

Captain's log, stardate 66510.4:

After completing the mapping of Sector 50112 and making diplomatic visits at both the recently established Romulan colony world Elehu and the Klingon colony of Kos'Karii just one sector further away, the Dauntless is returning to Starbase 719 to transfer our latest survey files to the base computer core and allow for a little crew R&R.

Koester, commanding Dauntless, out.

"On final approach to spacedock," Lt G'raff announced from the helm.

"Stand by to trrrtransfer contrrrrols to spacedock," added the Caitian Lt M'nday from the ops console directly to the Antican officer's left.

"Very well," acknowledged Commander Alasdair Wallace, the starship's officer of the deck, from his position in the center seat. "*Starbase 719*, this is th' starship *Dauntless*, standin' by t' transfer control over t' you."

"Acknowledged, *Dauntless*," replied the voice of the spacedock controller. "Transferring computer control now." Almost immediately the lighting of the bridge changed to blue as the starbase's computer assumed control of the approaching starship, gently maneuvering the *Dauntless* through Spacedoor 2.

Just as the starship passed into the interior of the vast spacedock, one of the turbolifts at the back of the bridge opened and Fleet Captain Peter J. Koester, commanding officer of the *Dauntless*, and Chief Pono R. Kyman, the starship's Chief of the Boat stepped out. Koester noted the lighting and glanced at the image on the main viewscreen, which showed his vessel nearing its regular mooring slip alongside the spacedock hub. He also noticed a familiar-looking starship moored in the slip next to where the *Dauntless* was slowly heading.

"What's the *Triton* doing in dock?" Koester asked, looking at the Luna-class starship as the *Dauntless* maneuvered alongside the hub. "I thought Amanda and her crew were half-way across the AOR right now?"

"That isn't Captain Tomkins ship, srrrr," M'nday informed, glancing back at the captain over her shoulder. "That's the *USS Titan*."

"Will Riker's ship? When did they get back from their extended mission of exploration?"

"Just recently, from wha' I've heard," Commander Wallace explained in his thick Scottish accent. "Though I'm surprised she's all th' way out here in th' Typhon Sector instead o' heading straight back to Earth."

"Must be making one of those post-mission good-will tours, Skipper," Kyman suggested.

"I wonder if Lieutenant Riker is aware his 'brother' is visiting the base?" Koester asked.

"Unlikely," Wallace replied. "Bu' I'm sure he'll know soon enough once th' crew gets liberty." Wallace then returned his attention on mooring the *Dauntless* in its slip. "Stand by t' take on mooring tractors an' umbilicals."

As the Sovereign-class starship came to a halt, the dock's mooring tractor beams activated, locking the vessel in place as a gangway extended from the hub to mate with one of the *Dauntless*' airlocks.

"Ship is moored, Cap'n," Wallace announced as most of the bridge crew turned their stations over to computer monitoring.

"Very well, Mister Wallace. Set the in-port watch."

"Yeoman, note in th' ship's log; set th' in-port watch – ship's time: 2015 hours," Commander Wallace ordered.

As the yeoman made the necessary entry, Koester turned to Chief Kyman and added, "Liberty is down by department head, COB."

"Aye, Skipper. I'll pass the word. Meet you and the Missus in the Lodge a little later?"

"Probably not tonight, COB. I have to make my customary visit with the base commander first, followed by my customary visit with my wife in her quarters. I'll be spending the night aboard the station tonight if you need me. Try to not need me."

"Understood, Skipper. Makia and I will raise a glass in your honor tonight," Kyman remarked as he headed toward the turbolift. Koester watched the El-Aurian man leave, then tapped his combadge.

“Koester to Arbelo.”

“Go ahead, Skipper,” replied the voice of the starship’s first officer, Setton To’Lock Arbelo.

“Meet me at the gangway airlock. Time to pay our respects to Admiral Raiajh... again.”

“Mind if I bring Annika along?” Arbelo asked, referring to his 10 year old daughter who – in spite of her age – was a fully commissioned Starfleet officer assigned to the *Dauntless* crew as well. “She’s been asking for a tour of Ops since half-way through the war last year.”

“I don’t see that being a problem. Koester, out.”

As the captain deactivated the intercom, a woman who appeared to be in her mid-twenties but was actually centuries old emerged from one of the turbolifts and stepped over near the center seat.

“We still on for breakfast aboard the station in the morning, Pe... um, Captain? I’ve been looking forward to trying out that new Romulan bakery everyone has been talking about in the Rec Area,” Ensign Cassie Koester commented, trying to cover her brief slip in front of the crew. “What time do you want to meet?”

“I’d like a morning I can sleep in for once,” the captain replied as he stepped up toward the turbolift. “Especially if there’s any possibility of tonight being a late evening. No earlier than 0900.”

“Okay, see you then,” the ensign replied with a nod before moving over toward the ops console to receive a turnover report from the Caitian officer still seated there. A moment later, Fleet Captain Koester disappeared inside the same nearby turbolift that Kyman had used.

Space, the Final Frontier...

These are the voyages of the starship *Dauntless*!

Star Trek: Dauntless

“He Ain’t Heavy...” By PJK

Early the next morning, Ensign Cassie Koester was accompanied by her department head, Lieutenant Thomas Riker, over to the recreation area aboard *Starbase 719*. Located within the residential section of the Ournal-class starbase, the recreation area contained the majority of the station’s better known destinations; the public holosuites, gift shops, restaurants, bars, a public library, food court, holovid cinema, and down one out of the way side corridor, the station’s most popular pub; the Bastogne Lodge, which was decorated with memorabilia intended to convey the atmosphere of the Battle of the Bulge during Earth’s Second World War, and was most often occupied by members of the station staff or the senior officers of the Fifth Fleet’s starships.

“I’m heading in here,” Cassie Koester said as the pair paused in front of one of the new Romulan bakeries that had opened aboard the station in the months following the destruction of Romulus and Remus, where the smells of fresh-baked goods and soups wafted out the door each time someone passed through. “I’m meeting Fleet Captain Koester and Commander Petersen for breakfast.” Cassie paused for a moment before adding, “Would you care to join us, Lieutenant?”

“I wouldn’t want to impose on your family gathering, Ensign,” Riker replied.

“Well, it’s not like I’m actually related to the captain,” Cassie remarked, not for the first time.

“Thanks for the invite,” Riker said, holding up one hand. “Perhaps another time?”

“Sure,” Cassie replied before turning and heading into the bakery, hoping to get a table close to the display case where cakes and pastries tempted both the eye and the palate.

Riker continued on through the recreation area, wondering where to go. It was only 0845 station time, much too early to hit any of the bars aboard the base, which if they were even open would likely be filled with drunken or passed-out Klingons. He briefly considered the holocinema, but none of the programs sparked his

interest. He was beginning to consider renting a holosuite when, out of the corner of his eye, a passing woman caught his attention. He turned quickly, but lost sight of her in the crowd.

The woman he had briefly seen had long almost-pure black hair and been wearing a Starfleet uniform with a medical blue department color yoke. Riker had not been sure, but it looked like she may have been walking with someone else, someone shorter than herself, though the woman in question was not all that tall to begin with. And she had definitely reminded him of someone he knew in a past life.

Hesitating for a moment and willing at first to dismiss what he had seen, curiosity finally got the better of him. Riker turned away from the holosuites and started following in the direction he had seen the woman walking. Pausing to look in each store he passed along the way, in case she had stepped inside one of them to shop, he finally noticed her ahead in the distance, passing through the emergency hatch that could be closed during a disaster and seal the section of the station, leaving the recreation area and entering a corridor that led to residential apartments and the main transit hub of the station. She was definitely walking hand in hand with what Riker now realized appeared to be a young girl, her hair as long and dark as the woman who had drawn his attention. As politely as he could, Riker pushed through the crowd toward the exit. Finally reaching the open hatch, he noticed the corridor beyond was straight for nearly twenty meters before it branched off in two opposite directions, one toward the residences, the other toward the turbolift hub. Neither the woman nor the girl was in sight.

Playing the odds that – if the woman was who he believed she was – she would not be heading toward a residential apartment, Riker turned right and rushed down the corridor toward the main turbolift hub, emerging just in time to see the backs of the woman and child entering one of the large lifts that ran almost the entire length of the kilometers-tall starbase before the doors swished shut behind them.

“Damn!” Riker remarked to himself.

* * * *

“I believe you will find this item quite interesting,” Lieutenant John Cole, the archeological and anthropological officer aboard the *Titan* remarked as he pulled another case out of stasis storage and placed it on the deck near the feet of Lieutenant Brian Barth, his counterpart aboard the base. “It was found about a year ago on a planet that used to support a thriving civilization that has since gone completely extinct. We named the planet Vishnu.”

“Vishnu? After the Hindu goddess of preservation?” Barth remarked.

“Yes,” Cole replied as he entered a code into the lock on the case. “The remains of Vishnu’s civilization, particularly the architecture, bore a striking resemblance to the ancient Hindu culture that flourished on the Indian sub-continent on Earth. And also because...” With a flourish, Cole unlatched the specimen case and opened it. Inside, packed in protective form-fitting sponge-foam, was a half-meter tall statue of a humanoid man with blue skin, very large ears like those of an elephant, and six arms spread out roughly in a circle in addition to his two fairly normal looking legs. His head displayed three eyes arranged roughly in a triangle above a single nose and two mouths – one above the other.

“Is this a depiction of their god or deity?” Barth asked as he squatted down to get a better look at the statue, awed by its detail and beauty. He reached out and touched the statue’s face, surprised by its rough feel, almost like shark skin, in spite of looking as smooth as glass.

“Honestly, we’re not sure if it depicts a figure out of Vishnuian myth or is an accurate portrayal of what a Vishnuian actually looked like,” Cole replied. “Because of the planet’s extremely low levels of oxygen and excessively high levels of nitrogen in the atmosphere – a ratio of nearly 20 to 1 – we were unable to send an away team down without environment suits, so we didn’t spend a whole lot of time on the surface, just enough to collect a few geological samples and some cultural artifacts for later study. But based on sensor readings we obtained, the entire civilization died out rapidly between 500 and 1000 years ago. Coincidentally, right around the time they had broken the warp barrier.”

“You think warp drive had something to do with the fall of their civilization?” Barth asked as he stood back up again.

“We’re not sure if warp drive contributed to the death of their civilization or if they perhaps developed it in response to some environmental catastrophe in order to evacuate some of their population and escape their dying planet,” Cole replied. “Those are among the questions we’re hoping can be answered through the study of these artifacts once they get shipped back to Earth.”

