

Border Cutter Silverfin

Mind's Eye

By Brydon Sinclair

Guest Accommodation, Erzana Centre for Psychological Analysis and Treatment

El'Nar City, Betazed

Stardate: 55254.7 (April 3rd, 2378)

The hour was late, but Tunde Mbeki couldn't call it a night just yet. On the computer screen were the results of the latest batch of tests that had been run on Kolanis Daezan, his shipmate and friend who'd been 'injured' in an incident onboard a derelict Starfleet ship. Seeing as how the experts at the Erzana Centre still didn't know exactly what had happened to Daezan, it was impossible to make any head way in understanding the incident.

For almost three months, Mbeki had been working day-in and day-out on the mystery to no avail. Though neuroscience wasn't his specialty, he was a quick study and his own perspective allowed the team to look at the problem from angles they might not have considered. Fortunately, the Erzana Centre had some of the best specialists in the field on staff—not to mention bringing in consultants from across the Federation—to work on the case.

But after weeks of tireless work, with little in the way of results or useable data, they were at a loss.

Sighing heavily, Mbeki slouched back in his seat, eyes closed and rubbing the bridge of his nose. The trauma that Daezan had suffered had been instant and intense. Onboard the lifeless *U.S.S. Cairo*, he'd only been out of sight for a few minutes during which time he'd been afflicted. Afterwards he'd shown unusual behaviour, self-harmed and left cryptic messages. Once back onboard the *Silverfin*, they had tried a couple of times to revive him, in which he'd shifted from depression to fury to anxiety and everything in between. Once back on Betazed he'd continued with the erratic and sometimes violent behaviour on the few occasions they had awoken him from the drug-induced coma. One thing Mbeki had noticed was that the anger and violence were intensifying.

As he tried to wind down and relax, he could feel his eyelids getting heavy, threatening to close. He needed sleep, so as to start the whole process again the following day. Reaching the terminal to power it down, the companel chirped. He tapped it and the display showed that it was a subspace channel, coming in over standard Starfleet frequencies.

Accepting the link, the Border Service logo appeared. It was quickly replaced with the image of Susanna Leijten, her face a mixture of happiness and concern.

He smiled widely at her. "Susanna, to what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Well you always call me, so I thought it was my turn."

"I'm glad you did. It's good to see a familiar face every so often."

The concern deepened, her smile shrank a little and her blue eyes bore into him. As good as he was at reading people and assessing their mental states, she was just as adept. *"Still no news?"*

He shook his head. "No change in his readings and we're still at a loss to explain what it is that actually happened to him," he admitted. "They've got every psionic-neurologist in a fifty light-year radius on call to offer input and advice."

"Psionic-neurology? I've never heard of that one before," she said with a soft smile, trying to lighten the mood.

"It's a specialty that's developed on Betazed, Vulcan, Delta four, anyplace where the majority of the population have telepathic abilities. I've read a paper or two, but never looked into it in depth—though over the last three months I'm becoming something of an amateur expert."

"Is this going to be the next degree?"

He chuckled. Being a lover of knowledge, he was constantly reading papers and new research, as well as taking distance learning courses into various other fields—which was how he had become certified as a ship's counsellor. It was something of a running joke onboard the *Silverfin*, the crew betting on what subject he would study next. "Perhaps not."

“How are things back home?” he asked, wanting to focus on something other than their lack of progress.

“Pretty good. We had a helluva time last a couple weeks ago; unfortunately it’s all classified so I can’t tell you any more than that.”

“I’m missing all the fun then?”

“Trust me, Tunde, it’s the kind of ‘fun’ that I could have done without. Things have quietened down once again. Elak and Syva are heading for Starbase 200, with Hank, to pick up a new upgrade we’re getting.”

As soon as she mentioned Henry ‘Hank’ Mitchell, he noticed her cheeks redden slightly and the slight upward curl of her lips. He’d know Leijten long enough and well enough to learn all about the man she loved and was pleased to see her so happy.

“What about my replacement? How’s she working out?”

“You’d be impressed. Jenka is hard-working, focused and sharp. I keep having to remind myself that she’s not a doctor. From what I’ve heard through scuttlebutt she’s keeping the corpsmen on their toes as well.”

He chuckled again. “Good, I’d hate to think there were getting an easy time without me there.”

“No chance of that.”

There was a moment’s pause. Mbeki knew there was something he needed to ask, but he wasn’t exactly looking forward to the question or many of the possible answers. Not willing to put it off any longer, he took a deep breath and cleared his throat.

“So how much longer am I going to be allowed to remain here, before being ordered to return?”

Leijten held his eyes. *“Admiral T’Rona has said that so long as your absence doesn’t negatively impact the performance of the Silverfin, she will grant you an extended sabbatical on Betazed for as long as you require. Thanks to the corpsmen, Nurse Jenka and the EMH, I’ve said that we can get by until you return.”*

"You just focus on Kolanis. Let me worry about things back here."

Feeling relieved he gave her a smile. In truth he was divided. He hated the idea of abandoning his duties onboard the Cutter—even with an exception staff to pick up the slack—but he was also the kind of doctor who would never turn his back on a patient. He knew that on Betazed, Daezan would receive the best possible treatment, but he was still Mbeki's patient.

"Thank you Susanna."

She gave him a supportive smile. *"Don't mention it."*

Before she could say anything more the ship's intercom whistled. *"Tyler to Leijten."*

"Go ahead, Ensign."

"If you have a moment, sir, I'd like to see you in weapons control," the Chief Tactical Officer asked politely.

Mbeki smiled to himself. It looked as though their newest addition was still having difficulties relaxing into life onboard a Border Cutter—once he returned to the *Silverfin*, he'd have to make a point of speaking with the younger man.

"On my way." She closed the channel and looked back at the screen. *"Duty calls."*

"Well I won't keep you any longer. I'll keep you posted on any developments."

"I know you will. Good luck. Silverfin out."

The screen reverted to the Border Service delta, then back to the day's scans and results. He switched it off and got up from the desk and shuffled over to his bed. Before he collapsed onto the comfortable mattress, he removed his uniform jacket and dropped it next to his boots on the floor. It was only a few seconds after his head hit the pillow he drifted off to sleep.

Patient Room 107, Erzana Centre for Psychological Analysis and Treatment

El’Nar City, Betazed
Stardate: 55256.2 (April 4th, 2378)

The Erzana Centre was an impressive building to say the least. Nestled in idyllic grounds on the outskirts of El’Nar City, the great lake could be seen from the vast majority of the facilities windows. On the ground floor and basement level there were a wide variety of laboratories, research rooms, and therapy suites, whilst the two upper floors were for the patients—private rooms for up to one hundred individuals. The accommodation block, where Mbeki was staying was separate of the main facility, and each morning he walked through the vibrant and fragrant garden to get to work. Though he didn’t think it possible, the gardens of Erzana were far beyond those of Starfleet Academy.

He had quickly settled into a routine during his time on Betazed. Each morning when he arrived at the centre, he greeted the reception and security staff at the front door, logged in and then went up to Daezan’s room, after which there were the daily meetings to go over the previous day’s work and what would be looked at next, then he would get down to business in the labs, where he worked with a few of the other scientists and all the labtechs who were on staff. Throughout the day he would visit Daezan’s room at least twice more, attend any other meetings or videoconferences that he was needed at, but the rest of the time he was looking over brain scans and blood tests, trying to find something that was missed or overlooked.

It was lunchtime when Mbeki entered Daezan’s room for the second time. He had with him a light lunch he’d picked up from the cafeteria and decided to spend the time watching over his fallen comrade. Whenever he did visit at mealtimes, he would spend the time talking on various topics. The coma he was in was medically induced, but he would still be able to hear and so Mbeki made it his mission to give him something to listen too. Part of him hoped that his presence would have a calming effect on Daezan.

As he stepped into the room, a nurse was just hooking up a new IV bag. Mbeki had gotten to know the medical staff well over the last few weeks, so he gave her a warm smile, which she returned.

“Good afternoon, Doctor Mbeki.”

“And to you Kallani. How’s he doing?”

“No change since this morning,” she said, looking down at his expressionless face. “His emotional state has taken a dip though.”

That caught his attention; it was rare that his radiating feelings were anything other than anger, aggression and hostility. Setting down his lunch, he stepped closer to the bed as Kallani finished with her task.

He was about to ask for the sensor records, when she produced a PADD which displayed the data he wanted. “Thank you.”

Looking over the telemetry, he tried to see what—if anything—had changed. The sensor relays attached to his temples and forehead kept a constant read on what was happening in his head, then sent that data to the monitor above the bed, along with respiration and heart rate. It was one of the most comprehensive systems he had seen, with a proven track record. The records showed that a little under an hour ago his brain pattern had spiked, followed by a slightly altered output. It wasn’t a drastic change, but it was a change. The shift wasn’t the first one Mbeki had noted, it happened intermittently, but after each one the readings were never the same. So far the team were unable to answer why.

“Can I get you anything else, Doctor?” Kallani asked.

“No, thank you.”

The nurse nodded and left the room, leaving Mbeki looking down at Daezan.

“Kolanis, in the three years I’ve known you, you’ve been nothing but an open book. Why are you choosing now to be a pain in my ass?”

There was no response—not that he’d expected one.

He went back to his lunch, set down the tablet and then pulled a chair over to Daezan’s bedside. He sat down and crunched into an apple-like piece of fruit called a *tahso*. “Now then. I spoke with Susanna this morning,” he began, getting himself comfortable for the one-sided conversation.

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**Meeting Room 6, Erzana Centre for Psychological Analysis and Treatment
El’Nar City, Betazed**

Stardate: 55258.6 (April 5th, 2378)

Since their first meeting back in January, the team had expanded. Mbeki sat with his back to the large windows, beside him were chief physician Doctor Bentham Graxx and neurological surgeon Doctor Yanzee Johai. On the opposite side of the table were emotional trauma specialist Doctor Stovak and Doctor Nalla, a specialist in bioelectric neurology and neurochemistry from the Tano Institute on Delta IV, and psionic-neurologist Doctor Atharon Kodas. At the head of the table, was Doctor Ria Yuza, the senior psycho-analyst and head of the team.

