

# Star Trek: Independence Beneath the Raptor's Wings

By Dnoth

*"This war isn't over and you're already planning for the next."*

*"Well put."*

-Bashir and Sloan (DS9: "Inter Arma Enim Silent Leges")

## PROLOGUE

**Stardate: 54512.4 (7 July 2377)**  
**Imperial Romulan Warbird *Odaus***  
**Rator Star System, Romulan Star Empire**

Slowly, methodically, Commander Hanora scanned the sensor readouts. She trusted her crew to do their job, but she couldn't help herself. He was out there...somewhere.

Green light from her tactical officer's display punctuated her pale white, chiseled face. The bridge of her *D'deridex* class ship was solemnly quiet. Despite the fact sound didn't travel in space, everyone muted themselves. They were playing a dangerous game of predator and prey...and it was still unclear which role they would play.

Her vessel was under cloak, but they were not alone.

Centurion Chruja reported to his commander, who hovered over his shoulder, "I'm not reading any tetryon particles."

Hanora confirmed with, "Commander P'nav knows how to run his ship."

The bridge crew's single-minded concentration was broke when an untactful voice blurted, "Have you found them?"

The *Odaus* commander didn't have to turn around to know who it was. In preparation for dealing with him, she took a long blink and sigh. Then, she regarded him, "Not yet, Major Rima."

Commander Hanora had an adequate working relationship with the Tal Shiar operative. Though, she wasn't thrilled about having an 'advisor' assigned to her ship. It wasn't due to any political or social reservations, though. She simply couldn't shake the idea that she was being evaluated. It *was* possible she wasn't, she reminded herself. She only took control of the *Odaus* last year, it was her first command.

Rima, a respectable officer, strode closer. He seemed to casually examine the earth-toned green and brown color scheme of the bulkheads. He settled in front of the main viewer. The dark-skinned Romulan gazed at the orange star. "P'nav *must* be in this system."

The warbird master joined him. Both sported the short, traditional military hair cut. "Of that I have no doubt, Major. If he went to warp, we would detect it."

"Which means he also knows we are here," inferred Rima. The Tal Shair crossed his arms, "Suggestions, Commander?"

"I've studied his tactics," began Hanora, "when trapped, he will strike."

"I agree," he stated. Rima began to make his way off the bridge, "Find him, Commander...lest he finds us."

He was about to enter the lift when Chruja called out, "Ship decloaking! He's right on top of us!"

"Decloak!" reacted Hanora. "Raise shields!"

"Too late!"

\*\*\*\*\*

The graceful lines of the *D'deridex* class, *Fothmar*, formed in space. It seemingly fired disruptor bursts at empty space. They hit their mark, however. The black exploded and another *D'deridex* was revealed.

The *Fothmar* slammed the *Odaus* with several well placed blows.

The attacker strafed its victim and jumped to warp.

\*\*\*\*\*

After recovering her footing and coughing out the smoke in her lungs, Hanora yelled over the klaxons, "Report!"

"Sensors are down," relayed one crewmember.

Another coughed out, "So...is the warp drive!"

"Six injures reported, all minor."

Despite the chaos he caused, Hanora couldn't help but feel a certain admiration for her foe. He knew exactly how to inflict maximum damage with minimal casualties. "Well done," she whispered to herself.

The major was on one knee aft of her. A trickle of green blood ran down his right nostril. He locked eyes with the female commander. His face barely hid his annoyance. It wasn't focused at her, however. "I had hoped we could take care of this problem alone." He stood, wiped his nose, and examined the copper-based fluid, "We are only four light years from the Neutral Zone. It's time to employ other assets."

## CHAPTER 1

### **Supplemental**

#### **USS *Independence*, Holodeck Two**

#### **Orbiting Quebec Outpost VI, Along the Neutral Zone**

A good portion of the crew seemed to be in an Aztec inspired stadium. It was rectangular in shape with a pit separating two seating areas along its length. The dirt filled pit wasn't very deep, only enough to protect spectator from participant. Hovering very unnaturally above the pit was a semi-transparent display showing the tournament ladder.

The crowd, some in uniform, some not, cheered as the ship's counselor walked out into the dirt. She wore a traditional Andorian robe passed down by her grandmother. Kimula gestured for the spectators to quiet down. And then began, "Welcome to the first annual...or semi-annual, or however often we decide to do it – USS *Independence* Martial Arts Tournament!"

The roar of over one hundred people filled the illusionary rain forest.

"Matches have been decided at random," explained Kimula. "Our first contest will be Captain Sintina Aurelia practicing Brazilian Capoeira..."