“The *Cassandra* is the vessel we’ve chartered to carry these artifacts back to the Federation Archeological Council and the Daystrom Institute. Captain Hunter reported he will be arriving at the base in the next three or four days,” Barth explained. “In the meantime we’ll transfer all these specimen cases over to Cargo Bay 9 on the base.” Barth glanced admiringly one last time as Cole kneeled down to close and latch the artifact case once again before saying, “Would you or your chief science officer mind if our science staff took a look at some of these items before they get shipped to Earth? Maybe we can solve a mystery or two before they leave here?”

“I don’t see that being a problem. I’ll check with Lieutenant Commander Pazlar and get you official authorization,” Cole replied as he lifted up the case and returned it to its storage location.

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“Lieutenant Riker to Starbase Ops.”

“Ops. Go ahead, Lieutenant,” replied the voice of Lt Commander B’Elanna Torres, the station’s chief of operations.

“I’m currently in the transit hub on level 600,” Riker stated. “One of the turbolifts just left my location. Would it be possible to know where that lift is going, Commander?”

“Is there a reason for this inquiry, Lieutenant?” Torres asked, sounding slightly suspicious.

“I was passing through the rec area when I thought I saw someone I knew, but they got into the turbolift before I could catch up.”

“This isn’t something we normally do, but I’ll make an exception in your case just this once.” There was a pause for a moment before Torres’ voice returned, saying, “Turbolift 4286 is descending to level 850, the main botanical garden.”

“Thank you, Commander,” Riker replied as he quickly stepped into the next turbolift. “Riker, out.” He then addressed the turbolift control computer as he said, “Level 850.” The doors swished shut and the turbolift started its descent.

Seconds later the lift doors opened again, and Riker stepped out. He was on the ‘ground floor’ of the star-shaped multi-story building that housed offices and civilian residential apartments at the center of the huge dome-shaped starbase botanical garden. Quickly determining the direction of the closest door to the ‘outside,’ Riker rushed toward the simulated sky and sunlight, emerging on the path nearly one hundred meters behind the object of his search, the woman in the blue Starfleet uniform and the little girl holding her hand.

Gathering his nerve, he called out, “Deanna!”

Deanna Troi stopped walking and turned around at the sound of her name. She smiled when she saw Riker and started walking back toward him, the little girl still holding her hand. Her smile slipped slightly, replaced by an expression of confusion as she looked at Riker again.

“Will, why in the world are you wearing an operations uniform?” Troi asked as the two neared one another. “You haven’t worn gold since... since you became first officer of the *Hood*.” Troi then noticed another abnormality. “And why are you wearing lieutenants...?”

Troi’s voice got caught in her throat as she experienced a revelation.

“You’re not Will. You’re...” She looked at the man closely, studying the cut of his beard and the way he held his shoulders erect. “Tom?” she asked as if unsure.

“It’s good to see you again, Deanna, though unexpected,” Riker remarked. “What brings you here to *Starbase 719*? I thought you were still serving aboard the *Enterprise*?”

“I haven’t been assigned to the *Enterprise* in almost ten years, Tom,” Troi explained. “I’m now Ship’s Counselor and Diplomatic Officer aboard the *USS Titan*. We just returned from a long-range mission of exploration that kept us outside Federation space for most of that decade exploring the Gum Nebula, and we’re here for a little

rest and relaxation while we transfer some of our specimens to the base so they can be shipped back to Earth quicker than we can bring them ourselves. *Titan* will now be making a good will tour around the Federation that's expected to last another year before we finally return home to Earth ourselves."

"Mommy, who is this man? And why does he look like Daddy?" asked the girl holding Troi's hand, reminding the counselor she had not introduced the two to each other.

"Natasha, this is...", Troi started to say before pausing to look at Riker, studying him as if it would help her explain who and what he was. "Well, I guess the easiest way of explaining it is this is your Uncle Tom."

"Uncle Tom?" Natasha Riker-Troi repeated, as if not quite comprehending.

"**Uncle Tom?!**" Riker likewise repeated a definite tone of dislike for the title in his voice. "Wait, you don't mean that you...? That you and Will...?"

"Daddy!" the young Riker-Troi suddenly shouted with glee, looking past Riker toward the hub building from which all three had emerged. Groaning to himself, Riker slowly turned around to find himself looking directly at a near mirror image, with the exception that the man standing there was wearing a red-yoked command uniform with a captain's rank insignia attached to the chest and a look of extreme displeasure on his face.

"What in hell are you doing here?" Captain Will Riker demanded to know.

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Fleet Captain Peter Koester, his wife Commander Michelle Petersen – the station's chief of security – and Ensign Cassie Koester left the bakery, their stomachs full, pausing in front of the shop to discuss their plans for the rest of the day.

"Michelle told me about the new art museum that has opened aboard the station last night. We're going to head there for a few hours. Would you care to join us, Cassie?" Koester asked.

"No thanks. I think I'm going to stick around here and see what trouble I can get into," Cassie replied.

"After all the trouble you got into aboard the *Erstwhile* last year, I would think that would be the last thing you would be looking for?" Petersen remarked with a smile before she and her husband waved and started heading toward the turbolifts. Cassie, meanwhile, started walking toward the holosuites when she almost literally ran into her first officer, Commander Arbelo, and his daughter Annika.

"Where are you heading, Ensign?" Arbelo asked.

"I was considering renting a holosuite and doing some surfing," Cassie replied. "I took it up in my spare time after the war ended last year to take my mind off things and I just really got into it." She looked at Annika Arbelo-Eeta and an idea occurred to her. "Hey, would you like to join me, Annika?"

"Sounds like fun. It's been a really long time since Eeta has done anything like surfing, but riding a skatsball board isn't too much different," Arbelo-Eeta said, referring to the Trill symbiont implanted in her abdomen that granted her the knowledge and experiences of five lifetimes. The young girl then looked up at her father and asked, "Do you mind if I go with Cassie?"

"Not at all, Annika," Arbelo replied. "Have fun. And call me if you need me."

Arbelo-Eeta gave her father a quick hug before heading away toward the holosuites with Ensign Koester. Arbelo then looked around – suddenly unsure where he wanted to go – before spotting the sign for the Bastogne Lodge in the distance and heading toward it.

"That looks like as good a place as any to rest and relax," he commented to himself.

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The doors to Infirmary 1 swished open and Lieutenant Barth was helped into the room by another member of 719's science staff. Nadaja h'Ryea – the head duty nurse – reacted quickly upon seeing the pair enter, directing them to the nearby exam bed.

"What are his symptoms?" h'Ryea asked.

“He told me he was experiencing intense pain in his elbows and knees,” the lieutenant that had carried the man in replied. “Happened all of a sudden. We were transferring cases from Cargo Bay 9 to one of the science labs, next thing I know he’s doubled over and laying on the deck in intense pain.”

“Did he suffer any accidents or trauma that could account for this pain?” the Andorian nurse asked as she entered information into a padd.

“Nothing I am aware of. Nothing in the last few days,” the lieutenant replied.

As the nurse pulled out a medical tricorder and started running it over the afflicted man’s body, Dr. Sylvan Xaran – the starbase’s chief medical officer – emerged from his nearby office and started to examine the man himself.

“No. No, this can’t be right,” Xaran said as he scanned the man with his own medical tricorder. He then called out, “Orderly! This man needs to be placed in the decompression chamber ASAP!”

“What...? What is it, Doctor?” the lieutenant that had helped the patient reach the infirmary asked as several orderlies transferred the man to an anti-gravity gurney and moved him to another area of the infirmary near the medical laboratory.

“He’s suffering from nitrogen bubbles building up in his blood!” Xaran replied. “If we can’t get him under enough pressure to reabsorb the nitrogen and allow it to decrease gradually, he’s going to die!”

“Die? From nitrogen in his blood?” the lieutenant asked.

“That man is suffering...” Xaran paused, as if trying to figure out how his diagnosis was even possible. “...from the bends!”

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“Wait, let me see if I have this straight? You and Will are married?”

“Since just before we both transferred off the *Enterprise* and commissioned the *Titan*,” Troi replied. She and Tom Riker were sitting on a bench along the path between the hub and the sports field. Not far away, Will Riker and Troi’s daughter, Natasha, played in the grass while her father stood nearby, glaring at his transporter clone. “Two years later we had Natasha.”

“I thought you told me, not long after the *Enterprise* rescued me from Nervalva IV, that your relationship had ended when he decided to concentrate on his career instead of you?”

“I never said it had ended,” Troi replied. “Merely cooled for a time until both of us were more comfortable with where we stood in our careers. A couple of incidents over the years that heated things slightly didn’t hurt either.” Troi smiled warmly as she remembered some of those incidents. “Admittedly, it’s been rough at times, trying to both command a starship and raise a family aboard the same, but we’re making it work.” Troi glanced over toward her husband and added, “Pretty successfully, in my humble opinion.”

“You still haven’t answered my question,” Captain Riker said loudly, taking a few steps closer to the bench on which Troi and Lt Riker were seated. “Why are you wearing a Starfleet uniform? You have no right...”

“I have just as much right to be wearing this uniform as you do,” Tom Riker suddenly countered, standing up and facing down his twin. “Yes, I made my share of mistakes.”

“You mean like deserting Starfleet and joining the Maquis?” asked Will Riker. “Or perhaps you’re referring to the mistake you made stealing a Federation starship from a Federation starbase?”

“I may regret some decisions in my life,” Tom Riker said with a glance toward Troi. “But defending Federation colonists from the Cardassians and their Obsidian Order is not one of them, especially if the Federation and Starfleet didn’t have the guts to protect their own people themselves.”

“Well if you’re so damned proud of what you did, what brings you back to Starfleet? Why aren’t you still with all your Maquis sympathizer friends?” Will Riker asked with a hint of sarcasm before adding, “Oh, yeah. I almost forgot. They were all killed by the Cardassians and their Dominion allies! Yet here you are, still alive.”

“Not for lack of trying,” Tom Riker countered. “Life in Cardassian captivity was no picnic. I was beaten almost daily. Used in a series of depraved experiments. And abandoned to die with dozens of others when the Dominion was finally defeated.”

“You still haven’t answered my question to my satisfaction,” Will Riker reiterated. “What gives you the right to wear that uniform – the uniform you **chose** to disgrace – again?”

“I wear this uniform today – with pride! – because a man I highly respect chose to forgive me for the sins I had committed and accepted that I had suffered enough for what I had done, and for that I am eternally grateful to that man.”

