

Breath Control

A Dr. Chapel Adventure

by Lance Schonberg

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1

“Admiral says get on the pad and go, Doctor. We’re receiving a distress call.”

Chapel didn’t pause on her way from the door to the transporter pad. Nurse Tashar and Medtech Hennely followed without missing a step. Two security officers whose names she didn’t know yet already stood on the platform. She turned to face the transporter chief, retrieving his name after only a second or two, glad to pull at least one out of memory. “She’s sure she won’t need me, Mister Knox?”

The chief grinned and shook his head. “Small prospector with engine failure in the outer system. We can handle it. Ten, twelve hours, tops, unless it’s a lot worse than they’re making it out to be. Relax and enjoy your colonial checkups, Doc. Energizing now.”

Relax and enjoy. She managed a response just before the beam took hold. “Thank you, Chief.” The *Yorktown’s* primary transporter room disappeared around her, a buzzing in her ears and golden sparkles in her eyes. What most people claimed was an imperceptible amount of time later, but during which Chapel always swore she could count to three, the scarlet leaves of a subtropical forest on the recently-christened planet Ruby Red, formerly HR 5183-2, faded into view. She had no problem deciding she liked the new name better.

She also liked that this was her first landing party as a doctor aboard her new starship. That

she'd only been aboard for a week before that had happened was a nice bonus.

Free of the transporter beam, Chapel turned to address the rest of the party. "First things first. Thank you everyone for volunteering to assist or safeguard me and I appreciate all of the mistakes you're going to prevent me from making over the next couple of days, but I'm going to apologize to two of you right now because I've only been on board for a week and I haven't got a name to go with every face yet."

Both security officers grinned. It seemed pretty obvious who she was talking about.

"Alberto Martinez."

"Denise Kolchak."

"Thank you." She smiled backed. "That will make things a little easier, and I'm not likely to forget now. Christine Chapel, but it seems like almost everyone is already calling me Doc, so do whatever you think best. Now, who's got the map in their head?"

"That would be me, Doc." Ensign Kolchak pointed through a thick part of the forest. "The edge of the colony proper is about five hundred metres that way, although the farm sites are a little scattered. There are a couple of paths that will take only a little more than that to get there."

Still smiling, Chapel gestured for Kolchak to lead. "I think that means you just volunteered to be our guide, Ensign."

"I suspected that would be the case, ma'am."

2

Five hundred metres didn't sound very far until you had to walk through forest to cover it, and

path had been a generous word for Ensign Kolchak to use. Once they left the little clearing they'd materialized in, game trail might have been more accurate for the first couple of hundred metres. A different beam down point would have been nice. But, true to Kolchak's word, the trail did cross an actual, apparently well-trodden path wide enough for two of them to walk abreast. The path curved a little bit, and Chapel thought she caught a glimpse of a building in the distance, something she suspected was either a barn or a warehouse of some kind, but she forgot all about it when she saw the body lying in the middle of the path.

Trusting her security team to look out for any non-medical dangers, Chapel ran towards the body, tricorder and hand scanner out before she'd covered half the distance. She dropped to one knee and began to wave the scanner across what part of her mind registered as a teenage girl. "Fluid buildup in the lungs. Respiration slow and shallow. Heartbeat barely forty beats per minute. Temperature thirty-nine point nine Celsius. Brain activity... less than half of normal. Blood oxygen level—" She held out a hand. "Two ccs of cordrazine."

Taking barely long enough to set the hypospray, Tashar dropped the device into Chapel's hand and she pressed it to the girl's neck. Still scanning, she watched for increased brain and heart activity, passing the scanner over to the Vulcan when she got it. "Monitor her vitals, please." She didn't look up. "Ensign Martinez."

"Ma'am?"

"Get to the colony's edge. Find someone and get them to bring a stretcher or a set of agricultural floats. Anything we can use to move her, get her to something a little more like a bed than lying in the middle of the woods." What was the girl doing out here anyway?

“Understood.” Footsteps moved quickly ahead, but she kept her eyes on the medical tricorder readout, looking for something that didn’t belong, but she’d already figured out she wasn’t going to get anything without a blood sample.