The applause was respectable while the Latino captain stretched in the pit.

"...verses Ensign Brad Weston using Tellarite Umpala."

This time the encouragement from the crowd was overwhelming. It didn't hurt that his opponent was the ship's CO.

The Euro-American human had arrived on the ship only two months ago. But he was outgoing and well-liked. He sometimes helped Susan Windslow in the classroom. Fortunately, his charisma made up for his mediocre performance in his official duties. He was competent, but not inspired.

Sintina finished stretching. The captain wore a black sports top and matching shorts. She had smooth, mocha skin and her jet black hair was pulled back in a ponytail. She had never been shy about showing off her toned body. She assessed her opponent.

Bradley was a less impressive specimen. He was in good shape, but not particularly muscular. His simple, brown tunic honored the martial art he learned as a child on Tellar.

"You sure got the short straw, didn't you?" jibed Sintina.

Weston smiled. He grew up with Tellarites, he knew how to play this game. "With respect Captain, I'm going to make you eat dirt."

Aurelia came to like the young ensign despite herself. She secretly enjoyed the verbal sparing they often engaged in. She began to loosen up and made movements reminiscent of dancing. "Big words for an ensign, let's see if you can back it up."

The roar rose again as Counselor Soma exited the pit and the combatants began to circle one another.

In the audience, Susan asked her engineer husband, "Do you think she'll let him win?"

Lieutenant Commander Windslow glanced over with a *what-Captain Aurelia-have-you-been-serving-with* look.

Aurelia quickly dove at Weston's legs. She grabbed and pulled, causing the young ensign to hit the ground. Before he could react, she began to grapple with him.

Science officer Tang Zian leaned over to his neighbor in the rafters, "What're the rules for winning?"

Doctor Zo'Kama, an Arkonian, responded, "Whoever taps out first loses."

"Tap out?" he repeated.

"They have to slap the ground or their opponent to forfeit."

The Asian officer looked confused, "That seems a bit...barbaric. And you condone this?"

The reptilian doctor shrugged, "I already told the fighters, I'm not going to treat anything less severe than a fractured bone." She looked at him, "Don't you have faith in your shipmate's self-control?"

Back in the pit, Sintina had finished a combination kick/roll to Brad's chest. The fight was obviously not going well for the ensign. The two styles couldn't be more mismatched. Umpala utilized brute force, while Capoeira employed feints and quick movement. Aurelia constantly struck and retreated, struck and retreated. Weston simply couldn't get a hit.

Brad was again swept to the ground and the pattern continued. She didn't give him the opportunity to recover before the next strike came. He felt like he was constantly being pelted. Finally, he had had enough. He repeatedly slapped the dirt.

Immediately, the captain backed off. Cheers were mixed with sounds of disappointment. Obviously, the crowd favored the underdog. Aurelia didn't seem to mind.

The Latin American captain stopped her distinctive movements, walked over to Weston and offered a hand, "Don't feel bad," she consoled, "Capoeira is supposed to disorientate people."

He took the proffered hand and rose to his feet, "Well, it worked."

She smiled and raised his hand in hers. The spectators showed their approval of the sportsmanship.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Supplemental IRW *Fothmar*, Wardroom Traveling Under Cloak**

The Romulan officers dined at an oval shaped table. An intense discussion was taking place.

"You ordered an attack on another Romulan ship!" blasted Centurion Dulas. His face was green with anger.

"Calm down, Gunner," instructed Sub-Commander Xil.

"I will not calm down! I don't care how important this *supposed* secret mission is!" He pounded the table, causing the items on it to jingle, "I will not fire on another Imperial ship again!"

Commander P'nav calmly witnessed the argument without reaction. He was an elder Romulan with silver hair.

"Dulas is right," commented Dren, the ship's medical officer, "We could've found another way."

Xil defended his commander, "There was no other way to remove ourselves from the situation, Doctor."

Dulas' anger was replaced by menace, "I demand to know what our true mission is, Commander."

"You needn't demand anything!" blasted the sub-commander.

The table transitioned into a tense silence. Eyes rested on P'nav. He took a drink and spoke for the first time in minutes. "I am loyal to the people of Romulas. That will never wavier." He sat forward, "I have learned of a great deception. The truth must be shared with those able to act against it." His relaxed, blue eyes scanned his senior officers, "That is all I am prepared to say at this point."

The weapon's officer continued in a more respectful tone, "Just don't ask me to shoot at my comrades."