The two Rikers glared at each other in silence for several seconds, Troi looking back and forth between the two of them nervously, before Captain Riker finally said, “That man sounds like a fool to me. As far as I’m concerned, you’re still not worthy of wearing the uniform, and I’ll use every power at my disposal to see to it that you won’t be wearing it much longer.” Then, without another word, Will Riker turned and walked away.

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Dr. Xaran sat in a chair across the desk from his wife and commanding officer, Vice Admiral Val’ri Raiajh. In the chair next to the Betazoid doctor sat the starbase’s first officer, Captain Cathryn E. Pearson. Both had looks of concern on their faces.

“My first thought was that Lieutenant Barth had been somewhere that could put him under enough pressure to actually induce nitrogen narcosis,” Xaran explained. “The only place aboard the base where that would be possible is the water storage tanks, which then alarmed me with the possibility of contamination of our emergency water supply. But I checked with both Commanders Petersen and Torres, and they confirm that none of our water tanks has been accessed for anything beyond routine maintenance and inspection in the last six months.”

“What about holodecks and holosuites?” Pearson asked. “Could the lieutenant have developed what you describe during the course of a holodeck program?”

“No,” Xaran replied. “Holodeck safety protocols would preclude any possibility of something like this happening, and I had that same thought. None of the holodecks or holosuites aboard the station has had their safeties overridden within the last month.”

“What else could cause a condition like this?” Raiajh asked. “And should I be concerned for the safety of the base crew and staff?”

“I don’t see how? Whatever the cause, I’m sure it’s an isolated incident,” Xaran answered. “But I’ll keep looking into it. In the meantime I have the lieutenant undergoing decompress...”

“Infirmary 1 to Doctor Xaran!”

Quite suddenly on the alert, Xaran tapped his combadge and said, “Xaran. Go ahead.”

“Doctor, we just had another member of the crew report to the infirmary with symptoms of nitrogen narcosis. Only this is worse. Much worse.”

“Worse? In what way?”

“The patients in question are not just showing a build-up of nitrogen bubbles in their blood. They’re actually bleeding from the vicinity of their finger and toe nails and ears!”

“Four Dieties!” Xaran responded. “I’ll be right... Wait a second. Did you say patients? As in plural?”

“Yes, Doctor. Lieutenants Rogers and D’niel and Ensign Gordon. All came or were carried in within a few minutes time.”

“Very well. I’ll be right there. Xaran, out.” The doctor then turned to look at his wife again and said, “We have something happening here. I don’t know what it is yet, but I’ll keep you informed.” Raiajh nodded as Xaran added, “You may want to prepare a communiqué to Starfleet Medical. If this turns out to be something spreading, you may have to declare quarantine on the station.”

With thoughts of the nearly 15,000 people aboard the starbase in her mind, Raiajh replied, “I hope it doesn’t come to that.”

* * * *

Will Riker walked into the Bastogne Lodge and looked around, smiling at the decor and atmosphere of the tavern before striding across the room and over to the bar to order a stiff drink.

Across the room, Setton Arbelo noticed the arrival of the person he first thought was his starship's operations officer before realizing he wore the wrong color uniform, immediately knowing who the man actually was. Arbelo grabbed his glass of liquor and stepped up to the bar next to Will Riker, who seemed to be studying the bottles on the shelf behind the bar as he absentmindedly ran a finger along the rim of his glass of ale.

"Captain Riker? Good to see you again, sir," Arbelo said, offering his hand. Riker looked over, at first annoyed that his privacy had been intruded upon, before looking closely at Arbelo.

"I know you, don't I?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. We met when I served briefly aboard the *Enterprise-D* for three months of training," Arbelo replied.

"That's it!" Riker said with a snap of his fingers as he remembered. "You were a member of the *Arcturus* crew, weren't you? Wow, that was... What? Twenty years ago?"

"Nearly twenty-two," Arbelo confirmed as Riker finally returned the offered handshake. "Currently First Officer of the starship *Dauntless*."

"Sovereign-class ship. Good reputation from what I've heard," Riker said with an approving nod.

"She's a good ship with a good crew and an exceptional commander," Arbelo confirmed. "In fact, your brother is our chief of operations. He's been..."

"Excuse me?!?" Riker interrupted with a raised eyebrow. "You mean to tell me that coward and traitor is serving aboard your starship?"

"Yes. In fact, he was assigned at the same time I was about four or five years ago," Arbelo confirmed.

Riker turned his head and resumed staring at the bottle of various liquors displayed on the shelf behind the bar, his foul mood evident even to a non-empath. "Maybe I was wrong about your captain. Who in his right mind would willingly accept Tom Riker as a member of his crew? After everything he had done...!"

"Which I believe is exactly the reason Fleet Captain Koester accepted Lieutenant Riker's assignment to the *Dauntless*," Arbelo remarked.

"See?" Riker said, looking back at Arbelo again. "Ten years and he's STILL nothing more than a mere lieutenant!"

"I've known Mister Riker for quite a while. Longer than just the time we have served together aboard the *Dauntless*..."

"Were you assigned to the *Gandhi* with him?" Riker asked. When Arbelo looked confused, Captain Riker explained, "The starship Tom deserted to run off and join the Maquis. You know, before he decided to singlehandedly steal another starship and get himself thrown in a Cardassian prison."

"Actually, sir, I first met him in that prison." When it looked like Riker was at a loss for words for a moment, Arbelo added, "Both he and I were incarcerated in the prison camp on Almatha together at the end of the Dominion War and several years afterward."

"Tom got himself into that predicament," Riker remarked. "True, you and all the prisoners of war should have been set free when the war ended, but if Tom had not abandoned Starfleet, Starfleet would not have abandoned Tom."

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Shortly after returning her daughter to the *Titan* for school classes, Deanna Troi approached the station's main infirmary. It was her intention to pay a visit to *Starbase 719*'s counselor, but the sight of several orderlies pushing patients on gurneys toward the infirmary concerned her. She stepped through the infirmary doors only to find nearly every doctor on staff huddled around dozens of patients who appeared to be in agony, some moaning, some screaming in pain, others bleeding from tear ducts and ear canals as nurses tried to do what they could to offer some relief.

Troi was still looking toward the ICU when one of the doctors passed her, pausing a moment when he realized she was not a member of the staff or exhibiting symptoms.

“Deanna?” Dr. Xaran asked, recognizing the woman he had known for years and with whom he had helped liberate Betazed during the war. “What brings you here?”

“Sylvan! I came to pay a visit to your Counselor Wyatt, but I can see you have bigger concerns for the moment,” Troi replied. “Anything I can do to help?”

“To be honest, I’m not sure what even I can do to help,” Xaran admitted. “Whatever this is, it’s spreading like wildfire. We’re not even sure if it’s viral in nature and – if so – how it’s being passed; whether by touch, exchange of bodily fluids, or air-borne.”

“Where did it come from?” Troi asked.

“Another excellent question without an answer,” Xaran replied. “We tried tracking it back to Patient Zero, but the nearest we’ve been able to narrow it down is the infection appears to have started either in the research labs or the cargo bays here aboard the station. We’ve already lost six of the earliest cases, and it seems to be getting worse exponentially.”

As he spoke, the doors behind Xaran opened again and two more gurneys were pushed into the infirmary. The orderlies handed small pads from each gurney to Xaran, who quickly reviewed them before he looked at the patients.

“Oh no,” he said.

“What is it?” Troi asked.

“Until now, all those infected with whatever this is have been members of the starbase crew,” Xaran explained before indicating the new patients. “But Ensigns Koester and Arbelo-Eeta here are assigned to the *Dauntless*.” Xaran looked down at Cassie and Annika with concern. “If it’s starting to spread to the starship crews as well, we could be in a lot more trouble than I anticipated. Nurse!”

“Yes, Doctor?” Nurse Nadaja h’Ryea responded.

“The symptoms in Ensigns Koester and Arbelo-Eeta have not progressed very far yet. We may be able to head this off. Get them into the decompression chamber, stat!”

“Right away, Doctor.”

As the two new patients were moved away to be placed in decompression, Xaran rubbed the temples of his head. “Those are the twentieth and twenty-first cases to be diagnosed in the last hour. But where is it coming from?!?”

Xaran indicated for Troi to follow, leading her into his private office where he sat down heavily in the seat behind his desk.

“I needed a break anyway,” he remarked before looking at the *Titan*’s counselor and diplomatic officer. “Can I offer you anything? Drink? Bite to eat?”

“No, thanks, Sylvan,” Troi replied. “I just wish my visit occurred at a more convenient time.”

“Well, if it’s not a space plague it’s an alien invasion or some other crisis,” Xaran remarked. “Welcome home, by the way. I understand the *Titan*’s mission was considered a resounding success?”

“Thank you. And yes, it was quite the mission. More intense at times than a good portion of my service aboard either the *Enterprise-D* or *-E*. But not as intense as just this morning aboard your starbase.”

“You mean realizing there’s some sort of plague loose aboard my station?” Xaran asked.

“No. I mean being reminded my husband has a clone created by a transporter accident who still harbors the same old feelings about me and that he’s here aboard your station at the moment.”

“Oh, you mean Lieutenant Riker!” Xaran said with a nod. “Yes, I can sympathize with you a great deal. I know exactly how you feel.”

Troi smiled a patronizing smile as she asked, “How could you possibly know how it feels?”

“Because for the past two years I’ve been in a similar circumstance,” Xaran explained. “About two years ago another version of my wife, Val’ri, who originated from an alternate quantum reality in which I died and she... well, let’s just say she married another man... crossed universal boundaries and took up part-time residence here aboard the station. It’s not easy having to deal with the two of them together, especially since they now regard each

other as sisters, and for a while was even harder on the rare occasions when I had to deal solely with Lady Val, whom I thought may have had some residual feelings for me, or more exactly the man she knew in her heart. However after talking about it, we both came to realize that wasn't the case. She had accepted what had occurred long ago and moved on."

"Well, with the exception of the time when we first rescued the man who now calls himself Tom Riker from the research station on Nervalva IV, I haven't really had to deal with two Rikers," Troi said. "Until now."

"Until I had that talk, I truly didn't wish to deal with two Val'ri's, but it has become easier since then."

"I know, from my little interaction with Tom this morning, that he still has the same old feelings for me that he expressed when we met again for the first time almost twenty years ago," Troi said. "The problem is I still have deep affection for him as well. I think it's mainly because in my mind he still represents the impetuous, youthful Riker I was involved with a long, long time ago, even though the years have evidently seasoned him much as they have my own husband."

