She looked up and commented, "There is...something about this place...these people that's soothing."

Karim chuckled to himself, "I don't think our X.O. thinks so."

"He was rather rude to them." She added, "Not that they seemed to care."

The security officer thought back to his high school philosophy. He quoted Marcus Aurelius, even though he knew his Arkonian shipmate wouldn't know the reference, "Reject your sense of injury and the injury itself disappears."

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Supplemental Runabout *Luger* On the Surface of Maluria II**

*Independence's* primary support craft lay in the shadow of the old United Earth vessel. Upon entering, Ethan activated minimal lights and climate control. There was a chill in the air. The hatch closed as he made his way to aft compartment, which held the bunk bed nook.

He prepared for bed, convinced he had these people pegged. *'Stupid neo-aged hippies, they don't know anything. They talk in gibberish. It's just rhetorical nonsense. Probably do more than make clothes out of cannabis. They don't know me.'* He rested his head on the pillow. *'They can't help me...'*

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Supplemental** **Nausicaan Raider *Tahin* (Affiliated with the Kyluk Empire)** **Traveling near the Maluria System**

The difference between Hi'ought Nausicaans and Kyluk Nausicaans were subtle, especially to outsiders. The two nation-states developed on separate continents on the homeworld. Most Kyluks were paler and their mandibles were less prominent than the Hi'ought's.

Everyone on the *Tahin* was of the merchant class. The owner and administrator of the ship, Ekik, didn't trust slaves or indentured servants.

Ekik was rather proud of himself. Emperor Kryim would surely grant him land on the Vebra coast if the Hi'oughts lost their gallicite trade with the Orions. Everything was going quite well. Starfleet would effectively end the arrangement *Juhin* Wi'jawk had with the mine owner.

Yes, the plan was going better than planned...until ten seconds ago.

Ekik steadied himself on a bulkhead. The tremors he felt were unmistakable effects of disruptor fire impacting the ship's modest shields.

He looked to Gryth, the gunner that had the lowest bid, "Who is it?"

"It's Wi'jawk's ship. Somehow, he found out!" He added, "He's hailing."

The ship's owner activated the main viewer himself. That Hi'ought pirate looked at him with a smug face. "Still trying to subvert the Shogun, I see."

Ekik shot back, "That murderer has killed tens of thousands in his quest to say on top! We will show you how fragile your shogunate really is!"

Wi'jawk chuckled darkly, "Not today...and not by you." He sniffed some type of substance and continued, "Stop your vessel and prepare to be boarded."

The Kyluk was in an untenable position. His ship was a 20 year old, Yridian cargo vessel. Sure, he was able to afford some upgrades, but it was no match for Wi'jawk's ship. The shogunate got their vessels second-hand from the Syndicate.

He weighed his options. He defiantly wouldn't win a fight. Running was no guarantee, either. Maybe he just wanted the gallicite? Ekik offered, "I don't have the ore anymore. Scan my ship. Confirm it."

The pirate looked off screen. The answer didn't seem to deter him. He looked back, "You may not have it, but you know where it went." He leaned closer, "I look forward to making you squirm." The channel closed.

The shaking resumed. Quickly, Ekik consulted his star charts. The closest place to hide was still the Maluria system. He ordered the course change at maximum warp.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Supplemental**  
**Nausicaan Raider *Raaik* (Affiliated with the Hi'ought Shogunate)**  
**Traveling near the Maluria System**

*Shikikan* Maniv reported, "They're heading back into the system at warp six." He added with a predatory grin, "I love it when they run." He looked to the quartermaster with glee.

Wi'jawk was more somber, "The ship is yours. I want him alive...at least until we know where the gallicite is."

Maniv barked the order to pursue.

## CHAPTER 11

### **Supplemental**

#### **Nausicaan Raider *Tahin* (Affiliated with the Kyluk Empire) Traveling near the Maluria System**

Gryth called out over the venting gasses from an overhead pipe, "Rear shields are gone!"

The ship owner could do nothing. Fleeing the *Raiik* was their best chance – their best wasn't good enough. He sat down and contemplated what the next few hours would be like...if he had a few hours.

Ekik was thrown out of his chair, surely because his port nacelle was just hit. The impact of the metal deck served to reinforce his despair. He would not get out of this. As a deckhand reported, "Warp drive is out," Ekik smirked, '*Of course it is you fool.*' He pushed himself up and ordered, "Turn about! Fire all weapons!"

The Kyluk watched his viewer as bolts of highly charged particles lashed out toward the oncoming ship. The disruptors were easily absorbed into the Hi'ought's defenses.

Then came the retaliation. The *Raiik* opened up with Klingon-made cannons. Ekik watched the tactical overlay. He watched helplessly as his own shields dropped. Seventy-eight percent...fifty-nine...thirty-five...seven...zero.

Seconds seemed like years. The Hi'ought could beam over at anytime. There was no doubt in Ekik's mind that the Shogunate would win the day, but that didn't stop him from wanting to kill as many spikeheads as possible. He was surprised to find his tone calm, almost serene, "Get ready for intruders." He unsheathed a knife with one hand and a disruptor with the other.

Most of the crew already had blades and disruptor pistols of various types. Those that didn't rushed to find some.

A slight hum started. His crew readied their weapons. Then, pillars of orange-red light appeared. The firing began even before the Hi'oughts materialized. Two fell to the deck, dead, before the transporter effect faded. Those that formed unharmed quickly opened fire.

Ekik didn't know exactly how many intruders there were, but they seemed to be everywhere.

Gryth threw away his weapon and pleaded to the Hi'ought. "I'm just a privateer! I have no loyalties to him!"

Ekik didn't have time to be disgusted. He slashed the throat of a Hi'ought behind him and killed another with a well placed blast. He glanced to see Gryth and an attacker beam away. He wished he had time to kill him before he disappeared. More Hi'ought beamed in. A crewmember was killed, then another. The bridge, and probably the rest of the ship, was overrun.

The *Tahin* owner fell to his knees. Had he been shot? There was a warm, tingling sensation in his shoulder. His vision blurred. He fought against it, but the darkness took him, despite his fierce resolve.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Supplemental**  
**Nausicaan Raider *Raaik* (Affiliated with the Hi'ought Shogunate)**  
**Near the Maluria System**

*Shikikan* Maniv could not be content once the report came in that the Kyluk ship was secure. It was dangerous to engage them this close to a Starfleet vessel. Though, 1.2 light-years was well within their scanning ability, he hoped the system's heliosphere and other intra-stellar debris obscured the weapon's fire. "Any response from the ships in the system?"

A young Nausicaan consulted his reading and reported, "I can't get a clear reading on them. But no ships have left the system."

Maniv nodded, "That's a good thing. Continue scans. If you detect movement coming from that system, tell me immediately."

\*\*\*\*\*

In another part of the ship, *Juhin* Wi'jawk doled out Nausicaan-style justice.

Ekik's return to consciousness was a jolting backhand slap to the face, made more painful by the small spikes on Hi'ought knuckles. A trait Kyluk lacked. He awoke just in time to see blood fly from his face and splatter on the deck. He was bound to a chair in a small room. His deep-sockets protected his eyes,

but they were swollen so much that he could barely see. What he did see disheartened him. He wasn't dead. For he was sure the Kyluk afterlife wouldn't allow Hi'ought bastards. He became aware of the pain his body was in. The mercy of adrenaline hadn't come. Perhaps Wi'jawk injected him with a suppressor. It would account for the unnatural suffering he was experiencing. Defiantly, he muttered, "I'll never tell you where we hid the gallicite." He managed a grin, "You'll be killed by your own shogun."

The comment didn't have the desired affect. Wi'jawk laughed out loud. He violently grabbed Ekik's jaw and held it steady – since he couldn't – and informed him cruelly, "I already know where it is. Several of your crew proved to be...very cooperative. I'm just doing this for the fun of it." Another hearty belly laugh followed.

Deep down, he knew the betrayal of his crew to be a probability, but he still choose outward denial, "You lie!"

Wi'jawk saw no reason not to give it to him details, "That's what you get when you have a mercenary crew, Ekik. I know the ore is on the colony of pacifist humans. It was clever to hide it in the warp nacelle of that old ship. We would have never found it, even if we scanned the area."

The Kyluk Nausicaan slumped his head. His plot had imploded totally.

The spikehead hellishly smirked, "I'm just trying to decide to kill you slowly or turn you over to the shogun and let him do it." He leaned closer, "Either way, your head will end up on a pike."

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**Stardate: 53611.9 (12 Aug 2376)**

**Bolian Freighter *Jolim***

**Traveling along Trade Routes near the Maluria System**

The attack had come without warning. But Captain Lum should've known better. It was a classic trap. The pirates in this area had been using obsolete Romulan spatial mines for years...obsolete, but still effective.

He checked the shield status: they were holding. The mine caused enough damage to force them to impulse. His freighter had limited weapons and maneuvered like a Tellarite swamp sloth. Its one saving grace was its shields,

one of the best arrays available to civilian vessels. He knew, however, in a fight they'd only buy him time; nothing more.