The silver-haired commander nodded in understanding, "I cannot promise it won't happen again. Should you hesitate, you will be relived of duty."

"I understand, Commander."

"I don't know what this is about, nor do I care," added Doctor Dren, "but the crew deserves an explanation...or at least, reassurance."

Xil concurred, "That would be wise, Commander. You have the full confidence of the crew. But your orders have been...unsettling as of late."

"Of course," agreed P'nav, "You are right." He thought for a moment, "Tell them we are participating in a fleet wide war game. I didn't tell them ahead of time since I wanted to gauge their true reactions."

"Is there any truth to that?" asked Dulas, hoping for an affirmative.

Instead of answering, Commander P'nav left his chair. "Excuse me," he said, "I must contemplate our next move."

The others stood as the commander exited the wardroom. The door slid shut behind him.

Dulas rhetorically asked, "What's he getting us into?"

## CHAPTER 2

### **Supplemental**

#### **USS *Independence*, Holodeck Two**

#### **Orbiting Quebec Outpost VI, Along the Neutral Zone**

*'It's too bad the tournament required unarmed combat,'* thought Jonin Faltyne. He could use the practice with his *ushaan-tor*. He jumped back to avoid a roundhouse kick from one of his subordinates from Security, Petty Officer Runningfox.

The Andorian panted, "Starfleet issue combat training won't cut it here, PO."

Cheveyo Runningfox saw how his section chief was losing momentum. He knew Andorians overheated quite easy. He held no illusions; however, he was sweating too. The Pueblo responded, "We'll see about that, sir."

Aurelia rested with a towel around her shoulders on the sidelines. She leaned over to her first officer. "This one's a tough call."

"Runningfox is good," commented Karim, "but Jonin has more experience."

"What are the odds at?" fished Sintina.

The Persian officer didn't bite, "Why Captain, you know gambling aboard ship is against the regulations."

She rolled her eyes, "Yeah, right."

The enlisted man went for a jab, but it was blocked and his wrist was grabbed in a single motion. It was the beginning of the end. And Cheveyo knew it.

Faltyne, still in possession of the human's wrist, spun behind him and started a submission hold.

The pain inflicted was intense. Runningfox tapped out.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Supplemental**

#### **USS *Philadelphia*, Captain's Ready Room**

#### **En Route to Sierra Outpost I, Along the Neutral Zone**

Captain Zackary Collins sat at his desk. His hair was short and black. He had what had been described for centuries as the “thousand-yard stare.” You could look into his cold, menacing eyes and know he was a killer. Though, there was no remorse in them.

The intercom activated with a tone, *“Captain, you are receiving a personal message.”*

Collins knew it was a lie. He hadn’t had any contact with family since he was fifteen. And friends...friends weren’t necessary. “Put it through.”

A familiar female Andorian wearing a black tunic appeared on the screen. “Agent Visala, you have another mission for me?”

“Indeed,” confirmed the Section 31 operative. “We’re issuing the official orders through Command this time. The *Philadelphia* won’t be working alone.”

“What’s the target?”

“Officially, a rogue Romulan commander,” she stated.

“And unofficially?” he prompted.

She sighed and elaborated, “We’re going above the board on this one for a reason. It is supposed to be a joint-feel good mission between Starfleet and the Romulan Navy. But to set up future plans, it would benefit us if a Starfleet vessel were destroyed by this rogue. You need to make sure that happens.”

“Planning on straining Federation/Romulan relations are we?” he suggested.

Her response was quick, “You need not worry about such things, Captain.”

He grinned devilishly, “Of course.” Zack went on, “Who gets sacrificed?”

The Andorian let a smile escape, “You get to kill two birds with one stone.”

\*\*\*\*\*

**Supplemental**  
**IRW *Fothmar*, Captain’s Ready Room**

## **Running Under Cloak near the Neutral Zone**

The enunciator chimed. Commander P'nav expected it. Maintaining control of the ship would prove to be more difficult from this point on. "Come in, Sub-Commander."

His suspicions were correct. Xil entered and asked without preamble, "Are you loyal to the Star Navy or the Tal Shiar?"

The seasoned commander templed his fingers, "I told you. I'm loyal to the people."

The sub-commander cocked his head, "With respect, that's no answer."

P'nav came back with, "It should be."

Xil stepped forward, "If I am to function as your second-in-command, I need to know your intentions."

The elder Romulan breathed deeply. He stood, looked out the large window behind his chair, and placed his hands behind his back. He stayed like that for several seconds.

It didn't surprise Xil. He had seen this behavior before. It was his commander's favorite thinking position. He knew he could not rush an answer. So he waited.