"But in a much different way, obviously," Xaran remarked. "If you were to compare their two lives, I would argue that Tom Riker definitely got the short end of the stick. First being stranded for eight years on Nervalva IV, constantly hoping for rescue when the outside world didn't even know he existed. Then only a few short years later he gets imprisoned by the Cardassians for twelve years! It's no wonder that..."

Troi noted Xaran's sudden pause, then turned to look where the station CMO was looking.

"It appears you have company, Deanna," he remarked as she saw Tom Riker entering the infirmary and ask the Nurse h'Ryea a question. She in turn pointed in the direction of the CMO's office, toward which Riker started walking. He knocked on the doorframe before poking his head into the office.

"Excuse me, Doctor Xaran. Could I have a moment with Counselor Troi?"

"Of course. I need to go see if my staff has come up with anything new regarding this disease we're being afflicted with. It was nice seeing you again, Deanna. Perhaps if we can get this problem under control you and your family can join me and my family for a nice dinner here aboard the station one night?"

"That would be lovely, Sylvan. Thank you," Troi said before Xaran walked out. She then turned her attention on Riker.

"I understand you're probably uncomfortable with my presence here," Riker started before Troi could say anything to him. "But I feel the need to get rid of some old baggage. Would you join me for a cup of coffee so we can talk for a little while...?" Riker looked around the medical office before adding, "...In a more public location."

"As long as I can get tea there instead of coffee," Troi remarked, getting up out of the chair and walking alongside Lt Riker.

"I hear one of the Romulan shops in the Rec Area brews a home-made blend Earl Grey. I haven't tried it myself yet..."

"Ooh! I haven't had a really good cup of Earl Grey since I left the *Enterprise*," Troi said, placing her hand through the crook of Riker's arm as the pair headed toward the nearest turbolift.

* * * *

Vice Admiral Raiajh was looking at the image of her husband's face on her desktop monitor screen as he spoke.

"The situation is getting worse and deteriorating rapidly," Dr. Xaran explained. "This disease, whatever it is, has definitely spread to the crew of the *Dauntless* as well. I've had four new cases in the last few minutes, plus another half-dozen among our starbase crew."

"Has any crew of the *Titan* come down with this thing yet?" Raiajh asked.

"Not yet, but it could simply be a case of them being in the right places at the right time and just haven't been exposed to however this thing is spreading. However, I feel it's only a matter of time until *Titan* starts to succumb as well. I'm afraid you have no choice. As CMO, I'm formally requesting you declare *Starbase 719* to be quarantined until further notice. Be sure to send communiqués to both Starfleet Command and Starfleet Medical informing them of this fact and include all medical log entries to present stardate."

“Understood,” Raiajh replied sadly. “Any estimates on how long it will take you to figure this out?”

“Val, I don’t even know what started it, and until I do, there’s little chance of figuring out how to stop it. But I have anyone and everyone who has any medical training and is not already infected with whatever this is working on finding a cure. I’ll keep you informed. Infirmary 1, out.”

As the monitor image blinked to black, Raiajh sighed softly and then touched her intercom.

“Admiral Raiajh to Ops,” she said.

“Pearson. Go ahead, Val,” came the quick reply.

“Cathryn, effective immediately, this starbase is under complete quarantine indefinitely,” Raiajh ordered. “No vessels are authorized to arrive or depart. All transporter stations are shut down until further notice. All spacedock and external launch bays are secured with the exception of required external maintenance. Nothing comes in, nothing goes out! Am I understood?”

There was shocked silence from the intercom speaker for a moment before Pearson’s voice replied, “Understood, Val. I’ll notify all vessels currently in port and all vessels en route with a scheduled arrival at the base. What should I say if someone asks for the reason we’re doing this?”

“The base is under quarantine due to a potential epidemic loose aboard the station. We will inform all concerned as soon as we have more detailed information. In the meantime, advise them not to panic.”

“Very well. I’ll pass the word. Ops, out.”

* * * *

“Have you ever considered the fact that Tom had a lot to live up to?” Commander Arbelo asked as another round of drinks was placed in front of him and Captain William Riker. “You and he were in fact the same person until nearly thirty years ago. While he found himself stranded – essentially abandoned – for eight years, you went on to do many great things. You were appointed as one of the youngest first officers in the fleet when you became XO of the *Hood* as a newly promoted Lieutenant Commander. Just a couple of years later you were promoted to full commander and received the prestigious assignment as first officer of the Federation Flagship. You stopped an alien takeover of Starfleet, were the first human to serve aboard a Klingon warship, beat the Borg, and commanded one of the starships that were instrumental in ending the Klingon Civil War! Then Tom got rescued from Nervalia IV and returned to the fleet. Everyone expected him to be William T. Riker, with all the accomplishments that name implies.” Riker gazed at Arbelo as the *Dauntless*’ XO took another drink from his glass before continuing. “I can sympathize because twice in my life I found myself out of touch with the universe around me and had to play catch-up. I was fortunate the first time that I wasn’t alone, I had an entire starship full of shipmates that were experiencing the same thing right along with me and we were able to depend on and support each other to make it through the difficulty before we each started moving on in our own direction. Then, a decade and a half later, I found myself in another similar situation. I was able to make it through a second time because some of those same shipmates were there to support me again along with new shipmates that were willing to overlook any shortcomings I exhibited due to my time in captivity. Now Tom – he reported aboard the *Gandhi* with the expectations of being able to continue his life from the point where he had essentially left off eight years earlier. But those around him expected ‘Commander Riker!’ Not ‘Lieutenant Riker.’ He found himself having to live up to a reputation that wasn’t his and all the pressure that came with it. His new crew – all strangers to him – apparently weren’t willing to overlook any shortcomings they perceived, and in fact expected more of him than they did of others simply because of his name. That pressure drove him out of Starfleet and into the Maquis, where he felt he could make some sort of a difference without having to prove to anyone he wasn’t Will Riker.”

“How do you know all this?” Riker asked, his pale blue eyes staring intently at Arbelo.

“Tom and I spent a great deal of time in close proximity during our captivity on Almatha. We talked a lot. There was little else to do. He told me all about what it was like serving aboard the *Gandhi* and the expectations its captain and crew had of him before he even arrived. It’s always been my opinion that he would have been better off changing his last name instead of his first. He might have had a better chance of success if he hadn’t been a Riker. Instead he was set up for failure. That is, until he reached the *Dauntless*. Captain Koester and the rest of our crew

were willing to look at him as Tom Riker, not ‘Will Riker’s Copy.’ It took a little while, there were some bumps, but he finally settled in among the crew and has been excelling ever since.”

Riker sipped his ale again, thinking about what Arbelo had just said.

“Perhaps you’re right, Commander. Perhaps I pre-judged him too harshly myself. I never considered what he must have had to go through coming back to Starfleet after his rescue from Nervalva IV. And then after hearing what he had done – joining the Maquis and stealing a starship from *DS9* – I guess I jumped to conclusions when I first saw him here aboard the station.” Riker looked at Arbelo intensely. “Is it possible that – instead of being mad at him – I actually owe Tom an apology?”

“If he’s still anything like you, and I see a lot of similarities, he probably doesn’t require an apology,” Arbelo remarked. “But it wouldn’t hurt matters any if you offered one.”

Before Riker could say anything more, his combadge activated. “*Titan* to Captain Riker.”

“Go ahead,” Riker replied.

“Captain, all senior staff are being recalled to the ship,” reported *Titan*’s first officer, Commander Christine Vale. “The starbase is experiencing some kind of emergency. Admiral Raijah wants to brief the command crews as soon as possible.”

“Very well, Christine. I’ll be back aboard as soon as I can,” Riker said. “Do you know if Counselor Troi is aboard the ship or if she’s still on the base?”

“Computer interface indicates the Counselor is located in the base recreation area. Not far from you actually, Captain,” Vale reported after a moment’s hesitation. “Base directory lists it as a Romulan-operated bakery and coffee shoppe.”

“I know where she is. I’ll inform her about the staff recall. Riker, out.” Riker then tapped his combadge to deactivate it before saying to Arbelo, “If you’ll excuse me, Commander?”

“Of course, Captain,” Arbelo replied just as his own combadge chirped.

“Koester to Arbelo.”

“Go ahead, Skipper,” Arbelo replied.

“Monster, report to the Base Infirmary immediately,” Koester’s voice said with concern. “Your daughter is ill and has been admitted to Infirmary 1.”

The smile that had been on Arbelo’s lips as he watched Riker walk away quickly faded. He pushed his drink glass away as he replied, “I’m on my way, Captain.” Seconds later he was en route to the nearest turbolift, heading toward the infirmary.

In the corridor outside the Lodge, Riker made his way toward the nearby Romulan bakery. He slowed in front of the window, seeing Troi sitting at one of the tables inside, a mug of liquid and a small bowl of chocolate ice cream in front of her. She was laughing at the moment, her companion having apparently said something humorous. It was then that Riker noticed who Troi’s companion was, and all feelings of good will for his ‘brother’ quickly evaporated. Barging into the shop, Riker quickly strode over to the table Tom Riker and Deanna Troi were sharing.

“Oh, Will! Tom was just telling me...,” Troi started to say when she was cut off by Riker. The captain of the *Titan* glared angrily at his ‘brother.’

“I’m telling you now, in no uncertain terms,” he said. “Stay away from my wife!”

* * * *

Commander Arbelo rushed into the infirmary and was immediately directed back toward the medical lab. There, near the large round hatch of the medical decompression chamber, he found Fleet Captain Koester talking with Dr. Jill Xaran, one of the station’s civilian medical staff and the Chief Medical Officer’s sister.

“What is it? What’s happened to Annika?” Arbelo wanted to know as he moved close to the door, peering in through the small round transparasteel window at his daughter and Cassie Koester lying on cots inside the chamber.

“Your daughter has contracted a disease that has apparently been spreading around the station,” the female Dr. Xaran explained. “They were both showing very early signs of the illness when they were brought in, so we

were able to place them in the compression chamber and stabilize them both for the time being. But we still don't know where the disease came from or how it is being spread. Do you know where she has been or what she was doing when she became infected?"

"Annika went with Cassie... Ensign Koester... a few hours ago. They said they were going to go surfing in one of the holosuites in the station rec area, but I don't know if they actually got there," Arbelo explained. He then looked back in through the thick window as he asked, "Are they going to be alright?"