He didn't entertain the hope that it was just an abandoned mine. His fears were confirmed when a Yridian-made ship dropped out of warp nearby. The pirates had come for their spoils.

His small bridge crew looked to him for courage and guidance. Captain Lum opened a Federation emergency channel, "To any Federation vessel in range: This is the Bolian cargo ship *Jolim*. We are under attack and require immediate assistance. Please respond."

Lum waited. He knew several nearby merchant and passenger ships heard his hail. Once upon a time, merchant ships came to each other's aid and forced pirates away through force of numbers. Now, with a few exceptions, everyone kept their distance when a distress call went out. Most people simply relayed the S.O.S. to Starfleet, which may or may not get there in time. It was a sad state of affairs within the merchant marine community.

Even though, the Yridian ship had modest disruptor power, they cut into his shields a bit at a time. His counter-attack wasn't ineffective. The *Jolim* was giving them a bloody nose. In fact, he was mildly surprised the pirates didn't cut their losses by now.

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### **Supplemental** **USS *Independence*, Main Bridge** **In Orbit of Maluria VID**

The chronometer read 02:13:09. Lights all over the ship were dimmed, but not on the bridge. The bridge never slept.

Petty Officer First Class Alex Coulter manned the security station. The tactical station was actually a podium behind the command chair. The security station was nearby, but had the advantage of having a chair to sit in. He toggled through different active scan results. He tagged a stellar radiation spike for Tang to analyze later in the morning.

Then, an icon flashed red. An emergency message was coming in. It was on a civilian channel. He turned forward, "Lieutenant Virak."



The dark-skinned female swiveled the captain's chair back, "Yes, Mr. Coulter." The Vulcan also served as a security team leader during the alpha shift.

"We're getting a distress call."

She said in the standard Vulcan monotone, "On speakers."

Coulter transferred the call. Lum's disembodied voice filled the bridge. After the brief message, the noncom added, "I've run a detailed scan of that area. The *Jolim* is in close proximity to another, unregistered vessel."

A Denobulan, Cadet Trevix, glanced back expectantly. "Should I set a course, Sir?"

The Vulcan considered a moment. "No, Cadet. Acknowledge the distress call and inform them to standby." She touched an armrest control, "Captain Aurelia to the bridge."

## CHAPTER 12

### **Supplemental USS *Independence*, Main Bridge In Orbit of Maluria VID**

Captain Aurelia strode on to the bridge barefoot. She wore only black sleeping pants and a matching sports bra. Modesty wasn't something she was concerned about. After being briefed she opened a channel with the *Rhode Island*. She wasn't sure, but she thought she caught Killian's eyes glance down. She chuckled internally. Quickly, more urgent matters took over. "My orders were to protect you. I don't feel comfortable leaving you and the miners alone for 16 hours." It would take that long to travel to the besieged freighter and back.

The elder captain waved her off, "We'll be fine. The *R.I.* isn't totally toothless. Starfleet was being a bit overprotective when they assigned you to us anyway."

Sintina still hesitated.

Killian added with a semi-playful smirk, "Let me put it this way: if you don't help them, we will."

Normally, Aurelia would take offence at such a comment, but she had grown fond of the man. It allowed her to take it as the helpful kick in the pants it was intended to be.

She considered. Fleet wide policy demanded they assist a ship in distress if the mission allowed. She also liked the idea of seeing some action. Besides which, Killian had made the decision easy for her. "Alright," she wagged her finger at her counterpart, "but don't you get attacked while we're gone."

Jason grinned, "We'll do our best," and closed the channel.

Captain Aurelia put on her warface and ordered, "Cadet, lay in a course and engage at warp nine."

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Supplemental Nausicaan Raider *Raaik* (Affiliated with the Hi'ought Shogunate)**

## Near the Maluria System

Maniv hovered over the scanner. Finally, he saw what he was waiting for. He turned back, "The attack cruiser is heading for the *Tahin*."

Wi'jawk's mandibles clicked together with satisfaction. "Good."

"We should wait a few hours before heading into the system." The *shikikan* added, "I am surprised the Kyluk crew didn't betray you."

"They wouldn't dare," he responded with confidence. "I told them I injected them with a dissolving, biochemical explosive and that if they don't get the neutralizer from me in three days, it will kill them."

Maniv was impressed, "I had no idea you had such devices."

The Nausicaan spread his mandibles, "I don't. They're too expensive...but there's no need to tell the Kyluk that."

Both broke out into laughter.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Supplemental Human Settlement Maluria II (Tollen)

Dawn had come to the village. Karim, Sierra, and Neale sat outside enjoying a breakfast of assorted fruits. Zo'Kama found a large boulder nearby and was sunning herself.

The tactical officer took a bite of a strawberry, which grew quite well here, and asked, "I know I've heard that greeting you use before, but I can't remember what it means."

"Namasté" said Neale. He went on, "It's an old Sanskrit word. It means: the divine within me honors the divine with you."

Sierra elaborated, "It serves as a reminder to us that what we see is not what we are. We are much more than that. We are all part of a whole and the apparent separation is merely an illusion of perspective."

Karim never missed an opportunity to have a philosophical debate. He asked, "How can you deny we are separate beings? What you're talking about is the removal of individualism. We aren't Borg, after all. We value our individual traits."

In her constant, serene voice, Sierra explained, "Individuals are indeed different from one another, but differences don't imply separation. You are confusing the two."

Neale chimed in, "Your hands are different from your feet, yet you consider both to be part of you."

Bin Nadal shook his head, "I'm sorry, I'm just having trouble believing that a Jem'hadar and me are parts of the same thing."

"That is because your definition of 'you' is narrow," responded the woman. She took a sip of water, "We use words like 'I,' and 'me' still because they are useful, but we have come to redefine these words. When I use 'I,' I don't mean what most others mean. I define myself as this particular individual awareness."

"So you are separate," Karim said good-humoredly.

She restated, "No, simply a different part of the one, universal awareness. We use the word 'Oneself' to refer to these more limited awarnesses."

Karim loved playing devil's advocate. "If these...Oneselves are part of the universal awareness, why are they more limited than the whole?"

Neale leaned in and fielded the question, "Imagine if you were the only thing in existence. There was nothing else but you. How could you experience what you are?"

The Starfleet officer thought hard for a moment. It was a paradox. Finally, he said, "I couldn't. If I were everything, there would be nothing to compare myself to."

Sierra smiled wide, "Exactly, which is why the universe compartmentalized itself into smaller, more limited units – us – in order to experience what it was."

Bin Nadal cocked his head, "Interesting theory. Your religion reminds me of Taoism or Mizarian *Ona*."

"It is not a religion," corrected Sierra, "It is an understanding. Religions are often concerned with being 'right.' An understanding has no such agenda."

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### **Supplemental USS *Rhode Island*, Main Bridge In Orbit of Maluria VID**

Jason Killian walked onto the utilitarian bridge from his small ready room. "Confirm your readings, Mister."

A lieutenant looked back from his station, "Confirmed. An Orion destroyer is entering the far side of the system."

"Can you determine its course?"

"It's heading for the second planet, sir."

Killian cursed to himself, "Damn the timing." A terrible thought occurred to him. Maybe it wasn't just bad timing? He barked to his security chief, "How far out is the *Indy*?"

The gold-trimmed officer responded, "Point eight-seven light-years. It'd take them five hours to get back, sir."

The captain snapped into action, "Contact the *Independence* away team on the planet via the relay. Tell them to expect company."

"Aye sir."

"How quickly could we reach the second planet?"

"It's on the far side of the star. It'd be an eight hour trip at full impulse, Captain."

The silver-haired captain thought about the situation. Could this all be a ploy to leave the mine unattended? He said, almost to himself, "This just won't do."

## CHAPTER 13

### **Supplemental Runabout *Luger* Maluria II (Tollen)**

It was an odd sensation to see sunlight shine through the windows of the *Morpheus* class runabout. Typically, the windows only had stars in them. Windslow had got up about an hour earlier. He took a sonic shower and now had breakfast alone in the cabin. A few hundred meters away, on his left, sat a relic of human engineering. He found himself staring at the old Earth vessel that brought the colonist here.

He felt empty, just going through the motions. He didn't feel like a husband. He didn't feel like a father. He didn't feel like a Starfleet officer. He just felt numb. The indifference didn't last.

It didn't take long for the guilt to come, as it always did. It consumed him like a shadow. The image of Helen Stuttgart, his CMO, being tore asunder filled his mind. He relived seeing the pieces of her body dropping back to the dirt like gruesome hail. Half of Joe Caplin's head was vaporized before him, leaving one, lifeless eye. Ethan put his hands to his face as he willing entered the hell he had created for himself.