“Prep a broad-spectrum antibiotic and antiviral shot, please, nurse.”

“Yes, doctor.”

Chapel scowled at the readouts. “Her body is losing against some kind of infection, and fast, but nothing is coming up on the tricorder.” She really wanted a fully equipped sick bay right at the moment, but she’d take whatever medical facilities the colony had. Might as well wish big when you weren’t going to get anything anyway. The *Yorktown* had left orbit within seconds of the transporter beam fading. They were on their own until they had the transmission power to call home.

3

It took Martinez a lot longer to get back than Chapel might have hoped for, and when he did return, it was alone, but at least he was pushing an antigrav unit that would be more than big enough to transport her patient. Motioning to Hennely and Tashar to help get the girl onto the unit, she cocked an eyebrow at Martinez. “Something else is wrong.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He hesitated while they situated the girl on her back. “There’s no movement in the colony, at least not in the near side of it. I knocked on several doors and looked in a couple of windows, but finally just opened up a storage building and borrowed the unit. Figured you needed it better than

the dust it was gathering and I didn't want to delay any longer."

"Good instincts. Mr. Kolchak, does your mental map of the colony layout extend to whatever passes for a medical facility here?"

"Yes, ma'am. The colony does have a doctor as part of the professional team, and there's a small office. They're better prepared than most."

Which made sense. Ruby Red was a bigger starter than a lot of colonies, hitting the minimum threshold to require certain professions be included under Federation law, most notably a doctor. But having that doctor didn't seem to be helping them from the limited data she had so far. "Then that's our destination. I don't think we need to endanger our patient or our footing by running, but a very brisk walk is definitely in order."

Both security officers acknowledged, and Martinez moved to be the primary force driving the floater unit. He set a pace down the path that made Chapel work to keep up so she could keep scanning her patient.

4

The doctor's office, such as it was, didn't impress Chapel all that much. But, compared to a fully stocked and equipped sick bay on a *Constitution*-class cruiser, more was hard to come by outside of a Starbase hospital, and any young colony world would have far less. Without another option, they'd make do.

Chapel was fairly certain Kolchak would have kicked in the door if it hadn't slid open faster, but it gave way in time to avoid destruction. The waiting

room, if that's what it was, with a few chairs and a small table, looked clean enough, she supposed. Chapel was a bit surprised, with a growing population of more than 300, that there wasn't anyone waiting to see the doctor. Of course, she had been surprised that there had been nobody out and about as they passed through the wide streets of the small, geometric town.

The door to the actual doctor's office hadn't given in right away, but Martinez had come equipped with Starfleet override codes, which would work a little faster than his partner's heavy boot, so the lock didn't really stand a chance. Inside, they found two chairs, two diagnostic beds, and a fairly standard array of civilian medical equipment.

"Get her from the antigrav onto one of the beds, please."

While the two security guards did that, Chapel found the sterilizer and held her hands under it for a very slow count of ten before she began rooting through the actual medical supplies and equipment to find a sampler, and taking too long to find it. She didn't waste time cursing the local doctor's version of an organizational system. It wouldn't help.

"Who are you people? Starfleet?"

Chapel turned to find a middle-aged bald man slumped against the doorway she'd ignored. Beyond him, a dimly lit room held a cot and a small nightstand covered in tapes and cartridges.

"Doctor Christine Chapel, USS *Yorktown*." She waved a hand. "This is the rest of my landing party but we can waste time on introductions later. You should have been expecting us, Doctor... Murphy?"

The man seemed to struggle to focus on Christine. "Murphy, yes. That's my name. *Yorktown*. Starfleet checking up on me, but that's not until... until... is it that time already?"

Martinez jumped to catch the man before he fell, slipping an arm beneath both of Murphy's and

manhandling him over to the other diagnostic bed before hauling him up onto it.

Waving a hand across the pickup to turn it on, Chapel divided her attention between the readings from both, programming the sampler by touch as she did so. Confirming the settings visually, she pressed the device to the girl's wrist and allowed it to extract a single CC of blood for analysis.