"As I said, we have them stabilized for the moment. The pressure in the chamber has caused the nitrogen in their bloodstreams to be absorbed, but if we take them out of that pressurized environment now the disease will kill them through nitrogen narcosis," explained Xaran. "Without knowing where this disease originated, we can't isolate the cause or determine how it is being spread. We have new cases being reported all over the station, and this is the only compression chamber aboard the station that we can use to treat the symptoms. Once a patient is placed inside, we can't constantly raise and lower the pressure as more people become infected – that would kill anyone in there as surely as the disease will – and we can't simply beam people into the pressurized chamber. The sudden change in pressure would likely kill anyone beamed inside in a horrible and painful manner."

"I'll make arrangements with Doctor Kelley to have Annika and Cassie beamed into the decompression chamber in the medical lab aboard the *Dauntless* as soon as possible," Koester said. "That will at least free up your chamber for any new cases. Have you or your brother contacted the CMO of the *Titan* about using their chamber as well?"

"We have, which raised a curious fact," Xaran replied. "While the disease is spreading aboard the station and now several members of the *Dauntless* crew are showing symptoms, none of the *Titan* crew appears to be infected with this disease."

"Perhaps they've been lucky and their crew has been in the right places at the right times not to get infected?" Koester suggested.

"Perhaps," Xaran agreed. "But it seems odd with how this disease is spreading."

"It does seem odd," Koester agreed before looking at his first officer, who was still looking through the small chamber door window. "Monster, I need to head back aboard the ship for Admiral Raijajh's brief. Stay here as long as you need to. I'll contact you when Doc Kelley is ready to beam them over to the ship."

"Thanks, Skipper," Arbelo replied with a grateful look toward his CO before resuming his vigil at the window.

* * * *

Station log, Chief Medical Officer, stardate 66521.3:

It has been three days since the base was placed under quarantine, and all we have been able to determine with certainty is that the disease we are confronting is viral in nature. We are still uncertain how the virus is being passed from victim to victim, whether by contact or – Deities forbid – air-borne, but to date nearly three hundred members of the starbase crew have become infected along with ninety members of the Dauntless crew, with close to one hundred fifty total deaths so far – mainly among the earliest reported cases of the disease. However, the most curious part of this entire epidemic thus far is the fact that still none of the Triton crew has exhibited any symptoms of the disease, and we have no better explanation for that than we have for how this disease is spreading.

Xaran, Sylvan, Chief Medical Officer, Starbase 719

Aboard the *Dauntless*, Fleet Captain Koester was sitting behind his desk in his ready room, his first officer Commander Arbelo and his chief science officer Commander Alasdair Myrddin Wallace sitting opposite him. The three senior officers were discussing the current situation and the quarantine that threatened them from ever returning to space when the door chime sounded.

“Come,” Koester said, looking up as the door swished open to admit Lieutenant Thomas Riker. “What can I do for you, Lieutenant?”

“I was actually looking for Commander Arbelo, sir,” Riker replied. “I just came up from sickbay, where I was visiting Ensign Koester and talking with Doctor Kelley about this disease she’s contracted, and something the doctor said about the symptoms sounded familiar to me.” Riker looked at Arbelo as he continued. “I remember Doctor Moset conducting a series of experiments on some of the prisoners on Almatha whose symptoms sound a whole lot like what is spreading around the station – extreme joint pain, bleeding from the eyes, ears, and finger and toe nails – and it made me wonder; are we under some kind of covert attack by the Cardassians?”

“I dinna see how, Leftenant,” Wallace replied. “The Cardassian provisional government is barely able t’ take care o’ their own population’s needs right now. I dinna think they would be attacking any Federation facilities in this manner, an’ even if they did, why would it be a space station halfway across th’ quadrant?”

“I remember the experiments you’re referring to, Tom,” Arbelo said. “Moset was experimenting with a disease very similar if not the same as the one we’re seeing here, infecting prisoners of various Federation species to see how their immune systems reacted to it. The Dominion was hoping they might be able to develop it into a biological weapon for use during the war.”

“What happened to it?” Koester asked. “I don’t recall hearing about any outbreaks of nitrogen narcosis on any planets the Dominion invaded during the war.”

“It turns out the disease was even more lethal to the Vorta and Jem’Hadar than it was to Humans, Klingons, Romulans or Vulcans, so the Dominion abandoned the research,” Arbelo explained. “All I know is the disease did not originate with the Cardassians and Moset developed a cure for it.”

“How d’ you know all this, Exec?” Wallace asked.

“Because I was one of the prisoners Moset infected in order to test his cure while I was a prisoner on Almatha,” Arbelo confirmed. “He wanted to see how the vaccine would work on a being as... unique as myself.”

“You said the disease didn’t originate with the Cardassians,” Koester said to his first officer. “If it was as deadly to the Dominion species as you describe, it probably didn’t come from the Gamma Quadrant either. Where did Doctor Moset get his hands on it?”

“I don’t know all the details, but Moset liked to brag a little as he worked,” Arbelo explained. “Apparently the Cardassians discovered it aboard an alien ship they found adrift in their space just prior to the outbreak of the war. Samples were sent to Moset once he had established his laboratory on Almatha. I don’t have any knowledge on where that ship came from or what the Cardassians did with it after Moset received his samples.”

“Bu’ they developed a cure!” Wallace remarked, excited. “Perhaps there’s some way o’ getting those records?”

“Unlikely,” Koester said. “All the records on Almatha were trashed before we got there. And no one knows where Doctor Moset is, or if he’s even still alive.”

“This is probably still something we should mention to Doctor Xaran and his staff though. Maybe they can learn something through diplomatic channels that might help?” Arbelo suggested.

“It wouldn’t hurt,” Koester agreed before looking at Riker. “Lieutenant, would you...?” Koester paused as he noticed his operations officer massaging one elbow with his other hand. “Are you alright, Lieutenant?”

“I’m fine,” Riker assured. “Just a little stiff around the joints after the events of the last several days.”

“Perhaps you should have Doctor Kelley check you out, just in case? In the meantime, compile a report about what you know about what occurred on Almatha and see to it that it is delivered to Doctor Xaran aboard the station.”

“Aye, sir,” Riker replied before heading back out onto the bridge.

* * * *

Tom Riker walked into the infirmary on the starbase, a padd in his right hand, his left again massaging the elbow on the opposite arm. As he walked in he noticed Deanna Troi talking with Jill Xaran halfway across the ward. She looked up at him just as the doors swished shut behind him, preventing him from simply turning around and leaving. Ignoring her instead, Riker walked toward the chief medical officer's private office and knocked on the doorframe before entering.

"What can I do for you, Lieutenant," Dr. Xaran asked. He looked to Riker like he had not had a full night's sleep since the outbreak of the epidemic first came to light. Riker presented the padd he was holding as he stepped toward the doctor's desk.

"This is a compilation of information Commander Arbelo and I put together, Doctor. We were both party to experiments by the Cardassian Doctor Crell Moset on Almatha. One of those experiments was in regard to a disease very similar to what is spreading aboard the station right now."

Xaran accepted the padd and thanked Riker before activating it. As Riker waited to either return a message to the *Dauntless* or be dismissed, a voice behind him startled him.

"Hello, Tom. I haven't seen you around the station in the last couple of days," said Troi from the doorway.

"Your... husband... made it quite clear that I was to avoid any interaction with you at all costs, Counselor," Riker replied in a very formal manner. "I've been spending what little free time I have aboard the *Dauntless* as a result."

"Will just has a little bit of a jealous streak, as I'm sure you're aware," Troi replied. There was something in her eyes Riker noticed. A look of sadness, not the usual cheerfulness he normally associated with the counselor. "And besides, you're the least of his worries at the moment. Natasha has come down with this disease, and Will has started showing early symptoms as well. That's why I'm here, to see if there's any progress on a possible cure."

"Your daughter has been infected?" Riker asked with disbelief. "Oh no. I thought... Well, everyone assumed the *Titan* crew was immune from this epidemic for some reason."

"We were starting to believe that fairy tale as well, since both the station and the *Dauntless* were hit so badly and no one aboard the *Titan* seemed to be getting sick. But that's changed now. Natasha was the first."

"I'm sorry, Deanna. I feel like I'm responsible," Riker started to say.

"How could you possibly be responsible for Will and Natasha getting sick?" Troi asked.

"After my last confrontation with Will, I had thoughts of him contracting this disease. Now that it appears he has..."

"It's not your fault, Tom. You didn't do this to him. Somehow he must have come in contact with..."

"That's it!" Dr. Xaran suddenly shouted, startling both Riker and Troi and several of the medical staff just outside the office. "This could be our answer!"

"What is it, Sylvan?" Troi asked, completely forgetting about Tom Riker for the moment and coming around Xaran's desk to see what he was reading.

"According to this, Setton Arbelo was exposed to a disease with the exact same symptoms while he was in Cardassian captivity," Xaran explained, pointing at the padd. "The Cardassian doctor at the prison camp developed a vaccine for the disease and tested it on Arbelo!" Xaran then looked up at Troi, his eyes gleaming for the first time in days. "If this is true, if the disease they experimented with on Almatha and the one here are even just similar, then Arbelo is carrying around the antibodies of that vaccine in his blood, and we can develop our own vaccine based on a blood sample from him."

Riker smiled as he listened to the Betazoid doctor. Then suddenly a thought occurred to him and his smile faded.

"Doctor Xaran, is it possible...? I mean, could it be...? If both Commander Arbelo and I were exposed to this disease on Almatha, could we be the source of the epidemic here on the station?"

"Well, I don't see how?" Xaran replied. "Even if either of you were the source, I don't see how it could have remained dormant for five years before the people around you started catching it, and even then I would have expected to see the *Dauntless* as the starting point, not here aboard the starbase. No, I can't see either you or Commander Arbelo being the source of our epidemic. But he may be the cure! Please request Commander Arbelo report to the Infirmary 1 aboard the station immediately."

“Aye, Doctor.”

As Riker turned to get Arbelo, he noticed the look of hope on Troi’s face and for the first time in days, he smiled.

* * * *

A short time later, Commander Arbelo was back in the station infirmary with Lt Riker. As Riker and Troi watched from the side, Dr. Xaran approached Arbelo, seated on one of the exam tables, with a hypo to extract a sample of blood.

“Hey, Doc, did I happen to mention I’m afraid of needles?” Arbelo remarked as he looked nervously at the device in Xaran’s hand.

“Don’t worry, Commander. This’ll hurt you more than it will hurt me,” Xaran joked as he placed the hypo against Arbelo’s neck. A brief hissing sound was followed by the sample tube attached to the device filling with a tan – slightly greenish – colored liquid. Xaran removed the sample tube and studied it in the light for a moment.

“Deanna,” Xaran said, passing the hypo over to the *Titan*’s counselor. “Would you please take a sample of Lieutenant Riker’s blood as well, just in case he was exposed to the disease on Almatha too?”