He was jolted out of his self-inflected torment by the computer voice, *"Incoming message from the USS Rhode Island."*

He cautiously lowered his hand as if Joe's one remaining eye would still be there, gazing at him. After taking a moment to gain some composure, he responded, *"This is the runabout Luger, Rhode Island."*

A small screen on the console flashed to life. Captain Killian filled the display. *"Commander Windslow, we've detected, what is most likely, a pirate raider heading for your location. I suggest you recall your team and make yourself scarce."*

The report smacked into him like a stone upside the head. This is not what he wanted to deal with. Secretly, he was happy to follow Killian's recommendation. He ran his fingers through his hair before asking, "How much time do we have?"

*"About thirty minutes."*

Windslow nodded silently.

Killian continued, *"The Independence responded to a distress call from outside the system and I'm concerned this may be a ploy to leave the mine unattended."*

Absently, the *Indy XO* said, "I understand. The mine takes priority."

Immediately the captain rebuked, *"Bullshit. My priority is to make sure no lives are lost. The Nausicaans could steal gallicite until they're blue in the face, as far as I'm concerned."*

The response prompted a quizzical look.

Killian stated, *"I'll be at your location as soon as possible."*

"But what about the mine, sir?"

*"I'll worry about the mine. You worry about your own butts. Chances are I won't get there in time."* He leaned in, *"So, take care of your team."*

The channel closed.

The emphasis wasn't lost on Windslow.

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### **Supplemental Human Settlement Maluria II (Tollen)**

Karim, Zo'Kama, Neale, and Sierra loitered in the central park. They all sat casually in the thick, green grass. In about an hour, the meeting Windslow requested would take place.

Bin Nadal continued the conversation, "So you don't believe in coincidence?"

"No," replied Neale. "We believe everything that happens, everything you experience, your oneself has chosen to experience."

The reptilian doctor chimed in, "There are a group of Arkonians that have a similar belief. All good and bad things happen for a higher reason."

“So,” ventured Karim, “if I get robbed, on some level, I agreed to get robbed?”

“That is so,” said the old woman.

The Persian had played devil’s advocate all day. It was almost expected at this point. It was more out a desire to debate than disprove. He was convinced his next point would cool their argument. “What about rape? You can’t tell me people chose to be raped.”

Without missing a beat, Sierra said, “Not on a normal, conscious level. But we believe each of us has a...for lack of a more accurate word – contract – with other oneselves. Your perceived enemy on this level is simply doing what it agreed to do with your oneself. So yes, that experience was agreed upon by all parties.”

Kairm’s sport was over. He was genuinely insulted by her answer, “That’s outrageous! Rape victims don’t choose that on any level!”

Sierra didn’t respond to his indignation. She leaned in and calmly began, “Consider the concept of ‘victim.’ By its very nature, it robs people of their power. I say that is impossible.”

“Unless,” added Neale, “you allow it.”

The elder woman continued, “My oneself could no more impose its will upon your oneself than matter and anti-matter can exist in the same place. Remember, we are all one coordinated being. Your liver doesn’t fight your kidney, does it?”

Karim leaned back in an attempt to soak it all in.

The Arkonian asked, “So all tragedies, all wars, all injustices are part of the universe’s plan?”

“The universe’s plan,” said Neale, “is to allow freewill. And sentient beings choose those things.”

Sierra added, “How can the universe experience what it is without experiencing what it is not?”



Kairm shook his head, "This is very confusing. You say you don't believe in coincidence, yet you believe in freewill as well. How is it possible to have both?"

Sierra smiled, "Because everything that has happened, is happening, will happen, and can happen, is happening now. It's just that your consciousness relishes each moment, each experience one at a time."

"Huh?"

Neale put a gentle hand on her shoulder, "Perhaps it would be beneficial to save that discussion for another time."

Bin Nadal began to rub his temples. Luckily, a distraction he was more comfortable with presented itself. The combadge activated, *"Windslow to bin Nadal."*

He tapped his chest, "bin Nadal here."

*"Double time it back to the runabout. Some pirates are heading our way."*

The security chief stole a glance from the doctor and then rejoined, "Sir, what about the colonists? We're obligated to protect them."

There was a pause. *"When the Nausicaans enter orbit, it won't take them long to find the Luger. It's a sitting duck here."*

Karim noticed it didn't address his question.

Neale said, "We don't require your protection. We won't be harmed."

"We can't take that chance," came from bin Nadal. He took measure for a second. He looked to Neale, "I noticed a canyon on the way down about 80 kilometers west of here. How deep is it?"

His brow crunched up, "Oh, I would say about half of a kilometer."

The security chief raised his voice slightly to address Windslow over the com, "Sir, might I make a recommendation."

## CHAPTER 14

### **Supplemental** **Nausicaan Hi'ought Ship *Raiik*** **In Orbit of Maluria II**

Old, dried blood from various species had been splattered on the bulkheads. It was dark and the air smelled rotten. Ekik had become very familiar with the stench. The chair was now gone. His only recourse was to lie on the floor. Thanks to 'visits' from members of the Wi'ought crew, he had no desire to move. A fresh coat of blood littered the deck and walls.

The beads on *Juhin* Wi'jawk's locks clacked together as he rounded the broken and battered Ekik. He knelt down and grabbed Ekik's face. He rose it up to meet his, "You're not going to die on me yet, are you?"

The Kyluk Nausicaan spittled some blood, but his eyes were defiant.

"Good," replied Wi'jawk with a cold satisfaction. He released his face, which hit the deck with a near lifeless thud. The *Juhin* continued, "If every single milligram of gallicite isn't in the nacelle of that old ship, I will keep you alive and in constant torment for a very, very long time."

Ekik managed a huff through his bleeding nostrils.

"Look on the bright side," said Wi'jawk, "if it's all there, I'll send you to whatever deity you believe in when I get back."

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Supplemental** **USS *Rhode Island*, Main Bridge** **In Orbit of Maluria VID**

"Administrator Junti," stated Captain Killian for the third time, "I know this is a bad time, but that does not change the fact that I need to evacuate the mine immediately."

The Saurian began to protest again, "Starfleet promised to protect the mine..."

"I interpret that to protect the people there and this is the only way I know how to ensure the wellbeing of you and your miners." Killian was tired of

reasoning with Junti. It was time to go. He added in a tone that precluded debate, "Prepare to be transported aboard. *Rhode Island* out."

The screen reverted to a view of the small moon, with a jade-colored gas giant behind it.

The captain looked to his tactical officer, "Mr. Veril, lock on to all personnel on that moon and beam them up."

To his credit, the Coridan officer immediately set about fulfilling his orders.

Killian thought to himself, *'They won't be happy, but they'll be alive.'*

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Supplemental Near the Human Settlement Maluria II (Tollen)**

Commander Windslow triangulated the beam down site of the pirates and relayed it just before he went deeper into the canyon. It was at the landing site of the old *Neptune* class ship. Bin Nadal wasn't sure what to do at that point. At least, it seemed, the pirate ship in orbit hadn't detected the *Luger*.

The doctor managed to prompt the colonists to go to their homes. Her advice was nonchalantly obeyed. The people truly didn't seem concerned. Zo'Kama got the distinct impression they were merely placating her. Currently, she was taking cover beside a large bolder in the central park. "What would they want from that old ship?" she asked over the secured comline.

Bin Nadal had positioned himself on the outskirts of the village. He was totally concealed in the tall grass. "I'm going to recon."

There was a short pause from the Arkonian, *"I'm not sure that's a good idea. You don't have anything to mask your bio-signs."*

The security chief retorted, "Chances are, they aren't using sophisticated scanning equipment. The grass will give me plenty of concealment. It won't be a problem."

Another pause. *"If you say so. Good hunting."*

"Thanks," concluded bin Nadal. He moved quickly but deliberately to the old ship.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Supplemental At Neptune Class Landing Site Maluria II (Tollen)**

Wi'jawk sniffed the air. He had spent so much time onboard a ship, the freshness seemed foreign. He raked his hand against the tall grass as he turned and saw the remains of the alien ship. It was supported by four landing struts. The main hull was about four meters above the ground.

He beamed down with four others. He said, "Find a ramp or ladder so we can get on that ship."

One of his crew asked, "Why couldn't we have beamed directly into the ship?"

He was irritated by the question, only because he asked the same thing to Maniv. The quartermaster repeated his *Shikikan's* answer, "We can't get clear readings inside. There could be all types of debris and instabilities in that ship. It's best to board it on foot."

\*\*\*\*\*

Karim cursed himself for not asking for visual scanner from the runabout. He was in sight of the United Earth vessel. His uniform was dirty from crawling on the dirt. The grass did hide him, but it also prevented him from seeing what was happening. He could squat up for a second, but he decided not to risk it. Instead, he reached for his tricorder.

Before opening it, he put it on silent mode and set it for passive scans only. Nausicaans: five of them. All of them were huddled by one of the landing struts. There was probably an access ladder on it. They were going to board it, but why?