The commander didn't turn around when he warned, "If I tell you, your faith in our leaders will be shaken."

Xil couldn't stop a slight chuckle, "It wouldn't be the first time, sir."

The sub-commander was assigned to the ship five years ago. P'nav liked him, trusted him. The two battled through the Dominion War together. It wasn't a matter of loyalty stopping P'nav from sharing the information. It was a matter of burden. He chose another route.

"I've been in contact with a well placed Klingon who associates with a group offering assistance," explained the commander. He turned, "I intend to give my information to them and then I must go into hiding."

Several questions formed in Xil's mind. He vocalized, "What about the ship...the crew?"

"They cannot be allowed to share my fate. If all goes as planned, they will bear no responsibility for my actions." He added, "Nor will you."

"Commander," offered Xil, "Surely there are other options, other channels to deal with this within the Empire. If the danger is as grave as you make it out to be, it must be addressed by Romulans. Not outsiders."

"I wish there were," admitted P'nav.

The sub-commander seemed at a loss. Then, he closed the gap between them, "If you tell me you are doing this for the good of the Romulan people, I'll follow you to whatever end, without question."

The elder Romulan somberly locked eyes with his subordinate, "I am doing this for the good of the Romulan people, for my grandsons, for your daughter."

Satisfied with the response, Xil assumed a ridged military posture, "What are your orders, Commander?"

P'nav moved around his desk and placed a proud hand on Xil's shoulder. "Chart an indirect route to the Beta Pictoris System. It is a large, energetic star surrounded by a massive debris disk that has yet to form into an organized system, and it's in the Neutral Zone. It's perfect for our purposes. There, our paths will part."

## CHAPTER 3

### **Supplemental**

#### ***USS Independence*, Holodeck Two**

#### **Orbiting Quebec Outpost VI, Along the Neutral Zone**

The semi-transparent tournament ladder rotated slowly above the primitive looking arena. There were only eight total competitors. The first fight of the second tier was won. A relative newcomer to the ship, Jonin Faltyne, dominated one of his subordinates. Ensign Folana Lemipil, a female Zakdorn, didn't take the defeat well. She all but stomped out of the holodeck. Most of the spectators disregarded her reaction. Zakdorns were known for their fragile egos.

The next match, though it wasn't the final, was by far the most anticipated. Commander bin Nadal defeated his first tier opponent and now faced Sintina. The crowd rose to their feet as the two stepped foot on the dirt from opposite ends of the arena. Everyone knew the two often sparred together, but they never allowed observers. Some of the medical staff started rumors of how vicious the captain and the first officer fought. One or both of them would come in with terrible looking bruises. A small minority of the crew were beginning to think they were non-sexual sadomasochists.

The Persian wore an Okinawan gi. It was an unbleached hemp color. An oval shaped patch adorned his left breast and the belt was black. The gi had several stains, deliberate reminders of his experience in their previous ship's last hours.

The fighters approached each other.

"You know," began Karim, "as first officer, I have to consider the effects it would have on ship moral if you lost."

Sintina berated him in a playful tone, "You'd better not hold back." Her voice had just a hint of threatening sincerity. She added, "Because I won't."

As they bowed, bin Nadal stated, "I never doubted that, Tina."

Immediately, both snapped into a defensive stance and began circling each other. Aurelia began the distinctive capoeira movements. Karim's body seemed much more relaxed.

Sitting just outside the pit, Weston leaned over to the *Independence's* security chief, "So you're gonna have to fight one of them?"

The Andorian male nodded slightly, barely acknowledging the comment. Jonin was far too preoccupied watching their styles. Bin Nadal was much more passive than Aurelia. He fought without visible emotion. The captain, on the other hand, used her passion.

The Latina went for a sweep. Karim jumped in time to avoid it. He landed and instantly delivered a low snap kick to her torso. Using the kick's energy, she rolled away and recovered.

The crowd was evenly split on their favorite. Everyone immensely enjoyed the event. It wasn't often fleet personnel got to see their XO and CO spar. The cheers were deafening.

Aurelia leaped up and landed a roundhouse kick to the Persian's cheek. The impact forced him to go into a spin. He ended up on his hands and knees, facing away from her.

She began to advance on him. Quickly, bin Nadal jetted out a foot that smacked into her jaw. Dazed, she retreated. He took the opportunity to stand back up.

Now, mixed in with the cheers, were sounds of sympathy for the participant currently getting hit. The strikes from both were noticeably more violent than from their previous contests.