Murphy's head rolled over to look, and she just heard the exhaustion in his voice. "Blood sample, yes. Good idea. I took those from the first victims. Maybe something new."

First victims. The words sent a ripple up Chapel's spine. How long had this been going on? More importantly, why hadn't they called for help? She turned to Kolchak and Martinez. "Chief Knox suggested that the *Yorktown* would be back in a matter of hours, that it was a simple emergency. Do you have any data to back that up?"

Kolchak looked at Martinez, then shook her head. "No, ma'am. We heard the initial call, but that was just before you came into the transporter room. It sounded simple: engine failure in the outer system, a repair job the prospectors couldn't handle. Hours, a day at the outside, I would think. If the Admiral had suspected anything here, she wouldn't have left just us."

"Of course not, but there wasn't anything to suspect at that point." Except that the colony was quiet, hardly unusual when it was this young. People were busy making lives and growing food. "Flip a credit chip, and one of you go find the colony communications unit. See if you can raise the *Yorktown* and get it back here faster. I feel like we're going to need more than I brought with us."

Kolchak nodded. "I'll go." She tapped her head with one finger, flashing a quick grin at Martinez. "Map of the colony, remember?" And then she turned and was gone.

“Can tell you what you’ll find.” The raspy voice belonged to Murphy. She looked over to find his eyes closed, his body almost sinking into the diagnostic bed. His heart rate was low, respiration slow, brain activity erratic. Looking at the readings, Chapel decided that the only way he could be functional, or even conscious, was that his body was full of stimulants. Looking at standard readings, she would have thought him in worse shape than the girl. “What’s that, Doctor? What will I find?” She popped the sampler cartridge and pressed it into the analyzer.

“Native organism. Not pathogen. Evolutionary advantage. Lots of extra oxygen stored in the bloodstream to be released during heavy physical activity, increasing endurance.” He seemed to collapse further. His heart rate dropped to a beat every two seconds.

Not knowing if he was still conscious, Chapel swore at herself for not thinking of it as soon as he came into the room. “Doctor Murphy, will you give me access to your records?” Just giving her that was so much more than she had. It might give her a clue of what to look for so she wouldn’t have to start over. Well, she’d already started over, but his records might get her a big jump ahead.

She watched the readouts appear as the analyzer flagged and categorized, or tried, every chemical, microorganism, and hormone in the girl’s bloodstream. Several unknowns, which surprised her not at all, but none of them appeared harmful, at least at first glance. There had to be something she was missing.

She looked up at the other diagnostic bed just as all of the indicators dropped to half of their previous levels. Unconscious, maybe slipping into a coma. Reaching for her med kit, she stopped when Murphy spoke again, and she wasn’t the only one who froze with the surprised. “Computer, release

access to all medical files for everyone currently in the treatment room. Acknowledge.”

An almost-androgynous, electronically generated voice, if possible even more stilted than the model on the *Yorktown* or *Enterprise*, responded. “Acknowledged. Each new voiceprint matched to a room occupant will be allowed to provide access.”

“Thank you.” The words were almost a whisper and his vital signs dropped even further.

“One cc of cortisone. Now.”

Tashar, with nothing more than the stereotypical Vulcan raised eyebrow, prepared and administered the injection almost in less time than it took Chapel to ask for it.

The computer interrupted anything else she might have been about order. “Voiceprint catalogued. Identification, please.”

“Doctor Christine Chapel, Chief Medical Officer, USS *Yorktown*.”

“Acknowledged, Doctor Chapel. All records are open to you.”

“Thank you. I’ve been a victim of far worse timing.” Not that she really had time to be a smartass, but it helped somehow. “Computer, transfer all information regarding current or recent patients, including the two currently occupying the diagnostic beds in this room, to the terminal on the desk. Timeframe, fourteen days.” Based on the current state of the colony, she didn’t know if that would be far enough back, but it should give her more than enough data to start with.

“Working. Complying. Complete.”

She made eye contact with her tiny medical staff. “You figure anything out by monitoring, don’t be afraid to sing out.” Shifting her gaze to Martinez, she jerked her head to one side. “Have a quick look around. The colony seems pretty empty, except for our two patients. There are supposed to be 300

people here, and it would be great to find more of them.”