“What if we were to try sensory deprivation?” Nalla suggested.

Kodas scoffed. “He’s in a coma; I’d say he’s already pretty deprived of senses.”

“Even in a coma he is still aware of what’s happening around him,” Graxx spoke up. “We could see if our readings change if he is cut off from all external stimuli, see if it has any effect.”

“So we run the same tests all over again, but just with him stuck in a box?” stated Kodas, not sounding convinced.

Though Kodas was an expert in his field, he acted as though his was the only opinion that mattered and rarely paid attention to the thoughts of others. Since coming onto the team six weeks ago, he’d butted heads with the other doctors and driven the labtechs nuts by his condescending manner.

“Alright, settle down,” Yuza interjected. The voice of reason, she was often playing mediator between the many specialists who were involved in Daezan’s case. “Doctor Kodas, we are running out of possible tests to run and therapies to try, so any new ideas will be looked at. Doctor Nalla, would you please take point on the deprivation tests.

“Let’s see if there are any differences or changes. If there are, then that will give us something new to compare,” Yuza continued. She looked between Graxx and Mbeki. “How is he physically?”

Mbeki let his colleague take the floor. “He is stable and, as far as we can tell, comfortable. We have him on a strict regimen of physical therapy and exercises, so as to keep his body fit and healthy. The nurses are logging even the slightest change in his brainwaves, but aside from changes in feelings he is projecting, they don’t seem to cause any other changes to his condition.”

Yuza nodded thoughtfully. “As I’m sure you’re all aware, we revived him again yesterday. His emotional state when conscious continues to shift and change rapidly, varying greatly. However, no matter what Doctor Stovak and I tried, we were unable to get anything useful from him. When he wasn’t screaming or in tears, he was talking in the same disjointed and non-coherent manner as previously.

“We’ve gone over the transcripts of all our meetings, but nothing matches up. Whatever he is trying to put across to us in constantly changing and makes no sense, no matter how we look at it.”

“Maybe it’s some kind of code?” Mbeki suggested.

She gave him a faint smile. “We discussed that after the last session,” she said with a gesture to the Vulcan scientist, “and I’ve already asked a linguistics specialist to have a look over what we have so far.”

She then went on to outline what she wanted them to look at next, how best they might take what information they had further and how to try and gather more. Once done, there was nothing more to discuss and so Yuza dismissed them.

Mbeki knew that it was important for them all to stay up to speed with what was going on among the team, but the meetings were proving to be less and less beneficial the longer they continued. They needed a lead to follow, something that would give them something to work on, anything that would help Daezan.

As the rest of the team headed out of the meeting room, Mbeki took a moment to gather together his PADDs. Among them were the change that was registered the day before, the readings taken during Yuza and Stovak’s interview with Daezan, and several others. But as he set the interview scans on top of the ones he’d picked up himself the previous day, something caught his eye.

The room had emptied by the time he held the two side-by-side, eyes flicking from one to the other and back again. At first he couldn’t quite believe what he was looking at, but as it filtered into his mind, he couldn’t help but smile.

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**Telemetry Laboratory, Erzana Centre for Psychological Analysis and Treatment
El’Nar City, Betazed**

After making his discovery in the meeting room, Mbeki had come straight to the telemetry lab and sat himself down in front of a terminal. Though the entire centre had a state of the art computer system, those in the telemetry lab were the best of the best. He was using them to go through the numerous brain wave changes logged whilst Daezan was in a coma—seventy-two to date—as well as the readings taken during the rare occasions he was revived and met with Yuza.

As the computer was crunching the numbers, he sat and hoped for the best. Brain waves were complex, though what he saw had gotten him excited, he needed to be sure of what he saw before taking it to the others.

As he waited, he heard the doors open.

“I’m surprised to see you in here, Tunde.”

He looked over his shoulder to see Tahl Edyne approach. The labtech was a jack-of-all-trades, chipping in anywhere that needed an extra pair of hands and as such, Mbeki had worked with him several times since arriving. They had hit it off and Mbeki found the young Betazoids perspective to be very helpful. Edyne—like most of the laboratory assistants—had initially found it strange having such an informal relationship with a doctor at the centre, but that hadn’t stopped them from batting around wild ideas and theories as they ploughed through the data and analyses.

“Hey Tahl. I think I’ve found something, but I need to be absolutely sure.”

Edyne studied him closely for a moment. “You’re excited though.”

“I’m getting my hopes up for something that might not pan out.”

“Optimism isn’t a bad thing in this line of work.”

Mbeki chuckled. Being surrounded by telepaths took some getting used to, as not all exercised control and respect of privacy, but there were times when working with those that knew your mind was useful.

The computer chirped. He took a deep breath and then turned back to the display. The two brain wave patterns were displayed, one above the other. The graphic then brought them together. Mbeki traced the peaks and troughs with his finger. They matched perfectly.

“My god!” he gasped quietly.

Edyne moved to stand beside him, looking at the display. When he saw the results, he let out a surprised laugh then clapped a big hand on Mbeki’s shoulder.

“Looks like you’ve finally gotten that break.”

The computer chirped again, then proceeded to bring up another pair of wave patterns. They matched. Then another pairing; they matched too. Then again. And again.

He slapped his combadge. “Mbeki to Yuza. I’ve got something!”

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**Meeting Room Two, Erzana Centre for Psychological Analysis and Treatment
El’Nar City, Betazed**

The team had assembled once again, all being told that he’d made a breakthrough. Even though he wasn’t empathic, he could feel the excitement and anticipation in the room. In addition to the assembly of doctors, he’d also asked for Edyne to be there—as he had confirmed Mbeki’s original findings.

Whilst they were all seated around the table, he stood at the large monitor, which depicted the first pairing of wave patterns.

Yuza gave him a nod. “This is your show, Doctor.”

“Thank you, Doctor Yuza,” he began, trying to clamp down on his excitement. “What I discovered was totally by chance this morning, but I wanted to be sure before I shared my findings.” From the corner of his eye he noticed a sneer from Doctor Kudas. “Yesterday morning, before Kolanis was revived for his session, Nurse Onall said that there had been a shift in his emotional state.

“Since we got to Betazed, I’ve been looking at these shifts to see if they held any relevance or importance, but was never able to see anything, as no two patterns ever repeated. After this morning’s meeting, I found myself holding two PADDs together. One had the latest shift and the other has brain scans from his afternoon session. I noticed two patterns that looked similar, so I went and ran them through the computer. They matched perfectly.”

“What?” Doctor Nalla asked her surprise evident in her voice and on her face. “Surely that would have been brought up in routine data compilation?”

He shook his head. “We always treated his time conscious and in the coma as two separate states—the former was looking at psychoanalysis and dealing with the trauma in a conventional manner, whilst the latter was a more analytical study of his brain to see what damage he had suffered. The data packets were never instructed to scan for any correlation.”

Doctor Johai nodded thoughtfully. “And since computers aren’t intuitive, they never wouldn’t have crosschecked unless instructed to do so.”

“Garbage in, garbage out,” Mbeki confirmed.

“Surely that’s the techs work,” sniped Kodas, looking at Edyne.

“We only do whatever work we’re asked to do, *Doctor*,” Edyne retorted calmly.

Before the psionic-neurologist could answer back, Yuza silenced him with a look (and probably a telepathic warning too). She then looked back at the monitor, knowing what was coming next.

Mbeki tapped the control panel, which brought up the next screen. It showed the rest of the matches between the comatose shifts and the conscious brain scans, all seventy-one. The rest sat and watched, as he then brought up Doctor Yuza’s notes for each session that corresponded with the shifts. It clearly showed that the emotional response matched as well, so when he became angry when unconscious the anger was evident when awake and talking (or rather snarling), same for when he was terrified or depressed.

“All seventy-two shifts he has displayed when unconscious have been evident during the brief periods he has been awake.”

“Have you examined the rest of the brain scans from our sessions with Commander Daezan?” Stovak asked. “To see if there how many other distinct patterns there are?”

Mbeki looked at Edyne. Everyone’s gaze, even Kodas’, shifted to the labtech.

“We’re going through all the data now and trying to analyse the full range of patterns, though it could take some time.”

Yuza nodded. “Alright, we have our first lead. I’m not sure exactly what it means yet, but I suggest we all take time to study these findings and see what we can learn from them. And if they help us determine a means of helping Mr Daezan.”

She then looked from Mbeki to Edyne. “Exceptional work, gentlemen.” With that she rose and headed for the exit, her stance and movement showed that she was eager to get to work on the new data herself. Graxx, Stovak, Nalla and Johai also quickly left. When it was just Mbeki, Edyne and Kodas left in the room, the Betazoid specialist glowered at Mbeki.

“It’s funny. You make a discovery and then don’t notify anyone else until you’ve compiled all the data. Not wanting to share the credit, Doctor Mbeki?”

“Doctor Kodas, I couldn’t give a damn about credit. I have a friend to is going through hell right now. All I want to do is help him.”

“So you say.” With that, Kodas left the meeting room.

After the doors closed, Edyne scoffed. Mbeki gave the labtech a surprised look. He knew that there was no love lost between the two, but he hadn’t expected such a derisive sound to come from a young man he thought he knew.

Edyne must’ve sensed what he was thinking and feeling, as he looked back at Mbeki. “Sorry. But it’s just what you’d expect from second best.”

“‘Second best’? Do you mean there’s someone better on Betazed?”

“He would lead you to believe they’re on the same level, but she is far ahead of his work though isn’t the glory hog that Kodas is.”

“Who?” Mbeki asked, puzzled as why he hadn’t been told this before.

“She’s head of neurological sciences at the University of Betazed, specialising in psionic-neurology. Doctor Inzendra Stadi.”