Aurelia rose up for a lunging punch. Karim began to anticipate for it. Then, she dropped down and kicked him in the midsection. He folded over. She followed up with a knee to his face. He flung over and landed in the dirt. She went for a stomp, but he grabbed her foot and twisted. She spun out and joined him on the ground.

Unbeknownst to the combatants, the cheering had died down a bit. Some spectators marveled in shock. Many wondered if this was what their 'normal' sparring session was like.

Kimula watched on with a mild concern. Not for her friends. She knew they took things a bit too far when they sparred, but for the observers. So, she was relieved when her combadge activated. She moved away from the crowd to hear Chief Hatora from the bridge.

*"...to get a hold of the captain. The computer says she's there."*

The Andorian comm. officer rejoined, "It's a bit loud in here, Chief. Plus, she doesn't have her compin on her. I can relay the message."

*"We've received a priority one communiqué from Fleet Commander Amasov."*

Soma glanced over at the fight. Somehow, it seemed fitting to break it up...before more people began to believe the rumors. "Understood, standby." The Andorian female shuffled onto the field of combat and yelled to the fighters, "Stop! Time out! Break it up!"

It took a moment, but the two withdrew from each other. The room felt a combination of relief and disappointment. Both were battered and winded.

Aurelia had a look of confusion and frustration, "What is it?"

"Rear Admiral Amasov is calling," responded the counselor.

Caught up in the moment, the captain actually complained, "But what about the tournament?" There was a child's disenchantment in her voice.

Karim chimed in with a chuckle, "I'm sure everyone will understand, Captain."

She realized the selfishness in her comment. She took a deep breath and put her hand on her hips for a moment. Then, she addressed the crew, "Sorry everybody, duty calls."

The crowd accepted her statement with an unfulfilled groan.

"So do you forfeit?" chided Kimula.

Sintina spun around with an incredulous look, "No. The tournament is delayed that's all."

\*\*\*\*\*

**Supplemental**  
**USS *Independence*, Captain's Ready Room**  
**Orbiting Quebec Outpost VI, Along the Neutral Zone**

Still dripping with sweat and pushing down the adrenaline, Aurelia entered her office off the bridge. The incessant beeping reminded her that Admiral Amazov was awaiting her over subspace. She quickly grabbed a towel from the head and dabbed her face with it before plopping in her chair.

She cleared her throat and activated the viewer. A dark-haired, Russian in his mid-50's looked back at her.

He noticed her lack of uniform, but thought little of it. He opened with a genial, "Captain Aurelia, how are you liking the Neutral Zone patrol?"

Sintina shrugged, "It's been relatively uneventful." She remembered she was talking to an admiral and admirals didn't like to hear things like that, so she added, "We assisted the Border Service in catching some smugglers last week."

"Yes, I heard about that. The *Jupiter's* skipper spoke well of you," confirmed Amazov. "I like to keep in contact with the local squadron commander."

She tipped her head in recognition. She was slowly but steadily breaking down the image of the inexperienced hothead some seemed to have about her.

The Russian leaned and steepled his fingers. "I have another mission for you, Captain. It seems the Romulans have a bit of a problem."

## CHAPTER 4

### **Supplemental**

#### **USS *Independence*, Conference Lounge Orbiting Quebec Outpost VI, Along the Neutral Zone**

Aurelia ran a casual enough boat to where no one felt awkward about showing up to a staff meeting wearing what they had on during the tournament. The *Steamrunner* class conference lounge was positioned aft of the bridge. It looked similar to that of a *Galaxy* class, but smaller and more utilitarian.

Sintina, now wearing a black, light-weight robe, walked passed the large, transparent aluminum windows. “Apparently, the Romulans have been chasing this ship for nearly a week. Now, he’s getting close to the Neutral Zone, so as a gesture of goodwill, they decided to include Starfleet in their search.” Her tone seemed distant, distracted.

“Who’s in command of the *Fothmar*?” Faltyne asked.

The captain nodded to her first officer as she leaned against the bulkhead.

Lieutenant Commander bin Nadal got up and activated the display on the opposite wall. An image of an elderly Romulan appeared along with biographical data. He began, “His name is P’nav. He has nearly 50 years of experience in the Romulan Navy.”

Kimula addressed Aurelia, “Why would he go rogue?”

She crossed her arms and shrugged, “Supposedly, he may be under some type of alien influence...at least, that’s the story the Romulans gave us.”

“You seem unconvinced,” observed Doctor Zo’Kama.