Martinez nodded, and by the tension around his eyes, Chapel guessed he was grateful to be given something to do that would make him feel useful. And while she did want to know who else was alive in the colony, if anyone, the activity was as much to give him that distraction as to find out. Knowing nothing about the pathogen involved, Chapel had no idea if they were all already infected or what the progression of the disease might be like if they were. She, at least, could drop into a chair and do some speed research. Her nurse and tech could manage more than adequately with the limited medical duties. And Kolchak had already been given a job. “Just be careful.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He turned and was gone before the computer could verify his identity.

Chapel continued scanning the records, quickly isolating the pathogen in Murphy’s notes. The first appearance was just shy of two weeks ago, and it started out simple and innocuous, a handful of people complaining of respiratory issues. New planet, new environment, new allergens. Nothing to be alarmed about. No connection and no similarity between the complainants was noted and so wasn’t concerning, at least until it began to spread.

A week later, half the colony was sick and the pace of decline seemed faster with newer victims. She couldn’t see why they hadn’t sent out a planetary distress signal, but Murphy’s notes got more intense as he used up all his time with patients, spent his last functional hours trying to isolate and treat the disease. He finally found a particular symbiotic bacteria, variations of which were common to most of the higher mammals on Ruby Red. It did exactly what he said it did, storing additional oxygen in the blood for later use those animals, releasing it when a particular hormonal

trigger was released by the brain, and so the extra oxygen translated into additional endurance for predator trying to catch prey, or that prey trying to escape. It seemed like a great evolutionary advantage, until all of your neighbors had it too. At that point, it just became a new type of insurance, with everyone enjoying same benefits, making chases longer for all parties.

Still, Chapel had to admit it was an interesting adaptation. But being interesting didn't make it any less frightening once it jumped across species boundaries. That was always worrying in a non-mixed biosphere, but when something could jump across evolutionary lines, it was likely to be incredibly virulent. And just how quickly this one had spread to everyone on the planet set off all kinds of alarm bells in her head. That meant that the same time it figured out how to live in humans, it somehow picked up some new genes to help it gather in and bind a bigger chunk of the oxygen in the victim's bloodstream, not leaving enough for the host to function.

But Murphy had only gotten as far as identifying the short-term effects. He'd barely started trying to find a way to mimic the natural hormone, something that might convince little critters to release their stored oxygen. If she could pick up where he left off, get the right combination, the release would almost certainly hyper-oxygenate the blood, and probably working very much like a stimulant to wake everyone up. From there, she thought they'd have every chance treating it like a standard respiratory infection while they figured out how to disrupt or disable the cause.

But Murphy had said it was an evolutionary advantage, a symbiotic relationship. Humans had plenty of species of microflora living in, on, and around them. So did every other intelligent species or animal ever encountered. This was just a native

version to Ruby Red, one that aggressively wanted to help everything it came into contact with. And Murphy had been trying to get on that track when he was struck down with it himself.

She just had to find the right answer and this was a condition that should be easily reversed.

5

“Sometimes, I’m so stupid.”

Tashar and Hennely snapped their heads around as Chapel looked up.

The Vulcan raised eyebrow. “Doctor, I fail to understand—”

Christine shook her head. “Not now, please. Give both of our patients a shot of tri-ox. Fifteen ccs. Even if we can’t get rid of their new passengers, we can at least oxygenate their blood to the point they’re not in danger. It’s not a cure, but it will buy us time, and I don’t think Murphy has very much left.”

A hiss from both hyposprays, and Chapel, along with her tiny staff, turned her eyes to the diagnostic readouts. Several of the girl’s readouts reacted almost immediately, her pulse increasing, her blood pressure levelling off, and the SPO2, the partial pressure of free oxygen in the blood, making a quick jump to be only worryingly low instead of dangerously low. She might not come around for a few days, even if they found a cure here right now, but she would be around. Murphy’s indicators took a little longer, which told her he’d been infected earlier, had absorbed too much of the strange antibodies in the course of trying to treat the colonists, or was having a stimulant hangover on top of the disease.