He sighed gently, trying to figure it out. After a moment, he used the tricorder to text a message to Windslow – it didn't transfer. *'Damn it,'* he thought. The runabout couldn't get the message with all the rock between them. So, he sent to Zo'Kama: *5 nasicans - boarding old ship - stndby.*

Karim watched three of the Nausicaans climb the ladder and enter. Two stood guard. His readings were sketchy once they boarded the ship.

He closed the tricorder and rapped his fingers on it. He rationalized it was best to stay put. Curiosity, however, overrode his caution. He crawled closer.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Supplemental Human Settlement Maluria II (Tollen)**

Slowly Sierra's eyes opened. She was in the earthen home she used. Neale was there, across the room. His eyelids rose at nearly the same time.

The elder woman observed, "The possibility of reincorporation has risen for the visitors."

He nodded, "I felt the frequency aligning." Neale took a breath, "Do you chose to intervene?"

She closed her eyes for a moment and opened them, "Yes, I choose the experience."

"I wonder how many others will make the same choice?" asked Neale.

"What will be, will be," she casually replied as she got to her feet.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Supplemental At *Neptune* Class Landing Site Maluria II (Tollen)**

The tactical officer simply couldn't get any closer. He could overhear the guard's banter. Any further would risk exposure. Cautiously, he readied his type II phaser. At first, he got it out purely in case he was discovered.

Then, a new thought came to him. He just might be able to subdue the guards and the three others in the ship. He did have the element of surprise. It was a risk, but he could do it. He set the phaser to level three, heavy stun. He would have to be quick. Karim readied himself for the encounter.

Then, he stood. Bin Nadal immediately targeted one of the guards and fired. The Nausicaan dropped unconscious. He aimed for the second, but the other guard already had a weapon at the ready. Karim knew he didn't have time. He might shoot the other guard, but not before he was shot as well – and he didn't think they'd be nice enough to use the stun setting.

The *Indy* security officer threw himself back into the tall grasses and moved to another location, all the while, disruptor shots streaked through the prairie grass. He heard the guard call for the others already in the ship. Soon, it would be four on one. Karim shot back blindly. "Well, that was stupid," he said to himself.

## CHAPTER 15

### **Supplemental At Neptune Class Landing Site Maluria II (Tollen)**

The noises of gently flowing grass and harsh disruptor fire made for an odd pairing. Karim popped up for a moment, fired, and returned to the false safety of the grass. He dared not stay up long enough to see if he hit his mark.

Bolts of energy pelted the dirt around him. He crawled a few meters and tapped his combadge. "Bin Nadal to Zo'Kama. I'm under attack and pinned down. It's only a matter of time before they get me."

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Supplemental Human Settlement Maluria II (Tollen)**

The doctor, trimmed in blue, was still resting against the boulder. She received the call and responded, "I'm on my way to your position. I'll try to reach Commander Windslow."

*"Understood."*

As the reptilian began a swift stride, she tapped her breast again, "Zo'Kama to runabout *Luger*."

Nothing.

"Doctor to Commander Windslow."

No response.

She made a low grumbling sound and exclaimed, "Turds."

The Arkonian was surprised to see dozens of colonists leave their homes and begin to walk toward the landing site. She paused to witness the spectacle. "What are you people doing?"

Many ignored her and walked past. Some simply smiled as they continued on. Finally, she saw Sierra. "What's going on?" asked the doctor.

The woman didn't stop walking, but said, "We have made a choice to play a role in what is to come."

"That's not an answer!" Zo'Kama blasted as she began walking with the crowd. She waved her hands up in the air and yelled, "Go back to your homes! There is a firefight up ahead. It's not safe!"

The colonists politely acknowledged in various ways but her warnings did not cause anyone to hesitate or change direction. They were like an unstoppable wave.

Finally, the doctor realized there was nothing she could do to deter them. The best she could do was to go with them.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Supplemental Runabout *Luger* Maluria II (Tollen)**

Ethan rested his chin in his hands. He couldn't shake the idea that he was still running. He was effectively cut off from his team. It was happening again.

At least...at least he was safe. The thought tormented him. HE was safe. His team, however...who knew? He was failing them, just like before.

Windslow sat there, unable to act. He just looked at the thruster control panel. It seemed to be berating him.

*'Just go up high enough to check in, damn it!'* he thought to himself.

Another undefined voice responded, 'But I might be detected by the pirates. They could get me.'

*'They might, but those people out there are your responsibility!'*

'I don't want to be responsible for them. I don't want to get hurt.'

*'So your safety is paramount to other's safety.'*



‘...’

*‘Is your safety paramount to your sons?’*

‘... I hate you.’

*‘That changes nothing. Are you too cowardly to make a choice?’*

A tear of self-hatred ran down Ethan’s cheek. At least his hand found the controls. He began to ascend.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Supplemental**  
**At Neptune Class Landing Site**  
**Maluria II (Tollen)**

Bin Nadal had moved past any notions of besting the Nausicaans. At this point, he was simply trying to evade them. Four pirates were now sweeping the tall grass with disruptor fire. He couldn’t crawl faster than their advancement. Soon, he would be hit.

Just as that thought entered his mind, directed energy sheared his back. He called out in agony. The wound was deep, but probably not fatal. It would, however, end any hope of avoiding the Nausicaans. It was too painful to move anymore and his shout would bring them upon him in seconds.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Supplemental**  
**Runabout *Luger***  
**Maluria II (Tollen)**

Windslow eased the craft only a few meters below the rim of the canyon. He opened a channel, “Windslow to bin Nadal. Report.”

The response was quick, “*Commander, need immediate...agh.*” The transmission was cut off.

“Commander? Commander bin Nadal?” The first officer checked his readings. The receiver in bin Nadal’s combadge was no longer working.

Quickly, Ethan hailed the doctor, "Windslow to Zo'Kama. What's going on?"

\*\*\*\*\*

The crowd was wading in the sea of prairie grass. The Arkonian smacked her compin, "Commander, thank gods. Bin Nadal is being overrun by Nausicaans. They're near the Earth ship. Some colonists and I are making our way there, but I'm sure a strafing run with the shuttle would help."

\*\*\*\*\*

Windslow hesitated for just a moment. He was still in the runabout. He would be relatively safe. "I'm on my way."

The *Morpheus* class runabout lifted out of the cover and zoomed to the landing site.

\*\*\*\*\*

Nearly fifty villagers tromped their way through the grass. Sierra walked closer to Neale, "I'm being requested in a different direction. My role will not be the same as yours."

The man nodded, "Very well. Namasté, Sierra."

She smiled wide, "Namasté, Neale." The elder woman broke off from the main group and walked slightly to the north.

## CHAPTER 16

### **Supplemental At *Neptune* Class Landing Site Maluria II (Tollen)**

Karim's cheek hit the dirt hard. The Nausicaan's rough hand grabbed his collar and got him to his knees again. Despite the brutal treatment he was getting, bin Nadal was thankful they hadn't killed him on sight. At the very least, it bought him time.

The four Nausicaans towered over him. The leader, the other's called him Wi'jawk, asked again, "Where are the other Starfleet officers?"

Wi'jawk didn't wait for a reply before striking him again. Karim assumed the Nausicaan was just getting warmed up and didn't expect any answers yet. The tactical chief's head was throbbing.

The pirate walked around him. "How many 'fleeters are here?" Immediately, Wi'jawk kicked the gash on his back, forcing bin Nadal forward in the dirt once again. Karim couldn't stop from crying out in pain.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Supplemental USS *Rhode Island*, Main Bridge In Orbit of Maluria VID**

The *R.I.*'s Kasheetan helm officer turned aft, "Sir, I have the double warp jump set into the navigational computer. Our first jump will take us over the star's northern pole. The next will take us to the second planet."

Killian stood from the center seat, "Is everyone aboard?"

"Yes sir," came from Mr. Veril. He added with some trepidation, "Sir, shouldn't we inform the *Independence* about the situation?"

The senior officer smirked. "No. Not yet. I have the distinct feeling, if I do, Captain Aurelia will do an about face and get here too late to do anything, anyway." He shook his head, "No, the *Indy* needs to take care of that merchant ship. We need to take care of those people on the second planet."

The Coridan bowed slightly, "Aye sir."

"Alright." Killian said. He stepped forward and placed a hand on his helm officer, "Ewngus, get us there."

\*\*\*\*\*

**Supplemental**  
**USS *Independence*, Main Bridge**  
**Nearing the Bolian Freighter *Jolim***

The dark-skinned Vulcan, Virak, reported from the tactical podium, "The freighter's shields have failed." She checked her previous scans and said, almost to herself, "Intriguing."

Captain Aurelia looked back over her shoulder, "What's intriguing?"

The security officer responded, "I've analyzed the attack of the Yridian ship. The attack pattern suggests they are merely harassing the *Jolim*. Despite a sustained attack of several hours, the Bolian vessel only has minor damage. The *Jolim's* shields have been down for nearly an hour, yet the pirates have made no attempt to board the merchant ship."

Kimula asked rhetorically from the comm. station, "They could have raided the Bolians and left by now. Why are they still there?"