The petite Latina didn’t comment. It was obvious something was troubling her. Normally, she’d be pumped to get this type of mission. Instead, she was reserved. She stood straight and informed them, “We’re due to meet the *Philadelphia* and a warbird in the NZ by zero-nine tomorrow.”

“The *Philadelphia*?” ominously repeated Lieutenant Soma.

Sintina confirmed with somber eyes, “the *Philadelphia*.”

The crew that came over from the *Interceptor* class *Independence* would remember. Last year, the *Indy* and the *Philadelphia* had a skirmish. Most everyone was told – and believed – the *Philly's* prior captain had become insane, attacked two civilian freighters, killed a police officer on New Sydney, and attacked the *Indy*. The incident became widely known, as it wasn't often two Starfleet ships engaged in battle. The event didn't help Sintina's reputation. Some brass vocalized their displeasure at how she handled the situation. In the end, the *Philly* was short a nacelle and well on its way to being totally disabled.

The truth was something far more sinister, and known by Aurelia, Karim, and Soma. It was decided, at the time, not to share it with the others.

The rest of the senior staff could feel the tension, but didn't fully understand it.

The captain wanted to end the meeting, so she started dishing out orders. "Faltyne, I want a tactical drill for each shift."

"Aye, Captain."

"Doctor, study up on...aliens that Starfleet has encountered that could explain P'nav's actions, just in case."

The reptilian jerked her head, her species equivalent to a nod.

Aurelia looked at her science officer and chief engineer, "Tang, Windslow, find out how to break through a cloak."

"Yes, ma'am," came from Zian. The engineer acknowledged.

"Ensign," as she addressed Weston, "Head to the rendezvous point at warp seven." She concluded with, "Karim, Kim, stand fast. Everyone else, dismissed."

Without protest, the others filed out. Once they were gone, the real issue was discussed.

"Is that one guy still in charge of the *Philadelphia*?" started the female Andorian.

“Collins,” corrected Sintina, “Captain Zackary Collins, and yes.” The name was etched into her mind ever since she realized she had been duped by him. She could have stopped him. She had the chance...and she let him go. He played her like a fool.

In the most soothing voice he could muster, bin Nadal stated, “I know what you’re thinking, and we can’t.”

“I know,” she rejoined without missing a beat, “a *Steamrunner* is no match for a *Sovereign*.”

Soma suggested, “Can’t we just request another ship take our place?”

“On what grounds?” Sintina snapped. “Refusing a mission isn’t something taken lightly.”

Karim reminded Soma, “As far as anyone knows, Collins didn’t do any of those things.” He added with a cruel irony, “He didn’t try to kill Admiral Uhura. He didn’t nearly kill me or Commander Cherenkov.” Noticeably, he didn’t bring up Nicole Chase.

Ever the voice of practicality, Kimula asked, “So what now?”

Aurelia thought for a moment. “The only thing we can do. We proceed with the mission...and we don’t let our guard down for damn second.”

\*\*\*\*\*

**Supplemental**  
**IRW *Odaus*, Tal Shiar Advisor’s Office**  
**Running under Cloak in the Outmarches (Romulan Neutral Zone)**

Major Rima settled into his plush chair and activated the monitor on his desk. He began to dictate his report:

“...any active subversion proved to be unnecessary. Commander Hanora’s inexperience has been sufficient. Commander P’nav has successfully dominated her ship in each encounter.

I understand the necessity of bring in Starfleet. However, their presence will cause the situation to become more precarious. I will, of course, do everything in my power to ensure our objectives.

Rima, out.”

The Tal Shiar agent then heavily encrypted the message and sent it to its recipient.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Supplemental IRW *Fothmar*, Medical Center Running under Cloak near the Outmarches**

The ship’s sickbay continued the theme of browns and greens that flowed throughout the rest of the vessel. It was quite large, due to the ship’s 1,500 inhabitants. The activity was average. About a dozen officers and crew were receiving care, mostly engineering injuries.

As Centurion Dulas entered the medical center, he noticed a Reman soldier in one of the bunks.

Dulas hadn’t decided what to think about the Remans. Before the war, they were little more than a slave labor force that hardly anyone ever saw, let alone thought about. The decision to use them as shock troops was a controversial one in the Senate. Some feared using them to defend the Empire might garner sympathy for them in the public’s eye.

He had learned to respect them as fighters, but little else. They enthusiastically went into battle. Dulas didn’t know what motivated them, whether it be courage, stupidity, or simply the desire to serve. Ultimately, it didn’t matter. They served their purpose well during the war.

The *Fothmar*’s tactical officer found who he came to see, “Doctor Dren,” he called out.