Troi nodded and, as she connected another sample tube to the hypo, noticed Riker massaging his right elbow joint.

“Are you alright, Tom?” she asked. “It almost looks like...”

“I’m fine,” Riker replied snappishly. “Let’s just get this over with.”

Troi nodded again before placing the hypo against the operations officer’s neck and activating the sampling trigger. Again, the hypo hissed and the sample tube filled, this time with a dark red liquid. Troi contemplated the sample for a moment before handing the tube to a waiting lab tech. She then returned her attention to Tom Riker, who was now massaging his left knee.

* * * *

A couple of hours later, Dr. Xaran and the two laboratory technicians emerged from the medical lab. Xaran was carrying a hypo with a pale yellow liquid in the tube as he walked over to Troi, Arbelo, and Tom Riker.

“Is that it?” Troi asked hopefully. “Is that the cure?”

“I have good news and bad news for you,” Xaran remarked, throwing off the mood slightly.

“Good news first,” Arbelo said.

With a nod, Xaran explained, “The good news is, by cross-referencing Commander Arbelo’s sample with those of known infected and non-infected personnel, we were able to confirm the disease is the same as the strain Crell Moset experimented with on Almatha and we isolated what we believe is the antibody for this disease from Commander Arbelo’s blood.”

“That’s wonderful,” Troi remarked, clasping her hands together in joy. “But what’s the bad news?”

“We cannot be certain that what we have synthesized is a workable vaccine,” Xaran replied. “Commander Arbelo’s unique genetic heritage makes it difficult to determine if the vaccine Moset developed actually cured him, or if his combination of human, Vulcan and Efrosian bloodlines simply made him immune to the disease in the first place.” Xaran then looked at Riker as he added, “In addition, our tests determined Lieutenant Riker is now infected and has likely been suffering from early stage symptoms for the last 24 to 36 hours. The disease is progressing.”

Shocked, Troi looked over at Riker and was shocked again to see a trickle of blood appear like a tear in the corner of the operations officer’s eye before it started to slide down alongside his nose. Riker tried to wipe at the drop nonchalantly, hoping no one had noticed, when he realized Troi was looking at him.

“What happens if the vaccine you developed doesn’t work, Doctor?” Arbelo asked, pointing at the hypo in Xaran’s hand.

Xaran held the hypo up, looking at the tube attached to the bottom as he said, "If this isn't the cure we hope it is, then it's a deadly poison with the potential to cause an extremely painful, near instantaneous death. I'm reluctant to test it on any live subjects until we can refine it better and run some simulated tests."

"How long will that take?" Riker asked.

"If we do it by the book, up to a week and a half. Even cutting some corners it will be no less than 5 to 7 days," Xaran replied.

Troi looked on the verge of tears.

"Doctor Ree said Natasha has no more than four more days, and unless a cure is found before then...!"

"I know, Deanna," Xaran said as he placed the hypo on the nearby table and moved to comfort the *Titan*'s counselor. "We'll do everything we can to confirm we have a viable vaccine as soon as possible. Would you rather I was wrong and what I have developed kills your daughter instead of curing her?"

"No, of course not," Troi assured, regaining her composure.

"Lieutenant, no!" Arbelo suddenly shouted. Xaran and Troi quickly turned to see the hypo now in Riker's hand. The lieutenant had a determined look on his face.

"Mister Riker, what do you think you're doing?!" Xaran demanded, holding out his hand to take the hypo from the *Dauntless*' operations officer.

"What needs to be done," Riker replied. "People are dying, and even more will die if we don't confirm this is the right vaccine."

"Riker, you have no idea what that could do to you!" Xaran implored. "It could kill you..."

"I'm going to die anyway if this doesn't work. We need to know the answer as soon as possible!" And with that said, he placed the hypo against his neck and pressed the trigger. A small dose of the liquid inside was pumped into Riker's carotid artery, quickly spreading through his entire circulatory system.

"How do you feel, Tom?" Troi asked with concern as she moved closer to him.

"I'm feeling... a little... light... headed..." Riker replied as he moved toward the exam table, missing it entirely as he fell to the deck.

"Tom!" Troi yelled.

As Xaran, Troi, Arbelo, and the two lab techs watched, Riker began convulsing on the deck.

"He's having a seizure!" Xaran proclaimed. "Someone, help me get him up on the table!"

The doctor, Arbelo, and the two techs lifted the convulsing Riker as gently as they could onto the exam table. Immediately the indicator panel lit up, readings on Riker's bodily functions displaying erratic lines and out of synch beats.

"He's going into cardiac arrest!" Xaran exclaimed. "Get me the cardio-stimulator, stat!"

Arbelo and one of the lab techs continued to try and hold Riker onto the exam table as the other tech rushed to get the stimulator. Suddenly Riker's back arched up off the table and a loud moan emanated from his lips for several seconds until he flopped back down, as still and silent as death. Blood trickled from the corners of his eyes and out of his ear canals.

On the indicator panel, one by one, the bodily functions flat-lined; respiration, brain function, heartbeat. Xaran paused for a moment, shocked by Riker's reaction to the experimental vaccine before regaining his wits and grabbing the cardio-stimulator from the returning tech and attaching it to the exam table, trying to shock Riker's heart back into beating several times with no success.

Arbelo and Troi gathered closer to the table as Xaran said, "Computer, mark time of death; 1443 hours, stardate 66522.1." Troi started crying, Arbelo placing his arm around the half-Betazoid woman's shoulders to offer comfort as she reached out to take hold of Riker's hand.

"Why?" she asked as tears streamed down her face.

"I realize it's of little comfort," Arbelo remarked softly, "but he did it in order to give your daughter and husband a better fighting chance. Now Doctor Xaran can go back and..."

The indicator panel above the exam table beeped. Xaran, who had turned away for a moment to hide his own reaction to Riker's death quickly turned back to look at the panel.

“What is it, Doctor?” Arbelo asked. He too stared at the indicator, which remained unchanged with the exception of a small red circle flashing on and off steadily near the lower right corner.

“I’m not sure,” Xaran admitted. “That’s an alarm indicator. It usually activates when something potentially dangerous to the medical staff occurs, like if a body that has been poisoned by cyanide gives off potentially lethal fumes after death. But if that were the case, there would be an audible alarm as well.”

Curious, Xaran pulled a medical tricorder out of a nearby storage drawer and activated it.

“I’m detecting a higher than normal nitrogen percentage in the atmosphere in this room, but nothing that could be considered dangerous to us.”

“What’s causing it?” Troi asked.

Xaran continued to scan for a few more seconds before finally aiming the sensor grid directly at Riker’s still body.

“It’s coming from Mister Riker,” Xaran confirmed. “His body is... for lack of a better description... out-gassing. All the nitrogen that had built up in his bloodstream is diffusing out of his body.”

Troi, who had continued to hold Riker’s hand the entire time, squeezed the hand affectionately before moving to place his arms across his chest when suddenly the indicator panel above the exam table started displaying a cardiac beat twice the normal speed of a human body at rest. Everyone looked at the panel in confusion until Riker suddenly opened his eyes and mouth wide and took a deep breath, startling all around him. The respiration and brain wave activity indicators likewise started moving on the monitor. Riker’s breathing sounded labored, like an asthmatic suffering an attack, unable to get enough air into his lungs.

“Quick! Tri-ox compound! 10cc’s!” Xaran demanded, and Troi quickly reacted, grabbing a new hypo from a nearby cart and loading the correct tube into it. She passed it over to Xaran and the doctor pressed the device to Riker’s neck and activated it. Almost immediately Riker’s breathing normalized.

“Tom! Tom, are you okay?” Arbelo started to ask.

“Commander, I need to see to my patient,” Xaran said. “You’re only going to get in the way. With all due respect, can you wait outside?”

“May I offer my assistance, Doctor?” Troi asked.

“Yes, Counselor. But I need room in here. Everyone not actively working on this patient please leave!”

Arbelo offered no resistance as he and the two lab technicians quickly moved back out into the main ward of the infirmary. Once outside, the first thing Arbelo did was activate his communicator.

“Arbelo to *Dauntless*.”

“*Dauntless*. Lieutenant Commander Windsor, Command Duty Officer.”

“Amanda, I need to speak with Doctor Kelley. It’s urgent,” he said.

* * * *

Tom Riker slowly opened his eyes. He realized he was in a medical facility, and it did not look like sickbay aboard the *Dauntless*, so he assumed he was still aboard the starbase. He started looking around the small room he was in, seeing a man reading from a padd in one of the visitor chairs near the foot of his bed.

In other circumstances Riker might have thought something was odd, as the man sitting in the chair looked exactly like him, but given where he was and the knowledge of which starships were in port there, he knew the man was his ‘brother,’ William T. Riker.

“I swear, I didn’t start the conversation with Deanna,” Tom said, his voice little more than a whisper. “In fact, were it not for the severity of the circumstances, I would have just ignored her presence.”

Will Riker, who was initially surprised by the voice coming from the bed, stood up and walked over.

“I’m not here to argue with you. I’m here to thank you.”

“Thank me?” Tom asked defensively. “Thank me for what?”

“For being brave enough... and foolish enough... to test Doctor Xaran’s vaccine on yourself,” Will replied. “Because of you, the medical staff here was able to run additional tests on your body’s response and refine the

vaccine enough so that no one had to undergo the physical reaction you did. They replicated the vaccine, just in time to save Natasha, and everyone aboard the base, the *Dauntless* and the *Titan* have now been immunized.”

“Already?” Tom asked, confused.

“What do you mean, ‘Already’? It’s been days since you injected the vaccine into yourself?”

“Days? How many days?”

“Six,” Will replied. “But I’m sure Doctor Xaran will bring you up to speed on everything you missed.”

As if on cue, the room door opened and Doctors Sylvan Xaran, Jill Xaran, and Leonard Kelley all walked in. Sylvan Xaran appeared surprised to find Tom Riker awake and talking.

“How do you feel, Mister Riker?”

“Like I’ve had an old used sweat sock shoved in my mouth for a week.” Tom then stretched his arms above his head momentarily before adding, “But better than I did before I contracted that virus.” With Xaran’s help, Tom rose to a sitting position on the bed, his legs hanging over the side, his feet only centimeters above the floor. “I don’t think I’ll be running any marathons today, but I think I could walk around if I needed to.”

“Excellent progress, Mister Riker,” Dr. Kelley remarked. “For a dead man.”

“Dead!?” Tom exclaimed. “What do you mean, dead?!”

“According to computer records, you were clinically dead for over a minute as the vaccine took effect,” Kelley explained.