Aurelia shrugged and added, "Whatever the reason, they've made a fatal mistake." She asked, "How long until we're in weapons' range?"

"Two minutes, ten seconds," rejoined the Vulcan.

The captain regarded her Andorian friend, "Open a channel to the pirate ship." She had been trying to warn the Yridian-made ship off for hours without avail. They might listen a bit better now that they were ready to get pummeled. "Unregistered vessel, this is your last chance to withdraw. Failure to do so will result in...well, the result will be your sorry asses getting kicked."

"Nice touch, Captain," humorlessly commented Kimula.

Virak sighed slightly. Then, she reported, "They are not responding, Captain."

"Works for me," said Sintina. She sat on the edge of her seat and ordered, "Red alert." The bridge dimmed and a klaxon sounded. She continued, "I want their shields weakened with pulse phasers then disable their engines with conventional phasers. I don't want them bugging out."

The Vulcan manipulated her console and confirmed, "Understood."

Aurelia tapped a control on her armrest. A tactical overlay appeared on the main viewer. The *Independence*, represented by a Starfleet icon, was in the center of a pale yellow circle. The circumference was the weapons' range. The edge neared the two other icons. She watched it intently. She didn't want to delay a second more than she had to.

Just as the pirate vessel was about to reach the circle, its symbol disappeared.

The captain shot up, "Did they go to warp?"

"Yes, ma'am," stated Virak. "They assumed a course of fifty-six mark twenty-one."

D'nas turned his head, "Do you wish to pursue, Captain?"

She addressed Virak, "How fast is that ship?"

The Vulcan consulted the computer, "They're maximum speed is warp six point eight two, Captain."

"We can afford to let them get a head start, then," rationalized Sintina. She stated, "Hail the *Jolim*, Kim."

"Yes, ma'am." She did so, "I'm putting the response on screen."

The tactical display changed to an image of a Bolian man. "Thank you, *Independence*," said Captain Lum. "I don't know why they were stringing us along like that. We been unable to put up an effective fight for hours, but they just kept on picking at us."

Sintina put her hands on her hips, "They didn't even try to steal anything?"

"No," replied the Bolian, "They were the stupidest pirates I've ever come across."

The captain grimaced and allowed the mystery to be put on the back burner. "Do you have need of any medical or engineering assistance?"

"Well, I certainly wouldn't turn any assistance down, but now that the attack is over, I think we can be underway in a few hours. As for injuries, we do have a few, but I think my doctor can handle it."

Aurelia grinned dubiously. Many private vessels didn't care to have Starfleet board them. Part of it was pride that was associated with any ship. Part was resentment toward new inspection powers Starfleet attained during the war. To be honest, Sintina didn't blame him. She'd probably do the same thing if she were in his position.

She nodded, "Okay, Captain Lum. How about we stick around until your engines and shields are up and running."

"That would be appreciated."

Aurelia nodded and gestured to Kimula to close the channel. "Are you still tracking that pirate?" she asked Virak.

"Yes, ma'am. They are thirty-five point nine million kilometers away."

"D'nas," continued Sintina, "Lay in an intercept course. Warp nine. Engage."

"Aye ma'am."

Next, the captain turned to the Andorain in blue trim, "Report our progress to the *Rhode Island* and request a situation report from their end."

Kimula complied. The response she got made her jaw drop. Still processing the report in her mind, she swiveled her chair and said somberly, "Captain, you're going to want to hear this for yourself."

## CHAPTER 17

### **Supplemental** **USS *Rhode Island*, Main Bridge** **Near Maluria II**

Captain Killian could feel the deck shudder as disruptor fire hit the shields. He began to reconsider his decision to stand up. The pirates in the Orion vessel didn't waste anytime once the R.I. dropped out of warp. The raiders had skillfully engaged them well before they could get into transporter range of the planet.

The tactical overlay on the main viewer indicated their forward shields were now at 78%. He called out over the klaxons, "Mr. Veril, let them know we're not as weak as we look."

The Coridan replied back, "Aye sir. Returning fire."

Killian was confident. The *Nova* class was among the least impressive ships Starfleet had, tactically speaking. However, they were pretty much on par with the dated Orion destroyer. And he wasn't about to let a bunch of pirates get the better of him.

He saw the beams of red energy hit their mark. The raider strafed away. "Target their aft side with a torpedo to soften up their shields," he ordered.

"Target locked. Torpedo away."

The screen showed the illuminated ball smack soundly into the pirate vessel.

Veril reported, "Hostile's aft shields are down to 14%, Captain."

"Good. Follow up with phaser fire. Disable their engines." He put a hand on his helm officer, "Keep with 'em, Ensign."

The young Kasheetan female didn't look up, "Yes sir, I'm doing my best."

He gave her an additional pat, "If all else fails just do evasive pattern Kirk delta. It's an oldie, but a goodie."

She smirked slightly, "Aye sir."

A voice from behind him, Veril, called out, “The *Independence* reports the freighter is safe and the pirates have fled. They’re requesting a status report from us.”

The silver-haired Killian looked back and sighed. “Well, I’m not going to give a false report. Give Captain Aurelia our current status.”

The gold-trimmed officer nodded and sent the reply.

Killian added as another tremor came, “I have a feeling I’ll be getting a call in a moment.”

The Coridan reported, “The pirate ship is now on our dorsal side. Could I get a quarter roll to port?”

“You hear that, Ensign?” said the Captain.

“Aye. Quarter roll to port. Engaging.”

“Starboard phasers firing... Two impacts. Their shields are holding.”

The Captain reminded them, “I want their engines out. Try to maneuver behind them, Ewngus.”

The helm officer replied, “Aye sir.”

“Sir,” called out Veril, “The *Independence* is hailing.”

He snickered under his breath, “That didn’t take long.” Killian ordered, “Route it to my monitor here.” He spun the display next to the captain’s seat so he could see it and activated it.

Captain Aurelia’s face was flushed, “What the hell is going on over there?”

The bridge shook again. Then, Killian said, “I don’t have time to go into it right now, Captain. Can I call you back later?” Then he ended the transmission.

Veril gave him an ominous look.

Killian looked back, “What? I’ll call her back later.”

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**Supplemental**  
**USS *Independence*, Main Bridge**  
**1.4 Light-years away from the Maluria System**

The bridge crew was in stunned silence.

Sintina's fingernails gripped ever tighter to her armrest. She was more mad at herself than Killian. Getting them out here was an obvious ploy and she fell right for it. She jumped up and barked, "D'nas take us to the second planet. Maximum warp."

"Aye ma'am," he rejoined.

She spoke up, "Bridge to Engineering."

*"Lieutenant Jinal here."*

"Jinal, give me as much speed as you can possibly get."

*"Yes ma'am."*

She felt the ship slip into sub-space and the stars on the view screen morphed into streaks in the blackness. "How long?"

The Tamarian exchange officer consulted the computer, "At the current speed of warp 9.96, it will take about three hours to reach the planet, Captain."

At hearing the estimate, she immediately regretted going *only* warp nine to get here. Kicking herself would have to wait. She rested a hand on the back of the captain's seat for a moment. As if to redeem herself a bit, she stated, "Report the description of the Yridian-made ship to the Border Service and other authorities nearby. Maybe they'll get lucky and run into them."

Virak nodded, "Yes ma'am." She added solidly, "Captain, what about the Bolian freighter?"

Sintina looked back as if to say 'You would have to bring that up, wouldn't you?' The Vulcan's eyes didn't waver. It was a valid question. Finally, Aurelia replied, "I think they'll be alright."

It wasn't the definitive answer the Vulcan was hoping for.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Supplemental**  
**Nausicaan Hi'ought ship *Raiik***  
**Near Maluria II**

A display of knives from around the quadrant fell suddenly and violently from the bulkhead as the ship was rocked by another photon from the Starfleet vessel. They scattered on the metal deck causing added noise to the already loud bridge.

"*Skikikan* Maniv," yelled the gunner. "Our aft defenses are gone!"

Maniv was already talking to Wi'jawk on a small viewer. He snapped at the gunner, "Bring us about, fool! Target their torpedo launchers!" He continued with Wi'jawk, "I don't know how much longer we can hold this position. The Starfleet ship is more maneuverable and their shields are stronger."

"We have been delayed," said Wi'jawk. "We still need to activate the transport enhancers around the ore, so we can beam it up."

The *Raiik* shook again. The battlemaster rejoined, "It won't matter if we still have Starfleet on our ass!"

"It's your job to destroy that ship!" barked Wi'jawk. "Can you do that or not?"

Maniv sat back. Another tremor. He looked at the tactical display. The weakest part of the Starfleet's shield grid was the forward section. The greatest advantage of the *Nova* class was their photon torpedoes. His ship was only armed with Klingon-made disruptors. He would have to counter that advantage. Maniv thought for a moment. He looked into Wi'jawk's eyes, "Yes, I can." Then, he closed the channel.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Supplemental**  
**USS *Rhode Island*, Main Bridge**  
**Near Maluria II**

Captain Killian watched as his ship lanced out another phaser beam, which impacted on the rear hull of the pirate ship. Their impulse engines went dark and some debris flew off.