Like most everyone on the ship, the doctor wore the dark, irregular checkerboard-type uniform. The medical staff did lack some of the adornments, like the sash and raptor emblem, as they sometimes hampered medical procedures.

Dren waved Dulas into his office. The two often discussed things there. Both sat down.

The doctor correctly assumed the topic on Dulas' mind, "You're worried about this mission of the captain's?"

The tactical officer retorted, "There is no mission. You know that as well as I do." He added, "At least, not from the Admiralty."

Dren was dismissive, "It's not the first time we've been kept out of the loop. You don't know..."

"I contacted one of my peers on another vessel in this sector," admitted Dulas.

The revelation took the doctor by surprise. He leaned in conspiringly after he scanned to see if anyone heard the statement, "P'nav ordered a communications ban."

Dulas ignored the comment and elaborated, "Word is, P'nav is under some type of alien possession."

"No."

"And those so-called fleet exercises," he continued, "have been attempts to capture him."

"That can't be true," responded the doctor.

"Think about it," Dulas persisted, "it would explain his actions. Could you run a covert medical scan on him?"

Dren fidgeted slightly, "I suppose I could. But I've heard of parasites going undetected even with a medical scan."

"I suggest you do it."

He sighed, "Alright, I'll do it. But if I don't find anything, will it alleviate your fears...or make them worse?"

There was no verbal answer.

## CHAPTER 5

**Stardate: 54515.1 (8 July 2377)**

**USS *Independence*, Captain's Quarters**

**En Route to Rally Coordinates in the Neutral Zone**

The passing stars were the only illumination in Sintina's bedroom. She tossed from her right side to her left. She sighed. A few seconds later, she kicked at the sheets and ended up on her back. Her eyes were wide open. She blamed Section 31 for the loss of her last ship and most of her crew. She couldn't shake the feeling they were out to finish the job.

A year ago, she wouldn't have believed such an organization even existed. She remembered dismissing Karim's concerns about them as paranoia. She even questioned his patriotism.

*'Damn Karim,'* she thought to herself. *'If it wasn't for him, I'd be happily ignorant, I'd still have a gunship, and eighty people would still be alive.'* She pushed the blame and guilt out of her thoughts...or rather attempted to.

After several minutes of failing to quiet her mind, the enunciator chimed. She welcomed the distraction. She wasn't getting any sleep anyway. It sounded again. "Hold on," she called out as she wrapped a robe around her. She made it to the door and opened it. Light from the corridor flooded the room. Karim, in full uniform, stood outside.

He didn't wait for a reaction. Bin Nadal informed her, "You'll want to get dressed for this."

"For what?" she asked as her eyes adjusted.

He let himself in. The door closed behind him, "I got a personal communiqué a few minutes ago."

Annoyed, she guessed, "Don't tell me, from Admiral Nechayev and her little group."

Still in good humor, he acknowledged, "Someone who works with Nechayev and Uhura wants to meet you."

"Meet me?" she repeated. "We don't have time to deviate from our course. If we do..."

“We don’t have to.”

“He’s coming here?”

“He’s already waiting for us a few kilometers off to port.”

She huffed, “Why wasn’t I informed of an approaching vessel?”

Karim’s mild grin held, “No one on the bridge knows he’s there.”

\*\*\*\*\*

**Supplemental**  
**IKS *Heh’mup*, Captain’s Chamber**  
**Traveling off *Independence*’s Port Side under Cloak**

Now in her grey and red trimmed duty uniform, Captain Aurelia materialized in a humid, dark, smelly place. Karim was beamed over with her. After she orientated herself, her eyes settled on a fat Klingon. His hair and beard were a dirty gray. He smiled wide, exposing dingy teeth.

The Klingon held his arms out, “Captain Aurelia!” He walked in front of his desk, “Finally, I meet you face to face!”

She was in no mood for pleasantries. “Do we know each other?”

He seemed amused that he had to remind her. “Not really. But as I understand it, you first saw me on a...” He searched his mind for an appropriate phrase, “bad day.”

Her brow crunched up as she remembered, “On Cardassia. You killed the Romulan military governor.”

The Klingon casually defended his actions, “He was annoying, wasn’t he?”

“He wasn’t alive long enough for me to know,” she grimly jibed.

The comment prompted a deep belly laugh from the warrior. “Despite your crew’s actions at Cardassia, I like you, Captain.”

She recalled, “You’re name is Wo’toth?”

He nodded, "Once, I was General Wo'toth."