Abandoning her research for the moment, Chapel moved over to the synthesizer, and set it to produce tri-ox compound at maximum capacity. It took a few minutes for the machine to produce a full load for each of them. “The two of you, spread out. Check every building, every path between. Fifteen ccs for anyone you come across, ten if they’re under twelve or lighter than forty kilos. Flag locations in your tricorders so we can keep track of them, and if you find anyone conscious, tell them to come here, those who can manage it. Go. Now.”

Kolchak stuck her head in the door a few seconds after her assistants left. “*Yorktown* is going to leave an engineering team with a shuttle behind, ma’am. She’ll be on her way back in half an hour and won’t take long to get here. Anything else I need to tell them?”

Christine tossed a fully-charged hypsopray to the security officer. “That I understand the problem, and that I’m going to need a lot of manpower in the short term to find all the colonists. They’re probably mostly unconscious. Everyone who beams down is to be wearing an isolation suit and armed with as much tri-ox as they can carry. Once you’ve sent that message, start looking for colonists on your own. fifteen ccs for adults, ten for kids. Coordinate with Tashar and Hennely to make sure you cover as much of the colony as you can. Go.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Chapel looked at the data display. Understanding the problem might be exaggerating a little bit, but she had a piece of it. And when she had a piece, she wouldn’t give up on a solution until she had the whole thing.

She'd almost certainly been infected within minutes after they'd beamed down, probably the moment she'd come into contact with the girl. Assuming that had led Chapel to take her own blood sample late in the evening and she found a few of the new flora floating in it. She immediately tested the rest of the landing party. Tashar's copper-based blood didn't seem as hospitable, but the humans in the landing party all showed the infection, if that was the right word.

When the *Yorktown* hit orbit, the first thing she told the admiral after answering the hail was to reiterate that anyone allowed in the medical parties would have to come down in an isolation suit, and not just humans. In spite of the apparent Vulcan immunity, she actually had no proof that would last and that Tashar wouldn't be infected, so had to recommend it for every other species as well.

For the four of them who were definitely infected, Chapel prescribed a shot of tri-ox every four hours, awake or asleep, hoping that would keep any degradation in their capabilities to a minimum. After a few hours' sleep, she woke in the morning feeling only a little more exhausted than she thought she should and hoped she might even chalk that up to her own preconceptions. A new blood sample showed the tiny creatures making themselves at home and reproducing at a steady rate, but no additional symptoms. Not a perfect solution, but it might help her hold on until she had something a lot closer.

Suited landing parties from the *Yorktown* systematically searched every nook and cranny of the colony, down to the automated farming equipment. Eventually, Starfleet personnel accounted for every person registered as belonging to the colony. Unfortunately, they accounted for three dozen of

them by finding bodies instead of still rescuable victims.

Twice over the next three days, the admiral tried to gently relieve Chapel of duty and let someone else take over the grunt work, someone in an isolation suit. Both times, she fought back, having been the person on the ground, having had a jump start on the research and on understanding the not-disease, having the training and experience to address the problem better than the rest of the medical staff on board. That last bit and actually been on the advice of Doctor Piper, the CMO back at Starbase One. He'd spent some time on a starship, quite a few years back, but had been a Starbase Doctor for two decades and more. Before she'd shipped out, he reminded her she'd seen more medical disasters in the years she'd been on board *Enterprise* than he had in the previous 15, and probably during his five-year tour on *Enterprise*, although long before hers. Chapel used the argument on the admiral, as if she wouldn't have detected his words in her mouth anyway.

Both times the admiral accepted the logic, and backed off. Chapel was getting tired though, and didn't know if it would work again. She was infected, and even if she put a steady stream of tri-ox into her system, that wouldn't change. Functional wasn't enough, she had to figure out how to neutralize the unwelcome microscopic passengers she now carried, and quickly. If she didn't, her term as medical officer on the *Yorktown* might end up being very short.

"Any closer?"

Chapel looked over at the diagnostic bed Doctor Murphy lay on. The tri-ox injections were having at least some effect on the victims of what she couldn't quite think of as a plague. He slept a lot, and was certainly tired even when awake, but managed short periods being alert.