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**Guest Accommodation, Erzana Centre for Psychological Analysis and Treatment
El'Nar City, Betazed**

It was nearing the end of another long day. After his discovery the centre had been buzzing as the staff quickly went over the new information and tried to see how they use it. He'd had more than a few congratulations from the specialists, nurses and labtechs, to the point where he felt sheepish. A random act had led to him seeing the similarity; it hadn't been some new technique or anything astounding. But then again how many scientific discoveries had been made by chance or accident?

Despite the new work they faced, what Edyne had said in the meeting room had stuck with him. If there was someone as good as or better than Kodas, then why hadn't she been brought in to consult? It baffled him.

He'd been pondering the question on the walk from the centre to the accommodation block. As he stepped into his room the nagging problem hadn't subsided, so he went straight to his desk and sat down.

"Computer, access personnel records for the University of Betazed."

"Records accessed."

"Is there a Doctor Inzendra Stadi still of staff?"

"Confirmed. Doctor Inzendra Stadi is currently the head of neurological sciences."

"Is she on leave at present?"

"Negative."

"Hmm," he mused. Glancing at the chronometer he decided it was too late to contact her directly, but he could leave her a message and hoped she got back to him in the morning. He quickly ensured his uniform was neat and presentable.

"Computer, begin recording." The record light flashed on.

“Doctor Stadi. I am Doctor Tunde Mbeki, Chief Medical Officer of the Border Service Cutter *Silverfin*, currently on special assignment here at the Erzana Centre.

“Three months ago a Betazoid colleague of mine was seriously injured. The exact cause and extent of the injuries are unknown at this time, though they are neurological in nature. As I understand, you are perhaps the foremost specialist in psionic-neurology on the planet. I ask for any assistance you could provide in finding a diagnosis and treatment, it could prove invaluable to helping save him from a serious condition.

“Thank you.”

He ended the recording and sent it through to Doctor Stadi, marked high importance. All he could do was hope that she contacted him quickly.

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Director’s Office, Erzana Centre for Psychological Analysis and Treatment
El’Nar City, Betazed
Stardate: 55261.5 (April 6th, 2378)

Mbeki had spent the morning on tenterhooks, waiting for word from Stadi, but so far he had yet to hear anything. He understood that her position meant that she was a very busy woman, but she hadn’t sent any kind of response. It had gotten to the point when he was considering calling her directly, when he’d been paged to the Director’s office.

He found it odd that he was being called into a meeting with the Centre Director, a man he had only met twice before during the last three months. When he arrived in the anteroom, he was instructed to go straight through.

Inside, seated behind his large, dark wood desk, sat Director Reittan Lijoran, whilst Doctor Yuza stood quietly to the side. There was a sharpness to the atmosphere that immediately put Mkebi on edge.

When he reached the desk, he gave Yuza a small nod before focusing on Lijoran. “Director,” he said by way of greeting.

“I have just been contacted by the legal representative for the University of Betazed. They have issued a cease and desist warning against you, Doctor Mbeki, as well as strongly written letter criticising the Erzana Centre for the misconduct of its specialists,” Lijoran began, his tone cold and hard. “What were you thinking, harassing Doctor Stadi like that?”

“Excuse me?” he asked, not quite sure what he was being accused of.

“You did contact Doctor Inzendra Stadi, didn’t you?”

“Yes. I heard that she was perhaps the best in her field on Betazed, and asked for her help.”

“Did it ever occur to you that the Centre may have asked for her help already? Did you consult Doctor Yuza before harassing one of foremost medical researchers on the planet?”

He shook his head. “No I didn’t. But there has always been complete transparency regarding Commander Daezan’s analysis and assessment. In the last three months, I saw nothing about Doctor Stadi anywhere in the records. So I thought—”

“I don’t want to hear it! That may be how things are done on your starship, Doctor, but here we respect the decisions of others. If they don’t wish to get involved, we will not pressure them into doing so. Am I understood?”

Squaring his shoulders, Mbeki gave a single nod. “Yes Director.”

“Good.” He shot a look at Yuza.

She didn’t say anything but approach Mbeki and gestured for them to leave. They left the Director’s office behind, but nothing was said between them. He had come to respect Yuza during his time working with her, the thought that she had gotten into trouble for something he had done didn’t sit well with him.

Their silent walk took them to her office, where she offered him a seat. As she went behind her desk, he couldn’t take the quiet any longer.

“Doctor Yuza, I am sorry if—”

“It’s alright, Doctor Mbeki. I understand why you contacted her. It’s also my fault that her name has not been included in the records, on her own request. When we learned of Daezan’s injuries and that he was being transported here, I personally contacted Doctor Stadi. She told me that she would not get involved, and I was not to contact her again.”

Sitting down, he leaned closer. “Did she offer any explanation as to why?”

Yuza hesitated. “She didn’t offer a reason, though I may know of one.

“I assume you are aware of the *U.S.S. Voyager*?”

He nodded. “The ship that vanished in 2371 and presumed destroyed, only to turn up in the Delta Quadrant.”

“Doctor Stadi’s only child, her daughter Aiva, was onboard when the ship disappeared. When contact was established, they provided a full casualty list. Aiva Stadi was killed in action, during the very incident that transported the ship to the Delta Quadrant.

“Since then she has been somewhat outspoken about the role of Starfleet; that they do more harm than good. She has become more vocal following the Dominion War and the Occupation.”

“So she won’t help Daezan, just because he’s a member of Starfleet?” he asked, unable to wrap his head around what he was being told.

“I’m afraid so. I am sorry, Doctor Mbeki.”

“It’s not your fault. I understand that things were hard here during the war and that the invasion would affect some people’s opinion. Add to that the loss of a child and it’s a lot for one person to bear.”

He quickly stood up. “Thank you for your time, Doctor. I’d better be getting back to work.”

Yuza let him go and he hurried out of her office. Though he could understand the situation as she described it, he wasn’t about to simply give in—no matter what Stadi threatened him with.

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Transporter Complex, University of Betazed Rixx, Betazed

The transporter dais for the University of Betazed was located just off the main quad. As Mbeki stepped down, he had to take a moment and admire the educational institute. The Erzana Centre was stunning, a marvel of modern architecture, but the university was over three hundred years old. It held the majesty of age with the lush natural beauty that Betazed was famous for; tall towers emerged from the full foliage of the trees, plants brought a rainbow of colours to the open plazas, arches were surrounded in climbing vines. Students sat on benches, wandered around the quad, talk was light (though he suspected that the telepathic chatter was vigorous and impassioned, the way only young students could be).

He could have quite happily wandered around the buildings and explored the grounds, but he had a job to do. There was a directory in the transporter complex, so he checked for Doctor Stadi's office. Once he found the building and room number, he checked the map before heading out.

The university was located in the southern district of Rixx, the Betazed capital, and had managed to survive the Dominion attack. There were a few other important buildings and landmarks that hadn't been so fortunate, but three years after the end of the war and the reconstruction work had been completed. However, there were other, deeper scars that the planet and its people had suffered at the hands of the Vorta and Jem'Hadar. Kolanis was one of the lucky ones, as his parents and two older brothers had been off-world when the attack had occurred. He had spoken to Mbeki about what had happened to his homeworld, and a couple of old friends who'd died fighting to free Betazed but all in all, he had come to terms with what had happened.

Not everyone would be so fortunate, and Stadi definitely appeared to be in that group.

Seeing as how his being in Starfleet had offended her so much, he had changed into civvies before leaving Erzana. He had simply told Doctor Yuza that he needed to do look into something from the Starfleet Field Office (which also happened to be in Rixx). He had chosen to come late in the afternoon, when classes would be finishing and only a few staff were left—from what he'd learned, Stadi was always working late.

He got to the biomedical research building and proceeded to the neurology department. As he'd expected, there were few people going about—most

either in their dorms, in the library or enjoying the student union. When he'd beamed over to the university, he'd logged in stating that he was visiting the Starfleet Academy campus at the university (which specialised in psychology and social sciences) so he was in the right area but not the exact right building, which he could explain away as getting lost—if anyone stopped him.

Fortunately that didn't happen. He reached the office he wanted and tapped the enunciator.

"Enter," a voice called. The doors opened before him and he took a soothing breath before entering.

The room was half lab and half office, with computer terminals and highly specialised analysis equipment mixed in with bookshelves and a large solid-looking desk. It was behind the desk, perusing a stack of PADDs that he found that he found the woman he had come to see. She was slim and dark-haired, she looked much younger than her file said she was, but a few wrinkles at the corners of her onyx-coloured eyes gave away her age.

He approached the desk. "Doctor Stadi," he began.

Her head snapped up to look at him. It was evident she knew him, as annoyance and anger played out across her face. She dropped the PADD she had been reading onto her desk and stood up quickly.

"How did you get in here?" she demanded. Before he could answer she pressed a stud on her computer. "I need security in my office, now!"

Mbeki knew he wouldn't get a warm welcome, but he'd thought that she would at least be open to a dialogue before calling for the campus guards. He didn't know what their response time was, but he suspected that he didn't have long.

"Doctor Stadi, let me explain. I am here to ask for you to help my colleague."

She scowled at him. "I have already given the Erzana Centre my answer. If you came here to bully me into changing my mind, then you have wasted your time."

"I'm not here for the Centre, or Starfleet, or even myself. I've come here to ask on behalf of Kolanis Daezan, my friend who is right now drugged into unconsciousness—otherwise he'd shift from weeping to screaming to roaring

so rapidly that he'll cause himself harm. Please, Doctor. We need your expertise in order to find out how to help him."

"I thought you fleters all understood the risks of your chosen vocation. Well this is just one of those risks."

"We do know the risks and accept them. Just as your daughter did!"

The reaction was instantaneous. Had she been angry before, she was fuming now. Her eyes hardened, face flushed bright red and her posture stiffened.