“There were no readings whatsoever coming from you,” Xaran clarified. “Not even minimal brain activity. Usually no one comes back from that. What do you remember after injecting yourself with the trial vaccine?”

Tom Riker thought silently for a moment, concentrating deeply, before finally answering, “I remember a lot of pain. Thinking that perhaps I had made another wrong choice and this time I was going to pay for it with my life. And colors. Lots and lots of colors. Then a voice... a woman’s voice...” Tom looked over at his ‘brother’ before concluding, “That’s all I can remember until I woke up here just a few moments ago, in some strange alternate reality where Will Riker was thanking me.”

“It’s the same reality you left behind,” Will assured. “The only change is that I realize you and I are quite different people now and that people have the capacity to change for the better.” The *Titan*’s captain then held out his hand toward Tom. “I can’t help but wonder what I would have done had it been me that faced the hardships you faced, first on Nerval IV, later on your first return to Starfleet. Would I have wound up making the same choices you did? Would I have been capable of making any other choices?” Tom looked at the other Riker’s hand for a second before looking up at Will’s face and smiling, that same familiar smile Will himself had, and accepted the gesture.

* * * *

Captain’s log, stardate 66540.5:

The source of the mysterious virus has finally been tracked to the artifacts the USS Titan recovered from the planet the crew named Vishnu. The artifacts have been carefully decontaminated, as has the starbase and both starships. Commander Arbelo, Doctor Kelley and I will soon be on our way to a science/medical briefing aboard the base that we hope will finally explain how this epidemic, whose final casualty list totals one hundred thirty seven dead aboard Starbase 719, fifty three dead aboard the Dauntless, and two dead aboard USS Titan, was spread and why it seemed the crew of Titan was immune to its effects for so long.

Koester, commanding Dauntless, out.

With the epidemic now under control and the entire starbase and both visiting starships sterilized to kill off any last remaining vestiges of the alien virus, several of the senior commanders, science, and medical officers gathered in one of the conference lounges aboard the starbase. Less a formal briefing than a meeting to tie up loose ends, a small table with pastries and coffee was set up on one side of the room, while several rows of chairs faced the raised dais near the windows overlooking spacedock. Besides Koester and Arbelo, among those gathered were Will Riker, Christine Vale, Deanna Troi, and another female officer with blonde hair wearing a blue uniform with some form of articulation frame over it from the *Titan*, Cathryn Pearson, Makia Kyman, and Val'ri Raijeh representing the starbase, and Tom Riker – who wanted to know more about why he had died in order to save everyone else's life. On the dais at the front of the room sat Doctors Sylvan and Jill Xaran, Leonard M. Kelley of the *USS Dauntless*, and the raptor-like medical officer Shenti Yisec Eres Ree of the *USS Titan* as well as the *Titan*'s cryptolinguist, Lieutenant (JG) Loolooa Tereshini.

“First, on behalf of Captain Riker and the crew of the *Titan*, I would like to apologize for bringing this disease epidemic aboard the starbase,” Lt Tereshini explained. “We should have been more cautious in the storage of alien artifacts and samples.”

“What was this disease, and how did it get aboard the station and our starships?” Fleet Captain Peter J. Koester asked.

Doctor Sylvan Xaran stood up to answer the question posed. He nodded toward Tereshini as he said, “Once we were confident we had discovered the right vaccine, I had my staff conduct a more thorough search for the source of the virus. We tracked it down to three primary locations; Cargo Bay 9 and the Archeology Lab here aboard the base and Cargo Bay 2 aboard the *Titan*, where the sample cases from the planet designated Vishnu were stored for their journey back to Federation space. Once we knew what we were looking for, it became a simple matter to decontaminate everything the virus had come in touch with.”

“What is the virus?” Captain Cathryn E. Pearson asked. “I heard a rumor it was some kind of biological weapon the Cardassians developed. How did it infect the artifacts the *Titan* collected?”

Xaran looked at Tereshini again. The Antosian woman replied, “During the search to confirm the source of the virus, we discovered among the artifacts we collected a data storage device contained in what looked like a simple decorative plaque. We assume this was done deliberately by the Vishnuians in order for some record to exist regarding what happened to their civilization. It took almost all of *Titan*'s science department working in conjunction with your base's science and engineering staff to finally access the device and translate the data stored on it. Based on what we discovered, this is what we surmise happened;

“Starting almost a thousand of our years ago, the civilization on the planet we now call Vishnu experimented with genetic engineering, working mainly with microbes.” The use of the term ‘genetic engineering’ caused a stir in those gathered in the lounge. “We believe they were trying to create a microbe that could be released into nature and make their entire world's population immune to any known sickness or disease. Unfortunately, they didn't anticipate their techniques would cause what had been an innocuous disease – akin to the common cold virus on Earth – to become a deadly killer.”

“The disease infects the bloodstream of its victim,” explained Dr. Ree, the reptilian Pakhwa-thanh chief medical officer of the *Titan*. “There, it converts the oxygen carried in the blood cells into energy the virus uses to replicate itself, excreting nitrogen in the process. Nitrogen can usually be built up in the blood under pressure, where it remains saturated throughout the bloodstream and eliminated through gradually decreasing the pressure over a long period of time. However, when that pressure is reduced too quickly or eliminated entirely, as in our normal atmospheric pressure of roughly 21torr, the nitrogen forms bubbles in the blood – a condition known as nitrogen narcosis, which can affect the brain, vital organs, and of course the joints, leading to painful death. We believe this conversion of oxygen to nitrogen by the virus explains why the atmosphere of Vishnu had a much higher percentage of nitrogen – almost 95% – than the 68 to 73% normally associated with Class-M worlds, and also explains the mass extinction of animal life on the planet, including the intelligent humanoid civilization.”

“That still doesn't explain how the Cardassians got their hands on the virus and infected their war prisoners with it,” Admiral Raijeh pointed out. “Am I correct in my assumption that Vishnu is not even located in this region of the Milky Way galaxy?”

“You are correct, Admiral,” Captain Riker answered from a seat several rows behind the Vulcan-Deltan woman. “Vishnu was one of the last planets the *Titan* visited in the Gum Nebula before we returned to Federation space. Our most direct course home brought us into the Typhon Sector, which is what brought us here to your starbase first. In retrospect, it’s probably a good thing we made a stop in an enclosed environment like this starbase instead of returning directly to Earth or some other Federation member world. Can you imagine the devastation this virus could have enacted in such a case?!”

“We don’t need to imagine it, Captain,” Commander Vale reminded. “We’ve seen the results on Vishnu itself!”

“According to the records we discovered,” added Lt Tereshini, “the progression of the virus across their planet prompted research into faster-than-light propulsion technology. It is unclear if the Vishnuians intended to evacuate their planet using their new warp drive or only intended to look for help while the majority of the planet’s population remained behind. Either way, the records make reference to the launch of a single warp-capable ship.”

The blonde woman Koester had noticed earlier upon entering the lounge stood up with some degree of difficulty and addressed the gathering. “We surmise the Vishnuian warp ship encountered some kind of phenomenon; a wormhole or other similar occurrence, that transported the ship from the Gum Nebula to somewhere near or in Cardassian space in our galaxy,” explained Lt Commander Melora Pazlar, *Titan*’s chief science officer. “Without more detailed information from the Cardassians themselves, we can only guess at what was aboard that ship, but the one thing we are certain of is it contained the virus, either in some form of sample container or loose aboard the ship much like occurred here. Either way, the Cardassians discovered the virus and what it could do and decided to try and develop it as a biological weapon against the Federation alliance during the Dominion War.”

Now it was Arbelo’s turn to stand up. “I happen to know, first hand, that the experiment was a failure. The virus infected Dominion species faster and in much more horrific ways than it did the species of the Alpha Quadrant. Crell Moset developed a cure for it – I assume in case the virus ever got loose aboard a Dominion or Cardassian ship or planet – and then quietly abandoned the entire program, but not before a couple dozen prisoners were killed by the virus.”

“That still doesn’t explain why so few of the *Titan* crew got sick,” Pearson remarked. “They were the ones who brought it here, but for a while it almost looked like their crew was immune to the virus.”

“You’re not too far off in your remark, Captain,” Dr. Ree replied. “Our search and subsequent decontamination of the ship revealed that the sample case one of the Vishnuian artifacts – a statue – was stored in never sealed properly as expected when it was closed and placed in the cargo bay. We traveled for months with a small amount of the virus escaping the sample case, becoming active in the oxygen-rich atmosphere of our starship. This prolonged exposure of very minute amounts of the virus caused most of the crew to build up immunity to the disease. Everyone aboard the *Titan* was exposed to some degree or another. Those few aboard our ship who did contract the disease once the epidemic started aboard the starbase were those least likely to have had a regular presence in Cargo Bay 2 or exposure to those who did, like the Captain and his young daughter. Science and engineering personnel were the ones who received the largest doses without even knowing it.”

“Whereas those of us that had no previous contact with the virus were particularly susceptible, once it started spreading in the oxygen-rich atmosphere of the base and starships,” Dr. Kelley added. “If we had not discovered a cure, eventually Commander Arbelo would have been the sole survivor of this epidemic, trapped forever aboard a quarantined starbase.”

“Not the most pleasant of thoughts,” Arbelo remarked to his commanding officer. “I would have felt like Burgess Meredith in that ancient Twilight Zone episode.”

“At least you’d have time enough at last for all those holodeck programs you keep saying you want to try,” Koester remarked back with a smirk.

As the briefing wrapped up with the promise that further research would be conducted on samples of the virus by the medical staff of the starbase and assurances would be taken to make sure there would be no chance of the virus ever spreading beyond the station, Captain Pearson stood up and tapped her combadge.

“Ops, this is Captain Pearson.”

“Go ahead, Captain,” replied the voice of operations chief B’Elanna Torres.

“B’Elanna, effective immediately, the quarantine on *Starbase 719* is lifted. All scheduled arrivals and departures from the base are approved pending normal procedure.”

“That’s good news, Captain. There are several vessels out there that have been waiting patiently for days. I’ll pass the word.”

As Pearson deactivated her combadge, Tom Riker rose from his seat and started heading toward the door of the lounge. He was both relieved and abhorred that he had nearly died because of a simple accident.

“Tom, a moment please,” a voice called out. Riker turned to see both his ‘brother’ and Deanna Troi walking toward him.

“I really need to get back to the *Dauntless*,” Tom stated, hoping to head off any further confrontations before they even started.

“I understand that,” Will said. “I just wanted to say thanks again. What you did saved not only my life, by our daughter’s life as well, and for that we’ll always be grateful.”