The confirmation came from Veril, "That did it. They're drifting." He chuckled, "The impact even knocked off two of their RCS thrusters."

Killian grinned, "They just don't make 'em like they used to." He ordered, "Full stop. Hail them again. They might be more talkative now."

"Aye sir." A moment passed. "They're responding."

A gruesome looking Nausicaan appeared on the screen. His face betrayed his annoyance.

The victorious captain began, "Might I assume you are the master of your vessel?"

The Nausicaan nodded slowly and introduced himself, "I am *Shikikan* Maniv of the Hi'ought Shogunate ship *Raiik*. And you are?" He looked off screen as if monitoring something.

"Captain Jason Killian of the USS *Rhode Island*." He continued, "Well now that the introductions are out of the way, I require you to lower your shields, power down your weapons and prepare to be transported aboard my ship." He added, "I hear our brigs are much better than the typical Nausicaan prison."

Maniv didn't respond immediately. He continued to look off screen.

Killian pressed him, "If you do not comply with my orders I will continue our attack and leave you in much worse shape than you are now."

Maniv grinned and looked up. "I fear it is I that will leave you in worse shape, Starfleet."

A great burst of energy came from the ventral side of the ship. It caused everyone on the bridge to be knocked to the ground.

Killian hit the carpeted deck with a thud. He was sure he sprained his wrist upon impact. He was about to get to his feet when another thunderous blow pushed him to the rear of the bridge. He saw the entire bridge crew seemingly fly to the aft stations. The lights went out. Even the displays were blank for a moment before the emergency power kicked in.

The captain found himself on the floor near the science station. Veril and another officer were nearby. Several groans some came. It was odd reassurance to him. At least they were still alive. He got himself to his elbow and began to stand. When he went to put pressure on his left leg, an intense, sharp pain throttled him. It must've been broken. "Report," he called out.

Veril was the first to respond. "I'm alright." Two others made similar remarks. One voice he didn't hear was Ensign Ewngus.

"Where's Ewngus?" asked someone.

Dark smoke was beginning to fill the room.

"Ensign," yelled another.

Killian crawled along the deck to the tactical station and pulled himself up. The power was intermittent, but it was enough. He used his un-sprained hand to check the readings. The ventral side had taken massive damage. The main deflector was down, most of the shield emitters were burnt out, half of the phasers were gone, along with the forward torpedo launchers.

"How did they do this?" the captain asked himself.

Veril's voice filled the bridge, "I found her." His tone dropped, "She's dead."

## CHAPTER 18

### **Supplemental Nausicaan Hi'ought Ship *Raiik* Near Maluria II**

The large Nausicaan clutched his fist in victory as he saw the explosions. "Ha!" Maniv turned to his helmsman, "Bring our impulse engines back online. Turn us around as fast as you can!"

\*\*\*\*\*

Ekik lay in a small pool of his own blood and spittle. He knew the ship was in a battle. The impact tremors were unmistakable. The power had hiccupped several times. If he were to ever enact revenge, there would be no better time. He looked to the hatch. He dared to hope that the locking servos might have been disabled during the attack.

He slothed his way to the door and with all his strength pushed apart each side of it. It seemed futile at first, but then, a small give; then, some more. Now, he was able to place his fingers in the breach.

He didn't know how much energy he had to mount a resistance, but with each centimeter of the hatch opening, his will – and rage – doubled.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Supplemental USS *Rhode Island*, Main Bridge Near Maluria II**

There was no time to mourn Ensign Ewngus. Luckily, everyone understood that. Captain Killian motioned to Veril to take the helm.

Killian said, "Bring us about. We still have aft shields and weapons."

The Coridan entered the commands. "Sir, the helm is very sluggish."

"Bridge to Engineering," called the captain.

*"Engineering here."*

“What’s wrong with the engines?” Jason had no despondency in his voice. There simply wasn’t time for it.

*“The driver coil on the impulse engine is out, sir. And we only have two thrusters still online.”*

Killian fought back a curse. It wouldn’t be constructive. He looked to the helm, “How long until the aft shields can offer us some protection?”

Veril examined the data, “It’ll take us another 47 seconds to turn a full 180, sir.” He added, “But the Nausicaans aren’t in much better shape. Their impulse is down too and they lost at least two thrusters.”

An alert came across the tactical station. The captain, still balancing on one foot and nursing a sprained wrist, blinked in frustration. The impulse engines of the enemy ship had just fired up.

It was a ploy, one of the oldest in the book. They turned off their own impulse engines to draw them in. The Nausicaan commander put a new twist on it, though. Killian recalled sensor data to confirm his suspicions. There it was, right on the screen. The two thruster assemblies Veril thought broke off were, in fact, ejected. Then, they passed right through the *R.I.*’s weakened shields and were detonated. Two fusion bombs just went off outside the hull.

It was a wonder they were in as good a shape as they were.

He looked up, “It was the RCS thrusters. They were rigged.”

Veril glanced back at the realization. He said dejectedly, “I’m sorry, sir. I wasn’t paying close enough attention. I should’ve told Ewngus to maneuver out of the way. I...I didn’t know...”

Killian wanted to blast, *‘Well, you should’ve! Never let debris enter the shield perimeter!’* He didn’t, however. The berating would have to wait. Instead, he informed the bridge crew, “The pirates will have a bead on us before we can get to a defensive position.”

The crew looked back at him expectantly. Any edge they might have had against the Nausicaans was gone. The pirates could now outmaneuver them and pick at their unshielded sections until there was nothing left. The veteran captain was reduced to few options.

Killian addressed former tactical officer with his unwavering, blue eyes, "Mister Veril, engage the warp drive. Take us out of the system."

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Supplemental At the *Neptune*-Class Landing Site Maluria II**

Karim was in a daze. He knew he had been severely beaten, but beyond that was a blur. He found himself thinking, *'At least I'm in the shade.'* Slowly, it came to him that he was restrained to one of the landing struts of the old ship. The four Nausicaans placed him there before boarding the ruin.

The sky was bright. Something in it caught his eye, a spec of...something flying. Was it in the distance or just an insect? It got bigger. The shape became more clear. It was the *Luger*!

A wave a relief overcame bin Nadal. Windslow could get him out of there and...

Hellish bolts of red energy cracked from the sky. They slammed into the runabout, which was still at least a kilometer away. The *Luger* fell sharply to the ground.

Karim could see the dust and smoke from the impact. His head dipped in despair.

\*\*\*\*\*

The inside of the old Earth vessel was dark, hot, and very humid. Several types of rodents and pests had made it home.

A long cavern, the remaining nacelle, was lit by lamps brought by the Nausicaans. A huge pile of grayish-silver rock ran the length of the catwalk.

Wi'jawk oversaw his other kinsmen install meter-long cylinders, transport enhancers, around the ore. His communicator chimed. He answered, "Wi'jawk. What is it?"

*"We're now in orbit. I just destroyed a small craft on the surface that was heading to your location. The starship has been forced to flee and the other*

*Starfleet vessel won't be in system for another two and a half standard hours."*  
Maniv added, *"I don't think I'm in any danger of losing my job."*

Wi'jawk grinned.

He then asked, *"What about your progress?"*

The quartermaster rejoined, "We only need a few more minutes. There is more ore here than we expected."

*"You should send out a patrol,"* said Maniv, *"Our sensors aren't good enough to pick up life forms on the planet. There could be survivors."*

He gestured to a nearby crewmember to do just that and said to Maniv, "Understood. I'll contact you again soon."



## CHAPTER 19

### **Supplemental At the *Neptune*-Class Landing Site Maluria II**

The *Independence* tactical officer's hands were bound around the landing strut of the old ship. He took such a severe pummeling, he could barely stand. One eye had swelled shut and blood ran out of his nose and mouth. He heard footfalls on the metal ladder coming down another strut.

Soon, Wi'jawk entered his limited vision. He began, "Your comrades are dead, Starfleet. Any rescue is impossible. I am left with two options, let you die here of starvation, or kill you now." He paced slowly, allowing the chilling comments to sink in. "You endured our treatment well. You didn't plead for mercy. I like that." The Nausicaan raised his disruptor, "So, you'll die now."

Karim noticed movement behind Wi'jawk.

A calm, tranquil voice came, "Are you sure you want to do that?"

The Nausicaan spun around fast. He did not know why he didn't shoot out of pure reaction.

Before him was a group of humans standing in the tall grass. One of them was closer than the others, a male with graying hair, wearing a straw hat.

"Who are you?" barked Wi'jawk.

The man smiled, "You may refer to this form as Neale."

"Leave here or I'll kill you all!"

Neale replied, "We choice to stay. What is your choice?"