"How *dare* you!" she hissed. "You have no right to mention her! You shouldn't even be here!" She stabbed the comlink again. "Where the hell is security!"

He took a step closer to her desk, but she didn't back down. "I understand that losing her as you did was a terrible ordeal. I've read her file, and she sounded like an exceptional young woman; second in her class, a list of citations and commendations longer than many twice her age have, glowing reports from her CO's, she made full lieutenant in just five years and had the potential for so much more—"

The door swished open and two uniformed guards entered. Mbeki glanced at them and then back to Stadi. He had to get through to her quickly.

"Get him out of here!" she roared, pointing an accusatory finger at his chest. He felt a weight upon his heart, as though she had it in vice and was squeezing it.

The guards came to either side of him and grabbed an arm each. Thanks to the intensive training that Master Chief Syva demanded of all those on the *Silverfin*, he probably could've handled both guards with relative ease, but he didn't exactly want to add assault to the list of charges that would no doubt be filed against him as soon as he was outside the door. That didn't mean he would go quietly.

As a doctor, he needed a certain degree of muscle to help move or restrain patients, and with Syva's training he had developed a lean yet toned physique and was deceptively strong. He pulled free from the guards and dashed to her desk. Using the brief element of surprise, he had one last shot.

"Were you proud of her?" he asked.

“What?” she asked, the question confusing her angry mind.

The guards grappled him again, this time with greater force and tighter grips—which would leave bruises as he struggled against them. Mbeki made them work for every step closer to the door they made.

“Aiva,” he yelled, “were you proud of what she accomplished?”

The sound of her daughter’s name seemed to snap her out of the grief-stricken rage that had consumed her. For a moment, she looked on the verge of tears before a brief smile tugged at her lips.

“She was proud of you,” he called as they were over halfway towards the door. “In her psych profiles, she said that you inspired her to always to better, to push herself farther. Her pride in you and your accomplishments were only matched by her duty.” He couldn’t tell if he was making an impact, positive or otherwise, as the guards were putting even more muscle into moving him.

“She served in order to keep people safe, to look after others as you do.”

They were just at the doorway, which he tried desperately to grab hold of, when a soft voice simply said, “I was.”

Stadi looked up and their eyes locked. He could see her love for her lost child, the grief and the anger it caused.

Before he was hauled out of her office, he confessed, “She was lucky.”

They had only gone another five steps, when Stadi appeared at the door. For the first time in a long time, he touched on the feelings he’d kept hidden from everyone—himself included—the rejection, bitterness, remorse, loss and guilt that he’d carried with him since his first day at the Academy.

She looked from him to the guards. “Wait.”

* * * * *

**Doctor Stadi’s Office, University of Betazed
Rixx, Betazed**

After being released from the guards, Stadi had led him back into her office, where he apologised for turning up at her office and any distress he had caused her—something he was truly sorry for dredging up again.

“Thank you. Doctor Mabetty, was it?”

“Mbeki. But please, call me Tunde.”

She gave a slight nod from across her desk. “May I ask; how did you get access to Aiva’s psychological profile?”

“I’m both a ship’s doctor and a certified counsellor. The Starfleet Field Office here on Betazed allowed me access to her service jacket and medical record. That was all from her initial interview during her application to the Academy. Each year, during her scheduled evaluation, she spoke of you and the inspiration you had been to her to go after what she wanted from life. All the kind of things people think about their parents but never say. I thought you should know the impact you made in her life.”

Her eyes wet, Stadi smiled. “After she got to Earth, she contacted me once a week. She filled me in on all her classes and what she’d been up to, asked for advice on occasion, and wanted to know how I was doing. After she graduated, I didn’t expect the calls to continue, but they did. Every week, she commed me and we spoke about everything—put the universe to rights. Every time we talked, it was never less than an hour.

“When she found out she was assigned to *Voyager*, she was so excited. It was a posting every good pilot wanted, and she got there by sheer hard work and diligence,” she paused, gathering her strength. “When the news broke about the ship going missing, I thought that there had to be a mistake. All that week, I waited for her call. It was only after it never came that I began to accept that they were actually missing.”

They sat in silence for a few moments, Mbeki letting her regain her composure. After a few minutes, he leaned forward a little.

“That’s what we were doing when Kolanis was injured,” he began softly. “We found a ship adrift; no lifesigns, no power. As we were searching the decks, something happened to him. He was acting oddly and talking in a strange voice. What happened to him could have affected the crew of that ship, we just don’t know. But whatever happened to him could be connected to the disappearance of that crew, or it may not, either way he is suffering.”

She looked away for a moment, thoughtful. “And you think I could be able to help?”

“I stumbled across something in his brain wave patterns, but we still don’t know the significance. Having someone of your experience could go a long way to finding an answer.”

Stadi looked him straight in the eye again. “I may have my problems with Starfleet as an organisation, the wars and bloodshed they have brought, the ships lost without a trace, the resources put into building bigger and bigger warships. But I shouldn’t let that stand in the way of helping someone when I can.” She paused for a moment. “I will come with you.”

* * * * *

**Patient Room 107, Erzana Centre for Psychological Analysis and Treatment
El’Nar City, Betazed**

By the time they returned to Erzana it was late. Stadi had asked to see Daezan straight away, not interested in attending meetings or looking over the data they’d collected so far—she wanted to see him for herself. Mbeki understood, sometimes working from others’ notes made a job harder.

He took her from the transporter room up to Daezan’s room. Once there, he stood by the door and watched as she ran scans on him and reviewed the last twelve hours of telemetry on the neuro-monitor. He didn’t interrupt, question her on what she was doing, or point out the vast array of scans and probes they had already conducted, instead, he just watched. The whir of her scanner, the steady beep of the cardiac monitor, and Daezan’s breathing were the loudest noises in the room and he focused on them.

Though he knew she had to be good, he was blown away by how she worked. Her movement was fluid as she moved from one scan to another, instruments appearing in her hand and expertly used, before being replaced by another.

Before leaving the university, she had gathered a few specialist pieces of equipment together—devices she had told him were designed and developed by herself and undergoing testing, which was why he hadn’t seen them at Erzana. She was affixing such a device to his head, taking care with where she attached the electrodes, making minute alterations before running a scan and,

once happy, moving onto the next one. Once it was set, she started the new device and then stepped away from the bed.

For a second he was worried that it may prove harmful in some way. She sensed his concern and looked over her shoulder.

“It’ll take at least thirty minutes to run a complete analysis,” she explained.

Relieved, he slouched against the wall and yawned. It had been a long and tiring couple of days, though he doubted he’d get much in the way of sleep tonight. Stadi moved to the chair and lowered herself into it, continuously watching Daezan. There was a moment of quiet before she turned to him.

“May I ask a personal question?”

“About what happened back in your office?” he guessed.

She nodded. “You said that Aiva was lucky. What did you mean?”

With his back against the wall, he lowered himself to the floor, facing Stadi. “My parents hated Starfleet—I mean really despised it, with a passion that was scary. They told stories about the ‘evils’ that it did, the dangers it brought to Earth, and the millions of people it sent out to be slaughtered. But as I got older, I started looking into it myself. I could see the dangers they had spoken of, but I also saw the wonder and awe.

“When I was sixteen, they found a datapad I had with Starfleet history downloaded onto it. They were furious that I would look at their propaganda, instead of studying proper books. I was terrified at the time and did as they ordered. But I could never shake the ideal of Starfleet from my mind. The following year, I applied to the Academy—though extremely carefully, paranoid that my parents would find out.

“I was accepted,” he paused, remembering the elation he’d felt when the acceptance letter had come through. But sadness followed joy. “I knew my parents would never let me go. So the day before matriculation, I recorded a message for my parents, packed a few essentials and waited. In the middle of the night, I left home and beamed over to San Francisco. A week after I had left, I tried contacting them. They never answered. I tried again the following week, but after hearing nothing I tried a neighbour. He told me they’d left, not long after I had. He didn’t know where they were going or how to reach them.

“After I graduated I tried a few times to locate them, but never had any luck. So I stopped looking. Since then, my only family has been the likes of Kolanis—the people I’ve served with over the years.”

She rested a supportive hand on his shoulder. “I am sorry.”

“There aren’t many people who know that part of my past; I could probably count them all on one hand.”

“Thank you for telling me. I understand now why you were so focused on Mr Daezan.”

They fell into silence once again. Though they were both fine with it, either eager to fill the moment with chatter, but rather reflect on the hard times each had faced. Even after Stadi’s device finished its work, she remained silent. She disconnected it from Daezan, then brought out two others. By the time she was finished, it was well after midnight.

She packed away her tools and scanners carefully, then turned to Mbeki. “I would like to review all the data you have compiled so far, especially the discovery you made.”

He got up from the floor and gestured to the door. “We can get started in the telemetry lab, it’s always empty at this time.”

* * * * *

Meeting Room 6, Erzana Centre for Psychological Analysis and Treatment

El’Nar City, Betazed

Stardate: 55264.0 (April 7th, 2378)

They had been in the telemetry lab until 0400, going over all the data, before transferring it to several stacks of tablets and opting for a meeting room. The dark wood table was covered in datapads, holo-emitters which showed rotating, three-dimensional scans of Daezan’s brain, and several empty pots of coffee. Fortunately the nurses had seen how intensely they were working and guessed (rightly) that they needed as much caffeine as possible, so they kept the pots coming throughout the wee small hours.

They’d worked continuously through the night, batting ideas back and forth, consulting the scans taken so far, looking through the medical database, he’d

even contacted the S.C.E. team working on the *Cairo* and the Starfleet Medical archives during the night. Thanks to Stadi, they were making headway. He just wanted to make sure that they were right before calling in the others.

Mbeki had chosen room six as it was where the morning meeting had been scheduled to take place in. So he wasn't surprised when the doors parted and Doctor Yuza entered. She stopped, startled, and looked at him, then to the sea of PADDs, then to the woman standing staring at the large monitor, then back to him.