“Not yet. After reading your notes, it seems like it should be pretty easy. Animals on this planet who have the adaptation also have a hormone release triggered when they no longer need the extra oxygen, or when they need to burn it off. But our version of the microbe isn’t quite the same as any the samples we have, and so it doesn’t quite respond to any of the synthetic hormones we’ve hit it with. We can’t find the right chemical signal.”

“And that’s... only half the battle. Just treatment.”

“Yes, but it’s critical to get there first. Important for us, too. Once we understand how it works, we can work on a cure and then an inoculation.”

Murphy nodded, closing his eyes. “I never got as far as analyzing markers.”

“I would’ve been surprised, doctor. *Yorktown* has a lot more equipment and lab space available than you do, not to mention personnel, and unraveling alien DNA on a new planet is a decidedly non-trivial task.”

He nodded again. “Agreed.”

She looked back down at her screen to skim through some not-too-blurry text, and when she looked back up at the bed, Murphy had fallen asleep again. Just as well. While it was good to know he was showing some improvement, having to talk was taxing. She didn’t want to admit it, but this non-disease was taking a toll on her, too. She wasn’t sure how much longer she could stay in control of the investigation.

She wasn’t sure how much longer she had before she would be lying in bed like Murphy, awake for only a few minutes every couple of hours.

Some undefinable time passed and the communicator chirped quietly. She absently flipped it open without looking at it. “Chapel here.”

“This is Armstrong on the *Yorktown*, ma’am. I have some data to feed down to the computer system you’re working on, and I think there’s something you might like in it.”

She couldn’t help picking up the communicator. “What is it, Lieutenant?”

“The samples you sent up, ma’am. From three small species of predator, all possibly related, all about of the size of house cats, more or less, who don’t have the adaptation. Instead, the markers appear to show a naturally increased oxygen uptake similar to, but stronger than, Terran species accomplishing the same thing through increased respiration.”

“They don’t have the adaptation? I thought it was ubiquitous. Just part of the way things are here.”

“That’s what it seems like, ma’am, but these may just be an odd group of species. It might mean nothing, or it might be that they don’t need the adaptation, and are protected from it somehow. But there are certainly other samples from species with closer common ancestors who do have it, as far as we can determine. It might be just an oddity group, but testing bears it up so far. Oh, and there are seventeen new minor hormonal signature variances to test.”

She didn’t expect much from those, because Murphy was right. It had mutated. Since it had mutated, there had to be human flag to counter the human version of the microflora. “Thank you.”

But three species didn’t have the little hitchhikers. That was where they’d find a treatment if there was going to be one.

If they had the time.

“It does work under laboratory conditions, Doctor, but it has not, as yet, been tested on a living being.”

“There are several hundred infected people on this world, Lieutenant, me being one of them. We have to move out of laboratory sometime, don’t we?”

Tashar nodded. “That is logical, however—”

“I’m forced to go on record as saying I think this is a bad idea, Doctor.” The admiral’s stiff, almost Vulcan voice reached out of the open communicator on the desk. “You are the expert on this bacterium. If this doesn’t work—”

“With respect, admiral, if this doesn’t work, we won’t be any worse off than we were before testing. If it doesn’t work, nothing will happen, I’ll still be infected, and I’ll still need to work hard to find a real solution.” She looked at her still uninfected Vulcan nurse. “Is that correct, Lieutenant?”

“Available data indicates that you are correct, Doctor, but I am forced to concede it is laboratory data and there may be factors in a living patient we have failed to consider. However, I anticipate you ignoring my objection and so must insist on being the one to administer the treatment.”

“Admiral?”

A long pause. A long, long pause. “Very well, you may proceed. Switch to a view screen, however. I would like to monitor the treatment as it occurs.” Not unreasonable, Chapel supposed, considering the amount of time it would actually take. She nodded to Hennely. A small view screen on the long medical center war came to life, and the admiral’s pale face filled it, dark-haired, shot through with just a few bits of white, tied back and under control. “Proceed.”