Something came over Wi'jawk. All the humans looked at him...they just looked at him with caring eyes. Not one of them had any fear. They looked at him like an understanding mother would a child. He couldn't bring himself to shoot. He...He didn't want to. He had an odd sense about these people. It was as if, in some way, these people were his family. Wi'jawk became afraid for a moment and then, like a warm blanket, a feeling of acceptance came over him. He lowered the disruptor. Finally, he uttered, "I...We just want the gallacite."

Neale stepped closer, "So be it. We choose to help that man." He pointed to Karim.

Wi'jawk backed away. He nodded, "Alright." He returned to the base of the ladder.

The colonists began to release Karim. For bin Nadal it was like he was floating in a comforting mist.

\*\*\*\*\*

About a kilometer away, the hull of the downed *Luger* had cut a deep gash in the terrain. It came to rest tilted mildly on the starboard side. The hatch popped open unceremoniously. It landed in the dirt with a dull thud. Smoke escaped through the, now open, door. A moment later a coughing, soot covered Windslow crawled from out of the runabout. He rolled onto the dirt, gasping for cleaner air.

It seemed his attempted heroics were yet another failure.

He didn't hear the rustling of the grass over the flames and sparks coming from the *Luger*.

A dark form stood over him. The sun silhouetted the person. It crouched down. It was Sierra.

She began evaluating him, "You have a broken rib – maybe two. Just stay still. I'm afraid I'm not much of a doctor."

Windslow coughed out, "How'd you get here so quick?"

The elderly woman patted his cheek and smiled, "You asked me to come."

"What?"

Sierra chuckled, "You'll understand someday." She added, "You'll be alright."

A much deeper, harsh voice came, "No he won't and neither will you!"

Both looked to see a single Nausicaan with a disruptor. He leveled it at Sierra. Ethan tried to get to his feet to push her out of the way. The pain he caused himself was intense, but it was for nothing.

For a single, serene moment, Sierra turned to Ethan – and smiled. The discharge hit the woman square in the chest. She fell to the ground.

Windslow's eyes met with the Nausicaan's. The fire of life consumed him. He pushed up his injured body and charged the pirate before he could re-aim. Their bodies collided and both smashed into the grass. The disruptor fell a short distance away.

The commander ended up on top of the Nausicaan. He was no longer in control of himself. His fists moved with a fury that he did not think possible. He didn't know which was inflicting more damage: his fists to the Nausicaan's face or the Nausicaan's face to his fists. It didn't matter. He didn't know if it was courage or stupidity to take on a Nausicaan single-handedly. Again, it didn't matter. The fire had taken him.

The pirate managed to reach Ethan's throat. He squeezed with the unnatural strength of his species. Windslow got a few more good shots in before trying to pry the hand away. It didn't work.

The Nausicaan stood, still grasping Windslow's throat, and threw him against the *Luger's* hull. He landed in the dirt.

Ethan looked up at the pirate. He had recovered the disruptor and pointed it at his face. Windslow came to realize he was going to die here. It wasn't an intellectual realization. It was a feeling. It wasn't a feeling fear. It was a feeling of peace. He looked at the barrel of the disruptor. It was coming. He was not afraid.

A red beam came of out seemingly no where and hit the Nausicaan in the back. His eyes rolled back slightly and he fell, like a bag of meat, into the deep grass.

It didn't take long for the source of the phaser fire to be known. Doctor Zo'Kama ran up a second later. She glanced at him, then Sierra. The Arkonian went to the woman first and opened a medical tricorder. A moment later, without administering any type of treatment, she moved to Ethan.

Zo'Kama readied a hypo and injected him. "That will stop the swelling."

His eyes were fixed upon Sierra. "Is she dead?"

The reptilian doctor didn't stop her art as she responded, "I couldn't do anything for her."

\*\*\*\*\*

**Supplemental**  
**Nausicaan Hi'ought Ship *Raiik***  
**In Orbit of Maluria II**

Four Nausicaans formed on the dated transporter pad. One of them was Wi'jawk. Another collapsed onto the deck as he materialized. Maniv met them there. He asked, "Where's the other one?"

Wi'jawk responded matter-of-factly, "He didn't report back in time. I assume he's dead."

The battlemaster then gestured to the unconscious man, "And him?"

"He's stunned," was the simple answer. Wi'jawk went on, "Are we ready to depart?"

Maniv nodded, "We'll leave orbit immediately."

Wi'jawk expanded his mandibles wide, "We've done it! Let's go home."

## CHAPTER 20

### **Supplemental** **USS *Rhode Island*, Main Bridge** **Near the Maluria System**

It was not Captain Killian's proudest moment. He was humble enough; however, to know that some days you get the bear, and some days the bear gets you. He stared into the small screen on his desk.

Captain Aurelia stared back. She was still more upset with herself, than him. "I should've never left the system."

Killian gloomily added to his report, "We detected the ship leaving the system a few minutes ago. Now that the threat is gone, I'm taking us back to the second planet."

Sintina acknowledged silently. She said, "We're still over an hour away. I'll see if my crew can find the warp signature of that ship." Resolve was in her voice, as she added, "I want those bastards even if I have to go to Nausica to get them."

Jason nodded. He concluded with, "When you find them, don't be too gentle."

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Supplemental** **At the *Luger* Crash Site** **Maluria II (Tollen)**

Neale and the others carried a bloody Karim to the downed runabout. The Arkonian doctor was already setting up a field medical site just outside of the *Luger*. As bin Nadal approached, she set up another cot.

A large Nausicaan was laid out nearby. Zo'Kama made sure they wouldn't have to deal with him for some time.

Soon, the colonists also saw the corpse they once recognized as Sierra. They had little visible reaction to it.

A moment later, Ethan waved Neale to him. Neale knelt next to the injured Starfleet commander.

"I'm sorry," began Windslow, "She was too far away for me to help her."

The older man breathed and smiled gently, "An apology isn't necessary. Death is merely the shedding of the body. It's no different than taking off a coat that is no longer needed."

Suddenly, Windslow found himself frustrated. He brooded, "You don't even mourn your dead. She was a good lady. She came to help me. You bastards don't even care." His frustration became fury, "I saw her shot down for no good reason! She was no threat to that Nausicaan!"

Neale, to Ethan's eternal disgust, simply looked back at him with kind eyes.

Windslow was breathing heavy now. He plopped his head back to the pillow, "I hate you people. You don't care about anything."

The old man removed his straw hat. He said peacefully, "Sierra agreed to shed her body so that you would have the very emotions and experience you are having now."

The commander just huffed indignantly.

Neale leaned in and added, "The others who died on that planet far away, the ones you saw die; they chose to shed their bodies for the same reason."

The reference to the tragic events on Pentath III that led to his court-martial caught him off guard. It was like putting salt in a wound, especially right now. He grabbed Neale's shirt, "How do you know about that?"

He wasn't startled, "It is difficult not to know it. You constantly transmit thoughts about that day."

"What? You're an empath now?"

"All of us are, once we quiet our minds."

Ethan released the man. "If you are so damn powerful, why didn't you prevent Sierra from dying?"

"You still don't understand." Neale stood, "Because the choice was hers to make. It can not be otherwise."

A tear ran out of Ethan's eye, "That's bullshit. Those people don't chose to die. That's insulting!"

Neale shook his head, "No. It's liberating." He sighed, "The seed has been planted. It will wither or grow. The choice is yours."

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Supplemental Nausicaan Hi'ought Ship *Raiik* Near the Maluria System**

The gods had graced Ekik. He was able to move – stumble really – to the medical room without being seen. Calling it sick-bay would be like calling a hut a mansion. There was a single Hi'ought unconscious on the bed. There was no one else. He suspected there were no more than ten crewmembers, anyway. Likely, their medic wasn't a dedicated doctor, but only a crew member that had some medical training.

Ekik ransacked the cupboards and drawers, looking for anything to help him. Tools and medical equipment crashed to the floor with a flurry of bangs. Finally, he found the drugs he was looking for; stimulants: polyadrenaline, tricordrazine, even some black market drugs. He injected himself with them all.

The chemical cocktail coursed through his veins and gave him an unnatural rage, courage, and strength. He yanked at a nearby knife and plunged it into the recovering Hi'ought. He twisted it deep until he was satisfied the man would never awake.

Then, he charged out the door with a war cry of vengeance.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Supplemental At the *Luger* Crash Site Maluria II (Tollen)**

Most of the colonists began to return to the village. A few with medical training remained to assist Zo'Kama. She really didn't require it. Fortunately,

everything the doctor needed was in the wrecked craft. The help, none the less, was appreciated.

She approached Windslow, "I just got off the com with Captain Killian. The *Rhode Island* will be in transporter range in a few minutes." She injected him with a mild sedative.

He looked up, "What about the *Independence*?"

"Captain Killian said they're intercepting the Nausicaan ship." She patted his chest, "They won't get far."

That knowledge was just enough satisfaction to allow Ethan to close his eyes and allow the medicine to do its work.

A few meters away, Neale sat next to Karim. The security chief had gestured him over a moment before.

"You say you don't interfere with the choices of others, yet you changed the mind of that Nausicaan," began Karim.