"Um, Doctor," she started a little hesitantly, "what's going on in here?"

"Doctor Yuza," he said standing up straight, wincing at the pain in his back—he must've been bent over the table for longer than he'd thought. "May I introduce Doctor Inzendra Stadi. Doctor Stadi, this is Doctor Ria Yuza, senior psycho-analyst of the centre."

Stadi smiled and nodded. "Doctor," she said, by way of greeting, before looking back at the numbers and graphs that scrolled along the screen.

Yuza stared at her for a moment, then stepped closer to Mbeki. "Well this is a development."

"I took a little trip to Rixx yesterday evening and met with her," he explained, massaging his lower back to work out the knots and kinks. "We managed to reach an understanding and she agreed to help Kolanis. We got back here and have been working since then."

"Have you found anything?" Yuza asked, hopeful.

"Plenty." Stadi turned back to face them, despite being up as long as he had, she didn't look any the worse for wear.

The doors parted again and the rest of the team entered, until all they were waiting of was Doctor Kodas. Introductions were made and all of the others seemed thoroughly impressed to have Stadi onboard and equally intrigued to learn how Mbeki had done it. They kept the details vague, not going any further than what he'd told Yuza.

As the others took their seats, careful not to disturb the PADDs or emitters, he and Stadi stood by the monitor, impatiently waiting for the last man on the team to join them. Though the meetings had always been scheduled to start

at 0900, it was common for most of them to be there early and so the meetings would start. Ever since Kodas had signed on, he was constantly late—which Mbeki surmised was some means of flaunting his perceived control of the proceedings.

Surprisingly, as Yuza was reaching for the intercom to page him, Kodas strolled into the meeting room. Then he stopped. He was staring at Stadi, his dark eyes cold and accusatory. For her part, Stadi held his look but didn't appear fazed by it at all.

Yuza looked at him with a slight scowl. "Take your seat, Doctor, our newest member has news for us."

Kodas glanced at Yuza, before glaring at Stadi and then Mbeki. Sullenly he took his seat and slouched down in it, his eyes continuing to bore into them.

"I think we've found out what happened to Kolanis," Mbeki began. He looked at Stadi and nodded.

"Since I arrived last night, we've been going over all your previous findings, as well as new data I was able to gather," she began. On the screen she brought up his discovery from a couple days earlier. "Doctor Mbeki actually made the discovery, he just wasn't aware of what he had.

"I believe that Mr Daezan is, for lack of a better term, 'possessed'."

"'Possessed'?" Graxx questioned.

"Yes. Not by any spectre or demon, but rather by the collective consciousness of the *Cairo's* crew," she explained.

"Is that even possible?" asked Yuza, sitting forward.

"It has occurred, Doctor," Stadi began, "but as is evident with Mr Daezan, it is not an eventuality that is conducive to one's health."

"How wasn't he killed?" Nalla spoke up. "The mental stress should have ruptured almost every blood vessel in his brain."

"It would depend on the individual's resiliency," Stovak offered. "Had Mr Daezan been younger and more inexperienced in controlling his telepathic abilities, the incident may well have killed him."

“Kolanis served through the Dominion War, so he was constantly exposed to intense emotions from his shipmates,” Mbeki suggested. “When he came aboard the *Silverfin* it was after the previous CO was killed in action—a man who many of the crew had served under for years. He then had to face the collective grief and loss of over one hundred and twenty people, in very close quarters. He prided himself on his control and defences.”

“Excuse me,” interrupted Kodas.

“Yes Doctor Kodas?” Stadi asked, her tone polite.

“But how did you reach your conclusion? You’ve yet to provide any evidence of your apparent findings.”

Stadi clasped her hands behind her back; her body language was calm and measured. Mbeki suspected it wasn’t the first stand-off they had had in their professional lives.

“Thanks to the work of the labtechs, they have identified two hundred and seventeen distinct brain wave patterns, none of which have repeated. Doctor Mbeki discovered that the ones evident whilst he was in a coma matched some of those displayed whilst conscious. None of them have matched the normal patterns from Mr Daezan’s medical records.

“After looking closely at the results, I noticed that some shared characteristics found in Deltans, Vulcans and Napeans. We then started matching the profiles with other Federation species; we found that many shared similarities with races from sixty planets across the UFP.”

Mbeki quickly stepped in. “I contacted Starfleet Medical and had them send through the last annual physicals the *Cairo*’s crew had on file. We then began running a comparison.”

“They matched,” Doctor Johai concluded.

“All two hundred and seventeen,” he confirmed. “When she went missing, the *Cairo* had a crew of five hundred and thirty-eight. Which means there are over three hundred others we’ve yet to record.”

Nalla was obviously excited at what had been learnt. “Now that we know what’s happened to him, is there anything that can be done for Mr Daezan?”

There was a moment of silence and everyone looked at Doctor Stadi expectantly. She looked around those at the table and then at Mbeki. It was the one topic they had yet to reach. They had spent so much time on making the matches and confirming their findings, they had yet to see if it actually helped him or not.

"I...I don't know," she admitted.

"How do we essentially shut up five hundred and thirty-eight other souls, to leave just one?" Graxx mused aloud.

Mbeki's mind was drawing a blank. He'd been up for over twenty-four hours, on top of very little sleep, being kept awake by caffeine—the effects of which were starting to fade. His all-nighter with Stadi had taken almost everything from him and he just couldn't give any more. He was so close to helping Kolanis, he couldn't accept falling at the last hurdle. When they had been on the *H'krii*, travelling from Star Station Freedom to Betazed, Mbeki had vowed that he would help his friend—no matter how long it took.

Yuza broke the tense silence. "Somehow I doubt we're dealing with the full personalities of the *Cairo's* crew. If we were, they would have a stronger presence and I would have been able to sense them during our sessions. They would also have been more coherent and responsive. I think what we might be dealing with is a single moment in their lives, something highly traumatic—as that would explain the emotions we've been witnessing."

"I would agree," added Stovak. "An event trapped a psychic imprint on the ship, which was then ingrained on Lieutenant Commander Daezan. I suspect it may be at the instant of death."

Graxx stepped in again. "Does that help us? If it's just a moment from their lives, rather than anything more?"

"I believe it would," confirmed Yuza. "The problem is that there is no precedence for anything like this on Betazed."

"There is on Vulcan," Stadi stated. "*Katra* transferral."

Mbeki automatically looked at Stovak. "Could you do it?"

“No,” he replied simply. “I am a specialist in mental and emotional trauma. Only a High Priest from Mount Seleya could accomplish what Doctor Stadi proposes.”

“Would it be possible?” he pressed, not willing to let even the slimmest slither of hope go.

“I do not know. The procedure is delicate, even among Vulcans. To the best of my knowledge, it hasn’t been attempted on a Betazoid, and never has it involved more than one *katra*.” After he finished he must’ve seen the desperation and exhaustion in Mbeki’s eyes. “However, I will consult with the Vulcan Medical Directorate and the monks at the temple.”

“Thank you,” Mbeki exhaled.

“Yes, thank you, Doctor,” added Yuza. “In the meantime, Doctor Stadi, I believe I speak for everyone when I offer you our deepest gratitude for helping us. If it’s not too much of an imposition, would you be able to stay—any further assistance you could provide would be invaluable.”

“All I’ve wanted to do is look after others,” she said quietly. “I’ll do whatever I can to help.”

“Excellent. Perhaps you could work with Doctor’s Kudas and Nalla, go over your findings with a fine toothcomb. The last thing we need are any mistakes now.” Stadi and Nalla both readily agreed, whilst Kudas gave a grumble she took as confirmation. “Graxx and Johai, I want another full work up on Mr Daezan. I will go and inform the Director of this development. And Doctor Mbeki,” she said, turning to face him, “go and get some sleep. You’ve done more than enough to warrant some rest.”

“That’s one prescription I’ll quite happily fill.”

* * * * *

Gardens, Erzana Centre for Psychological Analysis and Treatment
El’Nar City, Betazed
Stardate: 55270.1 (April 9th, 2378)

All they could do was wait to hear back from Vulcan. They continued to go over the new data Stadi had provided, which had caused more than a few debates to flare up between her and Kudas, whilst keeping a close eye on

Daezan's physical condition and map any new brain wave patterns (three more over the last two days).

Mbeki had helped out as he always had, but now they had an answer he wanted to push forward and find a way to help Kolanis. But nowhere in the Betazed archives was there a case such as Daezan's. Due to their telepathic and empathic abilities, Betazoids were an open and honest people, and as such violent crimes against others were rare. But even looking at what cases there were involving severe psychic trauma, nothing even came close.

In a move to help clear his mind and to get out of the precisely regulated airflow of the centre, he'd stepped out into the gardens. He'd walked around for a while, smiling at the nurses and labtechs he met who were taking a quick break as well, then spent some time admiring the flowerbeds and a few pieces of sculpture that were arranged among the plants. Ultimately he'd stopped by a small pond and sat down on a bench, absently tossing pebbles into the water and watching the ripples.

On hearing approaching footfalls, he looked up and saw Yuza approach.

"May I join you?"

He gestured to the empty space on the bench. "Please."

She sat down and let out a long sigh. "This has been a long three months, and now it comes down to waiting on Vulcan mystics to make a decision."

"You don't believe in *katra's*?" he asked, a little surprised.

"I believe in what I can see and scan and study. In all the cases of apparent *katric* transferrals, there have never been any thorough scans taken of the subject. Until I see that data, I'll remain sceptical." She looked over at him. "Do you believe in things like that?"

"A 'living soul'? I don't know," he admitted. "I've seen some strange things during my years in Starfleet, and I'd like to think it has left me with an open mind. But now after what's happened to Kolanis, I may have to re-evaluate my belief system."

She chuckled. "You could be right."

"Doctors," a level voice called.

They both looked around and saw Stovak approach, his pace was the same speed as always, his face bore no expression, and his eyes didn't betray a single emotion. Mbeki had no idea if it was good or bad news he was coming with. Automatically, he and Yuza slowly stood.