Chapel lay down on the recently vacated diagnostic bed, her first patient moved to Murphy’s

cot. She heard the systems pick up her own readings and tried hard not to crane her neck to look at the display. Tashar leaned over, slanted eyebrows pushing towards each other over the bridge of her nose. "You understand this is a multistep treatment, Doctor."

"I do."

"The first injection will serve to intensify your heart rate. As soon as you feel it take hold, as we are seeking maximum efficacy, you must exhale as fully as possible and not inhale again until I tell you, under the assumption that the pathogen is airborne. When your lungs are empty, I will give you the second injection, the hormonal release trigger. This will require ten to fifteen heartbeats to be fully distributed through your blood supply before it can begin to soak into your tissues. I will wait for thirty. Please continue to hold your breath during this time. Finally, the counter-agent will be applied to the weakened microflora. Continue your efforts to hold your breath until I can gauge the effectiveness of the treatment."

Having the review laid out for her just how long she was going to have to starve her body of breath, and Chapel didn't ask how they were going manage the process with the patients who were still unconscious, only being kept alive by the tri-ox. They would cross that bridge as required. No, *when* required. "Understood. Whenever you're ready." Letting her head sink into the pillow, and close your eyes. The first hypospray hissed against her neck. Almost immediately, Chapel felt her heart rate increase from a normally unnoticed gentle beat to one pounding in her ears with every stroke. Stopping in the middle of an inhale, she pressed every bit of air out of her lungs she could. The organism had to be starved, driving the oxygen content of her blood down, hopefully convincing it the synthetic hormone was close enough and that its hosted needed the

oxygen. At the end of the exhale, she felt another hypo press against her neck.

“Thank you, doctor. Please don’t inhale if you can avoid doing so.”

She shook her head. *Wouldn’t dream of it.* The hypo hissed against her skin, and she began trying to count heartbeats. It should have been easy with the feeling of each one of them pressing against the entire inside of her skull, but Chapel very quickly lost count, focusing instead on not allowing herself to inhale.

A few seconds, hours, eternities later, Tashar spoke again. “Patience, Doctor. 28, 29, 30.” The third hypo, barely felt pressed against her neck, hissed, and she started counting again. How long would it take to wipe out the oxygen starved parasite? She realized that Tashar hadn’t told her how long she would have to keep holding her breath, and she suddenly couldn’t remember what they’d laid out. She didn’t ask, couldn’t ask now, how long she would need, in seconds or in heartbeats, before she could breathe again. Her lungs were burning now, making need to draw breath, empty for far too long. She knew there was plenty of stored oxygen in her blood, courtesy of her recent passengers, but that knowledge didn’t help her just now.

“28, 29, 30. Commencing scan. You may breathe again, Doctor.”

Chapel sucked in the deepest, sweetest breath she’d ever taken. She wanted to hold onto the sweet oxygen in case her assistant suddenly change her mind and wanted to repeat the procedure. A silly impulse, and she knew it, so she exhaled and inhaled again, slowly, the first step in trying to re-establish a normal breathing pattern.

Chapel felt something pressed against her wrist, realized that Tashar was taking a blood sample, and fought the urge to get up, or at least sit up far enough to turn and see the diagnostic

readings. But she needed to relax and hold still, so closed her eyes and focused on breathing. The readings were critical and she didn't want to influence them by moving around. They needed to know exactly how her body reacted, and what they might need to look at for in other patients.

"How do you feel, doctor?"

Christine smiled, and opened her eyes again to find she could just see the admiral's face still on the viewscreen. "Honestly, ma'am? About the same. Still tired, and still a little short of breath, but I don't expect miracles."

"That is wise, Doctor." Tashar stepped into view. "For we have not produced one." Chapel felt her heart began to sink. "What we have produced is merely another verification of the efficacy of the scientific method and persistence of expertise. The treatment was effective. You are not currently free of infection, but the organisms are being quickly terminated. Data indicates the likelihood of reinfection, however, and quite probably in a matter of only hours while remaining on the planetary surface. While some local species have moved beyond the adaptation, or, more likely, never had it to begin with, it is found in the vast majority of the mammal equivalents sampled so far on Ruby Red. The human version is likely to already be persistent in the colony."

"Can I sit up now?"

"There is no reason why you should not. My analysis is complete."