“We can never begin to express our gratitude,” Troi said as she moved forward and embraced Tom Riker. She then whispered into his ear, “Thank you, especially from me.”

As the pair’s embrace ended, Will Riker said, “Ever since the *Enterprise* crew rescued you from Nervala IV, I have had trouble thinking of you as anything more than a poor copy of myself. A copy that in turn made some extremely poor choices. But this incident has shown me you aren’t simply a faulty mirror image of me. You are your own man, and I’m proud... proud to have you as my brother.” Will held out his hand once again, which Tom accepted without hesitation. “I hope you have a long and successful career ahead of you in Starfleet. And I look forward to the next family reunion.”

“I’m glad things worked out in the end,” Tom remarked. “I’m especially glad I was able to help save my... my niece. Maybe before either of our ships departs the base I can visit with her and see for myself that she’s recovered?”

“That would be nice,” Troi agreed.

Will Riker nodded his agreement, then remarked, “Now if you’ll excuse us, I have a ship to attend.”

Tom Riker watched as Captain Riker started moving toward the door. He paused when he realized his wife was no longer beside him.

“I’ll catch up in a moment, Will. I just want to say good-bye to Tom.”

Will Riker nodded, then continued on toward the door where his first officer waited. A moment later the two officers disappeared into the corridor beyond.

Once she felt the two were sufficiently alone, Troi turned to Tom Riker, a look that merged amusement and concern on her face.

“What is it, Deanna?” Riker asked.

“Maybe if we get a chance some day, we can discuss some of what you said while you were recovering from your reaction to the vaccine?” Tom’s eyes bolted wide open as Troi turned and headed out the door. “Good-bye, Tom.”

“What did I say?” Riker asked himself, unsure if he really wanted to know the answer, when he felt a hand clasp his shoulder and cringed instinctively.

“I’m surprised to see you here, Mister Riker,” Fleet Captain Koester said. “I would think that after your ordeal you would want to take some time off and recover?”

“I’m feeling much better, thank you, Captain,” Riker replied.

“Good. Because I need you to report to Holodeck 1 aboard the *Dauntless* at 1300 hours today.”

“Report to the holodeck, sir?” Riker asked, unsure if he heard correctly.

“That is correct. Holodeck 1. 1300 hours.”

“Aye, Captain,” Riker replied, still uncertain.

* * * *

At 1258, Lt Riker made his way to Holodeck 1 aboard the *Dauntless*. When he arrived at the doors of the holodeck, he was mildly surprised to find no one at all waiting there for him. Checking the control panel of the holodeck, he confirmed no programs were running either. On a hunch, he opened the door and stepped inside.

“Lieutenant! Good to see you’re well, sir,” Ensign Cassie Koester said as she approached him. The Ensign was wearing a strange and elaborate uniform of a design Riker had not previously seen, consisting of tight white pantaloons, a white shirt covered by a white waistcoat, and a blue uniform overcoat with insignia on the sleeve cuffs.

“I’m glad to see you’ve recovered too, Ensign,” Riker replied with a friendly smile. “What the **heck** are you wearing??”

“It’s all part of the program,” Ensign Koester replied as she looked around, seeming to realize no program was running. “Computer, run program Koester Nine-Alpha.” She then looked at Riker as she added, “We need to hurry and get you dressed properly,” as scenery faded into existence around them both. She opened a wooden door that appeared right in front of the pair and pushed Riker inside. “There should be a uniform that will fit you in there. Get changed quickly. The Captain will be here any moment.”

Without further protest, Riker started removing his Starfleet uniform jacket and looked at the archaic uniform that was hanging on a peg inside the small room, where several wooden bunks built into the outer bulkhead were located.

“You say I’m supposed to fit in these pants, Ensign?” Riker asked with amusement through the closed door.

“They’re supposed to be a little tight, sir. It’s the style of the time,” Ensign Koester replied.

“And what time is this?”

“Early-18th century Earth, sir. Or so I’m told.”

After a few minutes and some grunts from inside the bunkroom as Riker put on the unfamiliar clothing, made all the more difficult by the occasional rocking of the deck, the Lieutenant stepped out wearing a near identical uniform to what Ensign Koester wore minus the blue overcoat.

“Looking good, Leftenant,” Koester remarked with a wink as Riker turned in a circle to show off his new uniform.

“What are we doing here, Ensign?”

“I only know what I’m told, sir. And the next thing I was told to do was this...”

Before Riker could react, Ensign Koester closed a pair of chained irons around his wrists, locking them in place. She then grabbed the chain between the cuffs and led Riker to a ladder leading to an upper deck. The hatch above was closed.

“Wait here until you’re told, sir,” she advised.

Riker could hear what sounded like many feet walking or running across the deck above and muffled voices. Then he heard the sound of several drums being beat in a pattern, as if signaling. Soon all sound of feet ended, some stopping almost directly above Riker’s head, and the drums started playing a drum roll. A muffled voice that sounded like Commander Setton To’Lock Arbelo called out, “Bring out the prisoner!” A moment later the hatch at the top of the ladder moved aside and sunlight beamed through, momentarily blinding Riker.

“Climb up,” he heard Ensign Koester’s voice say, and he reached for the rope running up alongside the ladder like a railing to help him climb. A moment later he was on deck, standing near the middle of a large sailing vessel, surrounded by members of the *Dauntless* crew wearing variations of the same officer’s uniform he and Ensign Koester wore – including large almost half-circle shaped tricorne hats – or what Riker assumed were enlisted sailor uniforms of the time. He smiled as he recognized Commander Aladair Wallace, Commander Jeff Bloom – the starship’s chief engineer, Doctor Leonard Kelley, Lt Commander Amada Windsor – Bloom’s assistant chief engineer, Lt Commander John Smith – another member of the engineering staff, and Ensign Annika Arbelo-Eeta, also recovered from her infectious ordeal, lined up on the main deck.

On a higher deck near the aft end of the ship stood Fleet Captain Koester – his uniform displaying enormous gold epaulets on each shoulder – and Commander Arbelo, while behind the two senior officers, manning the ship’s wheel, was Chief Petty Officer Pono R. Kyman. Everyone looked sternly at Riker.

As Riker turned to face Captain Koester, the drums stopped. The only sounds were the wind whipping through the ship's rigging and the occasional creaking of the deck beneath everyone's feet. Riker looked around at the scenery. The ship they were aboard was apparently anchored in a sheltered harbor beneath the cannons of a fortress protecting a town inhabiting a narrow spit of land close to a tropical island, based on the vegetation he could see and the temperature of the air.

"Where are we?" Riker asked no one in particular, still unable to wipe the smile off his bearded face.

"You're aboard *His Majesty's Ship-of-the-Line Dauntless*, anchored in the harbor of Port Royale, prisoner!" Ensign Arbelo-Eeta replied before Commander Windsor elbowed her to remain quiet. "Sorry," she said to Windsor.

On the upper deck, Arbelo partly turned toward Koester, his tight uniform collar making it difficult to turn his head, and asked, "Should we be doing this, Skipper?"

"I love tradition. Don't you, Exec?" Koester replied.

"When I was in the Navy back in the 20th century, this would have been considered hazing, Skipper," Chief Kyman said, leaning forward and speaking just loudly enough for Arbelo and Koester to hear.

"Well now it's tradition, COB," Koester hissed between his teeth before declaring loudly, "Mister Riker, are you prepared to face the charges?"

"Charges?" Riker responded, his voice taking on an edge of panic. "What charges?"

"Number One," Koester said, indicating Arbelo. "Read the charges against the prisoner."

Arbelo sighed slightly as he pulled out a scroll, rolling it open as he began to read from it.

"We, the officers and crew of the *Dauntless*, being of sound mind and judgment..." Arbelo glanced over at his commanding officer, truly wondering about the validity of the sentence he had just read, before continuing. "...Hereby make the following charges against Lieutenant Thomas W. Riker. One: That he did knowingly and willfully put the lives of his shipmates above that of himself. Two: That he has earned the admiration and respect of not only the entire crew of the *Dauntless*, but that of the *USS Titan* and *Starbase 719* as well."

Koester stepped forward one step, placing his hand on the railing before him and addressed Riker directly.

"Mister Riker, I hereby promote you to the rank of Lieutenant Commander, with all the rights and privileges thereto. Congratulations, Mister Riker."

To the applause of the gathered crew, Annika Arbelo-Eeta produced the key to release the irons from Riker's wrists. As Riker rubbed his wrists, Koester and Arbelo both descended the ladder and walked over to personally offer their congratulations. Riker, his infectious smile returned, shook first Arbelo's hand, then Koester's.

"Thank you, Captain. This is most un..."

"Extend the plank!" Arbelo ordered. Koester turned to look at his first officer with an expression of amazement.

"I thought you weren't too comfortable with this ceremony, Exec?" he said. "I was going to forego..."

"I figure if we're going to do it, we might as well go all the way," Arbelo replied before looking at one of the nearby enlisted men manning the rigging near the rail. "Lower the badge of office."

As Riker watched, another elaborate Royal Naval officer's hat was lowered from the rigging just off the side of the ship. The swaying of the ship caused the hat to swing side to side and forward to aft almost directly above the end of the plank that had been rigged to hang over the side.

"You want me to go out there?!?" Riker asked with incredulity.

"All you have to do is grab the hat to claim your new rank," Arbelo explained.

Riker looked up at the hat, which hung at least a meter and a half higher than Riker's extended arm.

"That's impossible!" Riker objected.

"No it's not. It's been done. You need to complete this to claim your new rank."

"It's been done?" Riker asked, sounding skeptical.

"Yes," Koester assured, gently leading Riker up to the start of the extended plank. "It's been done."

As the crew gathered around the plank, yelling their encouragement to Riker, the new Lieutenant Commander took a tentative step out, then looked back at Koester.

“How many times has it been done?” he asked.

“Once,” Koester replied with a grin.

Riker stared at Koester in amazement for several seconds before shrugging his shoulders and turning back out toward sea, carefully inching his way out along the plank. He gauged the height of the officer’s hat hanging above him, the rocking of the ship, and the swinging of the rope. The mental calculations continued for nearly half a minute as Riker swayed with the ship. Finally, when the rock and swing fell into synch, Riker made his attempt.

Jumping with all his strength, he reached up. His fingertips touched the hat, reflexively closing around it. The rope separated from the hat and both hat and Riker started coming straight down...

...Completely missing the plank...

...And landing directly into the surprisingly cold harbor water, to the continued applause of the *Dauntless* crew.

The End