"You have something, Doctor Stovak?" Yuza asked carefully.

He came to a stop in front of them. "Yes. Though the monks on Mount Seleya could find no records of any such incident as has befallen Commander Daezan, they have assessed our data and believe that the same principles of *katric* transferral may apply. To this end, a High Priest has agreed to come to Betazed, to see what can be done."

A deep sense of relief flooded Mbeki's mind. He felt so stupidly happy that he let out an unexpected laugh. Yuza was smiling as well.

"That is excellent news!" she exclaimed. "When will they arrive?"

"Due to commercial transport routes, they will not arrive for another fifteen days."

That snapped him out of his celebrating. "Fifteen days? Surely there has to be a fast way to get from Vulcan to Betazed?"

"I am afraid not."

Yuza looked at Mbeki. "At least they will get here and we can get things ready for them."

"I may be able to speed that up," he stated. "I might be able to see if a starship is going between Vulcan and Betazed and ask them to transport the High Priest and whoever else they needed."

"I'm not sure how you'd be able to authorise something like that."

"They're specialists we need on an important medical case," he suggested. By their expressions neither was entirely convinced of that. "It's worth a try. If it doesn't work, then we'll have to wait for the transport to arrive."

Yuza gave it a moment's thought and then nodded. "See if there are other arrangements, but please make sure that Starfleet doesn't lodge a complaint with the Centre as well."

* * * * *

**Guest Accommodation, Erzana Centre for Psychological Analysis and Treatment
El'Nar City, Betazed**

As Yuza and Stovak headed back to the Centre to pass on the news, Mbeki had returned to his quarters and opened up the communications system. Though being in Starfleet for over fifteen years, he didn't have a large network of contacts (outside of medicine that was) to call upon, or favours to cash in. All he could do was hope that someone else knew what strings to pull, so he put his call through and hoped for the best.

"Tunde, it's good to see you again," Susanna Leijten said with a smile. But once she took note of his face the smile dipped a little. *"Everything alright?"*

"This is why I always lose to you in poker, you know all my tells."

"That's my reward for getting to know you, Tunde. What's wrong?"

"We've discovered what it was that affected Kolanis," he began. What followed was a very brief retelling of the events of the last week, though he needed to ask for her help, she had to know what was happening—she would be even more worried about Daezan as he was. He finally got caught up to the problem with the transport from Vulcan.

"Which is why I was calling you; Susanna, I need a favour. There's no way you could find out if there were any ships going between Vulcan and Betazed, that would be able to take on a few passengers?"

"I'm not sure. I'll need to check with fleet logistics. I'll also put a call in with Rear Admiral T'Rona, see if she knows anyone that could help." She glanced at the chronometer on her desk. *"Give me a couple of hours. That should be enough time to do the checks."*

"Thank you, Susanna. Any help you can offer would be great."

"Anytime Tunde. I'll comm you soon. Leijten out."

* * * * *

**Patient Room 107, Erzana Centre for Psychological Analysis and Treatment
El'Nar City, Betazed**

As the others were all heavily involved in research or writing up their latest batch of reports, he had opted to wait for the Captain's call with Daezan. As always, he filled the time chatting. Anything and everything that came into his head he shared with his comatose friend, so that he would know someone was there watching over him.

It was approaching the two hour mark when reception called him. *"Doctor Mbeki, you have an incoming comlink from the U.S.S. Silverfin. Do you wish to accept?"*

"Yes please," he answered, trying to keep his voice level and calm. "Patch it through to the nurse's station."

He glanced back at Daezan. "I'll be right back."

Heading out the private room, down the corridor, he quickly arrived at the nurse's station. Kallani Onall smiled at his and gestured to one of the terminals, on which had the Erzana Centre's logo displayed. Taking a breath, he sat down and tapped in his access code. The logo was replaced with Leijten's face. From the relief in her eyes and the small smile tugging at her lips, he knew that what she was about to tell him was good.

"Captain," he greeted her.

"Doctor," she began. "How does six days sound?"

"You managed to get a ship? What did you have to do to arrange that?" he asked, a wide grin spreading across his face.

"Nothing special actually. The starship Hjaltland is en route to Vulcan, returning a representative who'd been on a diplomatic tour to the species who helped us out during the war. Also among the ambassadors is one from Betazed. The Hjaltland's captain is an old friend from the Academy; after I explained the situation to him, he agreed to help out and altered their route."

“That is excellent news, Susanna!”

Her smile widened. *“I’m just glad I was able to help in some way. They’ll be at Vulcan later this evening. After that, he said they’ll be underway at warp eight.”*

“I’ll make sure that everything is ready here when they arrive. I’d better go tell the rest of the team the good news. Thanks again.”

“Anytime Tunde. Good luck with your plan.”

“Thanks. We may need it. Mbeki out.”

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**Transporter Bay, Erzana Centre for Psychological Analysis and Treatment
El’Nar City, Betazed
Stardate: 55286.2 (April 15th, 2378)**

The Centre had been contacted by the *Hjaltland* when they entered the system, giving the team time to make final preparations and then assemble in the transporter room and await the arrival of their guests. They were all a little on edge (even Stovak seemed agitated), as they had a lot riding on the Vulcan priest.

The technician at the controls answered a chirping panel. “They are ready to transport.”

Director Lijoran stepped forward, dressed in an expensive-looking suit. “Signal we are ready to receive.”

Moments later, five shafts of light appeared on the platform. As they coalesced, Mbeki tugged on his uniform jacket and assumed what he hoped was a suitably respectable expression. The High Priests of Mount Seleya were among the most highly regarded members of Vulcan society, known for their intellect and control. Few Vulcans had the honour of meeting them, so for off-worlders it was even rarer. He wasn’t even sure how often they left Vulcan, or if they even did.

The five figures dematerialised. They all stood tall, posture perfect, and dressed in long robes. At the front of the group, wearing white robes and an intricate headdress, was a female—far older than the others. Behind her, all in

brown robes, their heads shaved bald, were three men and another woman. The one at the back of the dais was holding wooden box, in such a manner that Mbeki knew the contents had to be of great importance.

The elder female stepped down. "I am T'Pellinar."

"Director Reittan Lijoran," he began, a polite smile on his face. "On behalf of all here at the Erzana Cent—"

T'Pellinar held up a hand, cutting him off in the middle of what was obviously a well rehearsed sentence. "I will see the patient, now."

There was a moment of silence, before Yuza stepped forward. "If you would like to follow me," she said, gesturing towards the exit.

The elder Vulcan bowed her head. Lijoran quickly stepped aside as she led her acolytes off the pad and out the door. Before the Vulcans had arrived, Yuza had told the others that she wanted Stadi and Mbeki in the room at the same time, so they could give her a full report on Daezan's emotional, mental and physical health. There would be a meeting later with the full team, so as to go over all the details, but to begin with, they needed to see if first T'Pellinar could do anything.

He and Stadi followed after the last of the monks (he noted that the one carrying the box was in the middle of the others, peaking his curiosity as to what it contained). There was silence as they headed up to the next floor. When they arrived, Yuza led T'Pellinar inside, as the monks stood outside in the corridor. He and Stadi slipped past them and followed the others into Daezan's room.

Inside, Yuza stood to the side. They joined her and watched as T'Pellinar slowly walked around the bed, her eyes never leaving Daezan's peaceful face. It took her several minutes to get to the head of the bed on the far side. She stood still for a long moment, her eyes boring into Daezan with an intensity Mbeki had never seen before.

She raised a hand and held it just above his forehead, her eyes slowly closing. He noticed a slight frown crinkled her already wrinkled brow, her eyes rolled around behind closed lids. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. A glance at the two Betazoid women told him that they too felt the power of the moment in the room. He couldn't help but stare at the elderly Vulcan woman

(whose age he pegged at around two hundred). Despite her advanced years, she radiated strength whilst her movements were controlled and steady.

Her frown deepened.

Suddenly her eyes opened, her hand shot back, and the faintest of gasps escaped her lips. Mbeki felt his stomach tighten at her reaction. It took her a couple of seconds to restore her composure, but in that time he knew what was to follow wouldn't be easy.

She looked at Yuza. "There is great trouble and strife within this man. Hundreds of voices scream to be heard, drowning out his own. They are trapped, not just within his mind, but also within themselves."

"Can anything be done for him?" Yuza asked softly.

T'Pellinar looked between the three of them. "There is one thing we can try."

* * * * *

**Meeting Room 6, Erzana Centre for Psychological Analysis and Treatment
El'Nar City, Betazed**

They all sat down the sides of the table, whilst T'Pellinar stood at the head, her monks on either side (the one with the box standing to her immediate left). There was silence in the room as they were all transfixed on the High Priest.

"Though there are obvious differences between what has happened to Mr Daezan and typical *katra* carriers, the ultimate goal is the same—to remove that which does not belong. However, we cannot simply banish the other presences, they must be transferred."

"Transferred to who?" Stadi asked. "The *Cairo's* crew have vanished and we can't ask anyone else to take on these neural patterns."

T'Pellinar gave the slightest of nods. Immediately, the box-holding monk stepped forward and set the case on the table. Closer up, Mbeki could see the Vulcan writing that had been intricately carved into the polished wooden surface. The care that went into making the case was astounding; the delicate

curls and elaborate swirls could mean something completely different, if something as simple as the spacing between the individual lines was wrong.

Once the box was on the table, the monk took a step back. T’Pellinar’s long fingers touched either side of the case and slowly lifted the exterior case up. Inside, on a wooden base was a jade crystalline pyramid, approximately forty centimetres tall, though the multiple facets inside seemed endless, the exterior was flawlessly smooth. With the lid off the box, she handed it back to the monk, who returned to his previous place.