She did so, finding that she'd told the truth. She didn't feel any better, and probably wouldn't until she had a good night's sleep. "So we have a cure, but not a vaccine. Sounds like our next step."

On the viewscreen, the admiral nodded. "Get some rest, please, doctor. But keep us updated on your progress. The *Yorktown* will stand down from a class one medical emergency, but we are still going

to be fairly diligent with isolation and decontamination procedures.”

“Of course, Admiral. I wouldn’t recommend otherwise.”

The viewscreen went blank, and Chapel swung her legs off the bed, sliding forward to put her feet on the floor, trying to mimic a lightness she really didn’t feel. “Well, you heard the admiral. Let’s get to work.”

“In fact, doctor, I heard the admiral said you were to get some rest.”

“I did hear that, but it isn’t nighttime yet, and while I am still tired, I’m not really sleepy. Plus, we have several hundred colonists to get this treatment to. Every pair hands you can get right now will help things along. Cure first, then vaccine.”

“As you say, doctor.”

And that made her feel a lot better.

8

The transporter room faded into view around her. A technician Chapel couldn’t immediately identify, mainly because of the isolation suit, she hoped, stepped up onto the platform and began scanning the landing party, the original five, and the last to come back from the planet. The technician stepped back then pulled off her hood. “All clear, ma’am. Welcome home.” She looked around, smiling. “All of you.”

The transporter room door slid open to reveal the admiral and first officer, Commander Temple. The admiral’s mouth twitched as they stepped into the room, and, apparently, she decided to allow herself a small smile. “A sentiment I will echo,

doctor.” Her eyes swept across each member of the landing party. “And excellent work, as well, all of you. There will be the appropriate notations in your personal files.”

Chapel smiled as she put a hand on Tashar’s wrist to stop the coming objection before it got started. “Thank you, ma’am. While appreciated, it really is just wonderful to be back. As to personnel files, well, let the record show that the colony is in much better shape than when we landed, and, in the long run will probably thrive.” In the short-term, there would be a lot of grief counselling needed. A support ship was already on the way. There had been deaths, both before the *Yorktown* had arrived and after, the people they hadn’t been able to get in time. Thankfully, there were fewer of those than there might have been, but even one was too many for her.

The admiral nodded. “I look forward to reading your final report, Doctor.”

She took one step to the transporter console and opened communications channel from there. “Bridge.”

“Lieutenant Commander O’Malley here, ma’am. Orders?”

“Break orbit and resume our previous course. Warp factor five”

“Warp after five, aye, ma’am.”

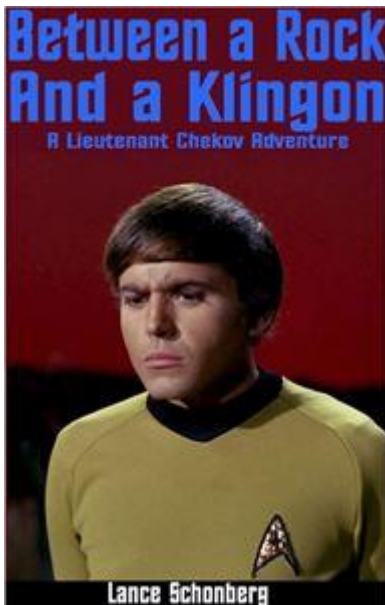
Chapel felt the warp drive kicking in, so like the one she’d gotten used to during her years on *Enterprise*. The *Yorktown* was a Constitution-class vessel, too. The same, but different, and she still had a lot to explore in her new, almost-familiar home.

If she could ever finish writing reports.

Thanks for reading “Breath Control”. I enjoyed writing the story, so I hope you enjoyed reading it.

If you like Star Trek TOS fanfic, and particularly if you liked this one, I do have other works in various stages of completion. I enjoy working with the supporting and background characters from the series, using the Big Three in smaller roles. Recently-promoted Lieutenant Chekov has an available novella-length adventure by my hand, and frequent, if often silent, supporting officer Lieutenant Leslie is next up in a short piece, but there just may be something novel-length in the not-too-distant future.

Live long and prosper.



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