Neale looked upon bin Nadal's damaged body. He chuckled, "You do enjoy a good debate, don't you?"

The Persian coughed, "That's not an explanation."

He answered, "We did not impose our will upon his, no. What we did was to...encourage him to make his decision based upon a broader perspective. In short, we raised his awareness for a short time. From that higher consciousness, a decision to harm you or us simply doesn't make sense."

"Isn't that still imposing your will?"

He shrugged, "Is lifting the wool from someone's eyes imposing your will or simply exposing them to the truth?" He stood, "Ultimately, there is no correct answer. There are only choices, experiences, and perspectives."

Neale began to leave when Karim asked him to wait. He paused.

"Suppose I believe you," bin Nadal began, "why can't you elevate my perspective or Windslow's for that matter? He's the one that really needs it."



The older man closed his eyes a moment and opened them, "I get the impression that Ethan's oneself, his soul, intends to play this out a bit longer. It is drawing experiences of grief to him."

"Why would it choose that?"

"For the same reason any oneself chooses anything – for the joy of the experience; so that the universe may truly embrace all its aspects."

Karim felt selfish for asking, but he said, "What about me?"

The man smiled wide, "Do you really think you came here by accident? Do you really think we are having this conversation by chance? Even Einstein said over four hundred years ago, 'God doesn't throw dice.' You are fulfilling your choice as we speak."

"So," asked Karim, "what am I supposed to do?"

He sighed, "Oddly, I've found that many off-worlders don't like to hear that they are in control of their own life. It gives them no one else to blame if they don't like the situation in which they find themselves."

Bin Nadal broke eye contact for a moment.

"I am no prophet," continued Neale, "The time-space matrix holds all possibilities. Which path you choose to experience has always been, and will forever be, up to you."

## EPILOUGE

### **Supplemental USS *Independence*, Main Bridge Near the Maluria System**

The dark-skinned Vulcan female reported from the tactical podium, "Captain, we're in weapon's range of the Nausicaan pirates."

A dark delight shined in Aurelia's eyes. It had taken them several hours to get to this point. The Orion-made vessel held a constant course and speed as they intercepted her. It was odd, but Sintina had little choice but to catch and board the ship. If it was a trick or a distraction...well...it would not make her a happy camper. She ordered, "Standard photons. Bring them out of warp."

Two dots of shimmering red light impacted the aft side of the raider. The first eliminated what little shielding existed. The second obliterated their port nacelle. The ship returned to normal space.

Aurelia stood, "Drop to impulse. Take us into transporter range. Security teams standby." She relieved Virak at tactical so she could lead the boarding party. The captain reported to the bridge officers, "I'm not reading any power spikes from their weapons. It looks like they've either given up," she went on ominously, "or it's another red herring."

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Supplemental Nausicaan Hi'ought Ship *Raiik* Near the Maluria System**

Virak and the security teams beamed on board. One team materialized in engineering; she led the team hitting the bridge.

The air was stale in the Nausicaan ship. It was poorly lit and the ship made noises indicating it required substantial maintenance.

As her eyes adjusted, she began seeing bodies. There were four of them strewn over the command center. Some had disruptor wounds; others had knife injuries. None moved.

She gestured for her team to establish a perimeter. Then, she heard labored breathing. It was shallow, but rapid. The Vulcan followed the noise, her phaser at the ready. It took her to a bulkhead a few meters away.

As she neared, the report from the other team came in, *"Sir, all we have down here are corpses."*

"Understood. Continue to sweep the ship."

There, sitting against the wall, was a Nausicaan. His appearance was slightly different than the others. His eyes were unnaturally wide and his breathing seemed more like a high velocity machine than biological. He was sweaty and covered in blood. There was a knife in his hand, but he made no attempt to threaten her with it. It appeared as if he couldn't move even if he had wanted to.

She neared him, "What occurred here?"

He made a guttural noise. In it was the word, "Vengeance."

"Am I to understand that you single-handedly killed the crew?"

His mandible widened and some blood spittled out.

The Vulcan could hear the Nausicaan's heart throb with a suicidal pace. She tapped her compin, "Virak to *Independence*. Please send a medical team to the raider vessel."

*"Is the ship secure?"* It was Aurelia's voice.

"My location is. There is a survivor on the bridge, however..."

The Nausicaan grabbed her arm suddenly. Though, she didn't believe it was a threatening gesture. His eyes were wild.

He said, "Long live the Kyluk Empi.."

There was an audible pop. The rapid heartbeat stopped. His grip loosened. His eyes dulled.

*"Lieutenant?"* prompted the captain.

The Vulcan hid her reaction well. She went on, "I have a correction to my report, Ma'am. There are no survivors."

\*\*\*\*\*

**Stardate: 53615.7 (13 Aug 2376)**  
**USS *Independence*, Counselor's Office**  
**Nearing the Maluria System**

"Enter," called Kimula. She was a bit taken back when Sintina strode in. The captain tried to look nonchalant. It wasn't working.

"I've a...been thinking," Sintina started, "You're the most annoying friend I've ever had."

The Andorian smiled, "You're just pissed that you missed out on all the action on this mission."

She grinned, "That too." The captain sighed and ran her fingers threw the contained waterfall next to the bulkhead. She looked at Kimula, "So are we alright?"

The counselor smirked. This was Sintina's way to make up, but without addressing the core issue. She had done it before. Kimula nodded, "Until the next time we get into it."

"Good enough."

\*\*\*\*\*

**Supplemental**  
**Federation Mine**  
**Maluria VID**

The mining station was surprisingly well lit. Though, this wasn't the mine itself, just the support complex.

The Coridan security chief caught up with his captain in the corridor, "The *Independence* has arrived on station, Sir."

"Good," rejoined Killian, "I just received an interesting report from our repair team at the mine. It's why I called you here."

“Sir?”

The veteran captain continued walking toward the administrator’s office, “I don’t expect any trouble. Just back me up if need be.”

Killian strode through the open door and didn’t stop until he was inches away from the Saurian manager, Junti. “My engineering team found your transmissions to the Nausicaan pirates.”

It took a moment for the Saurian to understand what he was taking about. He blinked nervously several times before responding, “I...I had no choice. If I didn’t give them a portion of our gallicite, they would have killed us!”

Killian and Veril were unmoved.

Junti continued, near hysterics, “We couldn’t defend ourselves without the weapons we are installing now! I made the deal with the Hi’ought so they would leave us alone.” He added with irony, “They didn’t even attack us. The Kyluk did!”

The Starfleet captain calmly stated, “I’m not talking about the communication involving the extortion from the Hi’ought. I’m talking about your communiqué to the Kyluk.”

Junti froze.

Killian continued, “You made a deal with the Kyluk, didn’t you? If they attacked your mine, the Federation would have to provide you with armaments. That would solve your Hi’ought problem, wouldn’t it?”

The Saurian began to breath heavy.

“And the Kyluk are always up for undermining the Hi’ouhgt,” the captain concluded.

Junti pleaded his case, “But I did it for the mine. No one was hurt in the attack...I...I did what had to be done.”

Killian didn’t allow himself to be moved. He realized Junti’s actions set certain things into motion. The result was a damaged starship and dead

officers. He finally said, "I'm not here to judge you. I'm just here to arrest you."

\*\*\*\*\*

**Supplemental**  
**USS *Independence*, First Officers Quarters**  
**In Orbit of Maluria VID**

Windslow entered his quarters with a limp. His wife and two sons were in the living room. They stared at him for a moment. He looked back. Jeff began to retreat to his room as always.

"Wait," said Ethan. He repeated it softer, "Please wait."

Jeff stopped.

"I'm sorry," began Ethan. He took a deep breath and continued, "I know saying 'sorry' doesn't cut it anymore. I...I've been selfish."

At that, Jeff turned. Paul, the youngest was sitting on his mother's lap. Susan's eyes watered.

He went on, "I've been so...consumed with self-pity that I didn't consider...I didn't want to think about how I've been hurting you...all of you." Now, tears formed from his eyes. "I didn't want to hurt any of you. I...I haven't been a very good dad lately."

Paul and Jeff began tearing up.

Ethan wiped at a tear, "I want to do better...I'm going to be better."

\*\*\*\*\*

**Supplemental**  
**Nausicaan Kyluk Ship *Tahin***  
**Deep Space**

"Where are they?" cried out the gunner, Gryth.

The crew had sold out to the Hi'ought *Juhin* Wi'jawk. To ensure they would attack the Federation freighter and cause a distraction, Wi'jawk implanted the

crew with a bio-explosive that would go off in three days. The *Juhin* promised to give them that antidote once they had the stolen ore. The time of their rendezvous had come and gone.

“Starfleet must have killed him,” said another.

“The Hi’ought bastard has tricked us! We’re all gonna die!”

“I will not wait for the end like some diseased dog,” commented Gryth. He looked to the engineer, “Set the self destruct. We will not die by Hi’ought hands!”

**END**