“Nor do I intend to transfer these consciousnesses to another person,” she stated. Gesturing to the crystal, she continued, “This is a *Katric* Arc. We utilise them to store the *katras* of important Vulcans, so that their knowledge and logic can be accessed by priests and scholars for coming generations. I will attempt to separate the other minds from his own and transfer them to this Arc. Once there, they will do no further harm.”

“What happens to them?” Yuza asked.

“Without their original bodies to return to, they will forever remain inside the Arc.”

Mbeki was conflicted. The transfer could restore Daezan to his previous self, but it would also trap five hundred and thirty-eight Starfleet officers and crew within a crystal for the rest of time. They were as much innocents in this incident as Daezan was—whatever had happened on the *Cairo* they hadn’t been asked for this to happen.

He sat forward. “And they’ll just remain in there, as furious and terrified as they are now?”

She fixed her cool grey eyes onto him. “Yes. Their collective emotional state comes from a single moment that they are trapped in. Such intense emotions are not uncommon at the time of one’s death.”

“So they are dead?” he asked.

“I believe them to be. Regardless, there is nothing within them other than raw emotions. Since there are no thought patterns or any other complex neurological readings, one Arc will be more than sufficient to contain them all.”

Silence fell on the room. Ever since Stadi and he had made their discovery, he had thought that the crew of the *Cairo* were dead. But to actually hear someone confirm that over five hundred people had been killed in action was a little tough to take. Though T’Pellinar’s solution would help Daezan, it wouldn’t give those trapped in his mind peace. They would continue to suffer, whilst the mystery of what happened to them remained.

“When can you start?” asked Yuza.

T’Pellinar gave it a moment’s thought. “I will be sufficiently prepared by tomorrow evening. We will require a space, preferably circular and sound-proofed.”

“Our main diagnostics suite should suffice,” the team leader suggested.

“Very well. We will need to begin preparations to the room.”

“Of course,” Yuza agreed. “I’ll show you there now.”

* * * * *

Main Diagnostics Suite, Erzana Centre for Psychological Analysis and Treatment
El’Nar City, Betazed
Stardate: 55290.0 (April 16th, 2378)

Mbeki and the others had been given permission to attend the transferral. It was around 2100 hours when they entered the diagnostics room and he hardly recognised it. The only illumination came from hundreds of candles, painstakingly laid out in a symmetrical pattern around the centre of the room, where two tables sat side-by-side on a raised pedestal. On one table was Daezan, dressed in a simple white gown, whilst the Arc was on the other, the crystal glistened in the candlelight.

T’Pellinar stood between them, her hands steeped in front of her face, eyes closed, whilst the four monks stood at equal distances around the outside of the room. Before the ceremony had begun, they had been told to remain quiet once inside and form a circle around the central podium. Yuza led the way in, followed by Stovak, Mbeki, Graxx, Stadi, Johai, Nalla and nurse Onall. Kudas had opted not to join them—which didn’t surprise Mbeki, as he’d withdrawn further and further from the group after Stadi’s arrival.

Wordlessly, they entered and then assembled around T’Pellinar and the two tables. There were no monitors or displays operational in the room, so he only could only judge Daezan’s condition by a visual assessment; from what he could see there was no change.

Once they were in place the room was oddly still. A quiet intensity filled the room, which seemed much larger in the candlelight. The monks could have been statues, he never even noticed them blink or breathe. The flames flickered making the shadows dance. Somehow, since yesterday, the Vulcans had taken a high-tech, spotlessly-clean medical suite and made it feel like an ancient shrine. He had to wonder what the temple on Mount Seleya was like—seeing what they had managed to do to a single room of a hospital on Betazed.

His train of thought was interrupted when the monks started chanting. They were speaking in their native tongue, since his combadge back in his room he couldn’t understand what they were saying. It was beautiful, almost lyrical, rising up and echoing in the room. They started deep and slow, but over time the pace increased and the pitch got higher as well. Soon it seemed as though the chanting filled the room, no longer emanating from the four monks, but rather the walls, floor and ceiling.

He noticed a few of his colleagues glance around at the monks, looks of curiosity on their faces, but no one said a word. The monks were getting faster and faster, the tone and pitch varying now, the words almost blending together.

As suddenly as they started, they stopped, leaving the room feel empty and a cold shiver running down his spin. In the middle of the room, T’Pellinar had separated her hands and now held one above Daezan’s head and the other above the Arc, eyes wide open but focused on nothing.

She began to speak, once again in Vulcan, her voice echoed around the room—but whilst the monks chanting had filled the space, her solitary voice made them seem very much alone and isolated. As she spoke, her hand slowly descended towards the unconscious patient. Mbeki was transfixed by the scene before him, the sense of power and majesty she exuded couldn’t be ignored.

“Kal-a-toh,” she finished, pressing her fingers to Daezan’s forehead.

The effect was immediate; her eyes went wide in a look of surprise, the air seemed to fill with energy, Goosebumps covered his skin, the candles nearest the platform flickered as though a gust of wind had blown through the sealed room. On the table, Daezan twitched. The calmness in his face fell away, replaced with a look of discomfort, his breathing was heavier. Soon his body was twitching and jerking repeatedly.

Mbeki really didn't like what he was seeing.

T'Pellinar began talking again, but this time her voice seemed gravellier and more distant. Some words and phrases were the same as her other hand lowered towards the Arc.

"Sah-na-Vey."

With that, her fingers touched the Arc. Daezan's body lurched, his face contorted with pain and beads of sweat formed on his brow. T'Pellinar shared the same pained look in her eyes but fought to keep it from her expression, her body trembled as she bridged the gap between Daezan and the Arc. The Arc itself was glowing, an eerie green glow which grew in intensity.

The atmosphere in the room felt heavy, like a thunder storm was moving in, the stillness had turned cold and oppressive, and all of the candles were flickering. Mbeki looked around at the others in the inner circle, all of who looked anxious, and then out to the monks. He was surprised to see that they too, looked uneasy. They all kept their eyes locked on T'Pellinar and what she was enduring.

Suddenly her head snapped back before collapsing on the ground. As she fell all of the candles blew out, plunging the room into darkness—except for the glowing *Katric* Arc on the table. The medical specialists stood in stunned silence. His eyes were slowly adjusting to the dim light, when four other sources came to life from the outer rim of the room. The monks hurried forward, each carrying a lamp.

As they got nearer, Mbeki noted that T'Pellinar was on the ground, slowly lifting her head up. The deep shadows made her look tired and older than her two hundred years. As the light improved, the others moved forward to help her up.

"Where...?" a soft voice asked.

Mbeki had to stop. The voice was so familiar, but one he hadn't heard in a long time. His head jerked up to the Daezan's table. What he saw made him stumble backwards. Kolanis Daezan was awake and sitting up, his face confused and nervous.

His deep, black eyes looked around the dark room, searching for answers. When they spotted Mbeki his brow furled.

"Doc? Where am I?"

* * * * *

Observation Lounge, *U.S.S. Cairo* S.C.E. Docking Bay, Jupiter Station

Captain Sarah MacDougall had taken to using the deck one meeting room as her own workspace onboard the *Cairo*, even though she had been appointed a comfortable office on Jupiter Station she preferred being onboard the Excelsior-Class ship. Part of her felt that being onboard as much as possible might help give her insight into the mystery that surrounded the ship. Unfortunately that hadn't happened yet. The massive conundrum that was the *U.S.S. Cairo* remained.

The Starfleet Corps of Engineers team assigned to the analysis had made head way into what hadn't happened onboard, ruling out many different phenomena and technologies, they just hadn't yet discovered what actually had happened to the ship or her crew.

It was getting late and as such the crew onboard was light. Even though there were teams working on what had happened to the ship twenty-four hours a day, many didn't like being onboard at night—so the team members of these shifts usually worked from the S.C.E. Annex on Jupiter Station. She didn't blame them. The *Cairo* gave her the creeps as well; it was rare to work on a Starfleet ghost ship. Whenever they did, it just brought home the dangers that they all faced.

MacDougall was in the middle of reading the latest hull analysis report when the doors opened. Glancing up, MacDougall expected to see one of the night shift staff stepping in with another PADD for her. Instead there was nothing but the open door and the empty corridor beyond.

She tapped her combadge. "MacDougall to Quinn. Are you running any checks on the minor control systems?"

"Negative Captain. Why?" asked the diagnostics officer.

"It's nothing, Ensign. Sorry for the interruption. MacDougall out."

Shaking her head, she mentally drew up a list of at least eight different problems that could have caused the doors to open. The ship had suffered battle damage and was due a good period of repair and refit work before she vanished, which would only have compounded the problems.

Just as she glanced back at the PADD, something passed by the open entrance. Her head shot up and looked again.

"Who's there?" she called.

Silence answered.

Somewhere further down the corridor another door opened. Immediately, MacDougall was on her feet and heading out the conference room. She looked around but did see anything. The door behind her closed, then one ahead of her did so too. Darting towards the Bridge at the front of the deck, it took her only a few seconds to reach the hatch. It opened on her approach and she stepped inside.

The Bridge was on power-down mode. The lights at a minimum level, whilst only the Engineering and Environmental consoles were operational, the rest were all blacked out and locked. From where she stood in the aft alcove she could see the entire room. No one was there.

"Right," she said to herself, trying to calm her nerves, "no more caffeine after eighteen hundred."

Turning back to the door she had come through, she took one step when the lights came on full and the Bridge filled with the pings, chirps and other sounds of the other active consoles.

Spinning on her heel, back towards the viewscreen, she stopped dead. A gasp of fear and shock escaped her lips as she fell back into the aft bulkhead. Humanoid figures sat or stood at every console as though going about their daily routine, oblivious to her.

Her combadge chirped. *“Garrn to MacDougall!”* the S.C.E. duty officer on Jupiter Station sounded panicked—not something she had ever heard from the Tellarite. *“We’re getting anomalous energy readings from all across the ship! What’s happening over there?”*

In the blink of an eye, before she could answer the Lieutenant, the Bridge returned to how it had been when she entered. Low lights, dark consoles and no signs of life.

“Captain? Captain!”

Still looking around the deck, she tapped the pin. “I’m here, Lieutenant. Get all departments to run a full analysis. I just saw...something over here.”

“What? What was it?”

“Ghosts.”

* * * * *

**Private Office, Erzana Centre for Psychological Analysis and Treatment
El’Nar City, Betazed
Stardate: 55302.1 (April 21st, 2378)**

It had been five days since the transferral. They had run every conceivable test on Daezan, all of which had come back clear. He’d undergone several therapy sessions with Yuza and Stovak, which had resulted in them learning that he remembered little of his time hosting the other neural patterns. T’Pellinar had told them that might not always be the case, that he may experience momentary ‘flashes’ of memory from the last three months—which could be brought on by various stimuli. She has assured them though that these would fade after several weeks, but until then he would need to rest and relax. The flashes wouldn’t be painful or debilitating, but depending on what they regarded, they could be unpleasant.

T’Pellinar herself proved to be as strong as an ox. What she had experienced had been a shock to her system, but after a couple days’ recuperation and meditation she was good as new. She and the monks would remain for another day or two before returning to Vulcan.

Mbeki had also spoken with Susanna, Amarin and a few others from the *Silverfin* over the last few days, after he had passed on the good news. Though they were eager to talk to their shipmate and friend once again, he advised against it for a little longer, in order to let Daezan's system get back to normal. He had however passed along their messages to Daezan, who seemed truly touched by the concern and support of the Border Dogs.

There was now little left to do but write up the last of his reports and findings, pass them along to Yuza and the others (there was already a buzz about the paper that could be written on this unique case), then book passage back to Star Station Freedom and on to the *Silverfin*.

Mbeki himself was exhausted, having worked long hours over the last three months on a tough and stressful job. He needed some time to unwind and relax, which he planned to do whilst on Betazed—in order to better explore the beautiful planet he had seen so little of during his time there. Fortunately, he'd been told that he could stay at the centre for as long as he wanted.

The door chimed.

"It's open," he called.

Opening, he was surprised to see Doctor Inzendra Stadi standing in the doorway. He had thought that she had returned to Rixx.

"I'm not interrupting, am I?" she asked.

"Of course not. Please, come in."

Stadi stepped inside and he gestured to an empty seat. She slipped into it and then looked out the window for a moment. He gave her the time to arrange her thoughts. When she looked back at him, her black eyes were sad.

"I wanted to thank you."

He gave her a soft smile. "I should be the one thanking you. If it wasn't for you, Kolanis would still be possessed."

"And if it wasn't for you, I would still be doing Aiva's memory a disservice."

Of all the things she could have said, he'd never have expected that. During the week that they'd worked together they had only ever had chance to talk

about the research and analyses, the personal conversations of their initial meeting weren't discussed again. Mbeki found it strange sharing something so personal with a complete stranger—even back on the *Silverfin* only Susanna and a couple of the corpsmen knew about his troubled family life.

"I..." he began, not knowing what to say.

Stadi looked him straight in the eye. "After she disappeared, I tried to hold onto my memories of her. But then when her death was confirmed, my grief turned to anger and I blamed Starfleet for taking my daughter away from me. I forgot who she had been, that she had wanted to join and do her part...and that I was proud of her choice.

"I may not completely trust Starfleet, but I can begin to trust some of those that, like my daughter, chose to follow their heart," she added with a soft smile. "If you are ever in need of a consultation, then you know how to reach me."

"Thank you."

Stadi stood up and he rose as well. "The *Silverfin* is a lucky ship, to have such a dedicated physician looking after them."

He offered her his hand, which she clasped. "Trust me, I'm the lucky one."

They released each other's hands and she left him alone in the office once again. He sat down at the terminal again, but instead of returning to his reports he opened up his personal database and opened up the only file he had in it. On the screen a holophoto appeared. It had been taken the previous summer in Central Park on Star Station Freedom, when the crew celebrated the fifty-fifth anniversary of the *Silverfin's* commissioning (which had been known as her birthday for as long as he had been onboard the Cutter). In the image, clustered tightly together were himself, Leijten, Amarin, Daezan, Ling-Na (just a few weeks before her departure), Llewellyn-Smyth and th'Shaan, all in civvies and smiling widely—though it was impossible to tell with the Benzenite XO, Mbeki knew that he was too.

The image was one he made sure to take with him wherever he went, whilst a hardcopy was safe on a shelf in his quarters. The men and women in the picture were closer to him than kin, and he couldn't have had a better family.

* * * * *

Patient Room 107, Erzana Centre for Psychological Analysis and Treatment
El’Nar City, Betazed

Kolanis Daezan watched as the attractive blonde nurse checked on his vitals, for the second time since he woke up that morning. She had a friendly smile on her face and went about her duties in an efficient and meticulous manner. Kallani Onall was definitely one of the more chattier nurses on staff, seeming genuinely interested in how he was doing and happily answering any questions he had at the same time. Some of the others treated him like a plague carrier, barely able to be in the same room with him let alone strike up a conversation.

“So when can I get up?” he asked as she was writing up her notes.

She peeked over the datapad. “When the doctors say that you can.”

“I feel fine now.”

“That may be so, but you’re not a doctor.”

“I’ve got degrees in sensor management, statistical and telemetry analysis, and translation operations. Doesn’t that count?” he pleaded.

“If we were on a starship, maybe,” she countered with a grin.

Daezan had to chuckle. He’d been telling the truth, he felt fine—great in fact. Doctor Mbeki had told him what the Vulcans said might happen, but so far he hadn’t experienced any flashes. Nor were there any headaches, nausea, dizziness, heart palpitations, blurred vision, or bursts of emotions.

The one thing that he was having difficulty with was the fact that the mission to the *Cairo* had been three months ago. His last memory was of entering a set of quarters with Crewman K8 Blue, looking for signs of the crew or any hint of what had happened to them. Since then until he work up in the dark room was all blank, but after hearing what had happened to him, Daezan wasn’t sure he wanted to remember.

The doors parted and Mbeki entered. “Afternoon Doc.”

“Hey Kolanis.”

As Onall was coming around the bed, heading for the exit, she said, “The patients complaining again, Doctor. Shall I get another sedative?”

Daezan flashed them a winning smile and they both chuckled. Mbeki looked from Daezan to then nurse.

“Have it handy, just in case.”

Onall’s smile widened and she headed out the door. Mbeki moved closer to the bed, taking a quick glance at the monitor above Daezan’s head, then down at him.

“Everything looks good,” he stated.

“I could have told you that, Doc. When can I get back on duty?”

“Not just yet. Give your system time to recuperate,” Mbeki advised.

Daezan nodded. “Okay, no work, but can I at least get out of this bed? Maybe enjoy some fresh air?”

“I think that would be a good idea. Do you want a hoverchair?” Mbeki asked as Daezan flung the covers off.

He shook his head as he swung his legs over the edge of the bed. In an instant the doctor was by his side, gripping him firmly and using his considerable strength to help Daezan to his feet. Though he appreciated the gesture and knew he hadn’t been mobile for some time, his legs felt strong and he was eager to get moving.

It took them only a couple of minutes to get him on his feet. His legs held firm and he gave Mbeki a confident—even somewhat smug—look. Smiling, the doctor shook his head but still stayed close and kept a light hold of his upper arm. After slipping on some light footwear and a robe, they headed out into the corridor and then down towards the lifts that were opposite the nurse’s station.

There was a bit of banter between the two, Mbeki telling him about all the well-wishers from the *Silverfin* as well as catching him up on some of the news and gossip from the Cutter. The mundane stories made him smile, glad to see that life continued onboard, whilst the long list of those that had asked

after him was touching. He would have more than a few people to thank once he got back.

They had just arrived at the large desk where Onall and another nurse sat, when the intercom chirped. *"Doctor Mbeki you have an incoming comlink."*

He tapped his combadge. "I'm just about to head out. Who is it?"

"It's coming in from Captain MacDougall of the S.C.E."

Mbeki scowled. The name meant nothing to Daezan, but the doctor obviously knew the Captain.

"Can you patch it through to the nurse's station?" he asked. Glancing at Daezan, he added, "This shouldn't take long."

He went behind the desk and over to a vacant terminal. Curious, Daezan moved closer. On the monitor he noticed the S.C.E. symbol appear for a few seconds, before being replaced by the image of a stern-faced woman, with blonde hair piled on top of her head. She had four pips displayed on a gold collar, which was something of a rarity in the fleet.

"Captain MacDougall, what can I do for you?"

"Doctor Yuza has just brought up to speed on Commander Daezan's recovery. Going over the data I noticed a correlation between the transferral procedure and an event here on the Cairo," the woman explained.

"What kind of event?"

"At the moment the Commander awoke, what can only be described as apparitions appeared throughout the ship. Five hundred and thirty-eight to be precise."

"What?"

"A previously undetected energy field enveloped the ship for a few seconds, during which time my teams encountered humanoid shapes moving through the ship, operating consoles, even running routine maintenance and eating. It looks like there is a link between Mr Daezan and the ship's complement."

The scowl returned to Mbeki's face, though much deeper than before. "No," he stated avidly.

"Doctor?"

"I will not allow him to return to that ship, not after what happened to him before. He was strong enough to handle the assault once, he may not be a second time."

"Doctor, I wouldn't be asking if it wasn't important."

There was a standoff between the two, neither backing down. Daezan looked from Mbeki to the screen. He understood why his friend was looking out for him, from what he understood of the 'incident', his mind had taken a serious hit and he'd almost been consumed by the trapped consciousnesses of the *Cairo's* crew. But if what had happened to him was somehow connected to what had happened to the crew of that ship, he had the opportunity to find out what happened to over five hundred people, to give their families some closure.

"I'll do it," he announced.

Mbeki, MacDougall and the two nurses all looked up at him, all at varying degrees of surprise. He was determined, his mind set. He wanted answers.

* * * * *

END