It all came back to her. Wo'toth was the Klingon military governor of Cardassia immediately after the war. He accused the Romulan governor – Goma – of taking items slated for the Klingons. Goma made some chide remark during a public meeting and the general him stabbed right there in front of everyone. Later, she sent Windsow and Tang in a shuttle to investigate the reports. They discovered the missing equipment on a Federation troop transport.

Aurelia reported it to the Federation governor, Admiral Whatley. He assured her of an investigation. She never heard anything more about it.

About the same time, Wo'toth ordered some birds of prey to attack a Romulan ship, which Wo'toth claimed, had the items.

It turned out, of course, they didn't. Soon after, Chancellor Martok demoted Wo'toth to captain and all the Klingon Defense Forces were pressured off the planet.

She was missing a piece of the puzzle, "What did we have to with your demotion?"

He puffed out his nostrils, "Directly? Nothing. You were merely the trigger. The fault was my own."

Both Karim and Sintina waited for more.

"I was a fool," he sighed. "I now see Admiral Whatley and I were merely pawns in a larger agenda, an agenda that still exists." He grunted in remembrance, "Whatley approached me about a plan to reduce the Romulan's share of the spoils of war. I was no friend of the Romulans, so I was more than eager to play my part."

The *Independence* captain and first officer listened intently. Neither had heard this part of the story before.

"Your officers, however, allowed the Romulans to catch the scent of our plot and it backfired. I was made...how do you say it? An escape-goat." He humorlessly guffawed. "But if they hadn't, I wouldn't have been contacted by that amazing human woman, Uhura. She took a chance with me and showed

me a hidden world.” He grinned devilishly, “I told her everything I knew.” He locked eyes with Aurelia, “and I vowed vengeance against those who used me.”

The significance of Wo'toth's story began to sink in. Sintina reveled in this missing bit of information. “So that's why there was no investigation.” She looked up in an afterthought, “You could've easily blamed me and my crew for your demotion.”

“I did for a time,” he admitted. Then, he leaned down in a light-hearted menace, “Now, I blame you for opening my eyes, Captain.”

The dark humored part of Sintina wanted to apologize for that as well, but she decided against voicing it.

Silence followed for a moment.

Karim chimed in, “You mentioned an ongoing agenda?”

Wo'toth cleared his throat, making a massive sound, and said, “I've been told this Section 31 decided the Romulan Empire would be ripe for...taming...after the war.”

“I've heard the same from the doctor at Deep Space Nine,” confirmed bin Nadal. He added, remembering current events, “Interesting how the Star Empire pulled out of its territorial gains during the war,” commented Karim.

“Indeed,” said Wo'toth, “a testament to our foe's resolve.”

Sintina shook her head. In her opinion, they were giving too much credit to 31.

“Don't misunderstand me,” the Klingon added, “the Romulans should be brought to their knees, but that is the job of the KDF, not some dishonorable *baQa'*.”

Sintina wanted answers, “What does all this have to do with us? Why are you here?”

The burly Klingons didn't keep her in suspense, “I've been in contact with the very Romulan commander you've been ordered to apprehend.”

Aurelia looked up in frustration, put her hands on her hips, and complained, "Goddamnit, I knew this was going to turn into some damn cloak and dagger crap."

This roused another laugh from the Klingon before he continued, "P'nav has come across some information about Section 31's actions inside the Romulan Empire. He won't give it to us, however, until he is..." He cocked his head, "relatively safe."

Sintina just shook her head in irritation.

It took Karim to ask the next question, "What do we have to do?"

Wo'toth walked over to a wall display. The red, triangular grids used by Klingons crisscrossed this sector of space. It zoomed in to a particular star. He pointed at it, "I told him to meet you here, in the Beta Pictorus proto-system."

"That's not going to be easy with the *Philadelphia* and another warbird looking over our shoulder," observed bin Nadal.

The Klingon stood stiffer, "None the less, it must be done."

Aurelia bluntly pointed out, "I fully expect the *Philadelphia* to attack us during this mission."

He nodded, "I know of your experience with that vessel and its captain." His jagged teeth were exposed once more, "We've considered that as well."

## CHAPTER 6

### **Supplemental**

#### ***USS Independence*, Deck One**

#### **En Route to Rally Coordinates in the Neutral Zone**

After spending nearly an hour on the *Heh'mup*, both Aurelia and bin Nadal gave up on the idea of getting anymore sleep. They decided to discuss their predicament in the ready room. The chronometer on the bridge read 03:47 as they exited the lift.

Lieutenant Junior Grade Tang Zian looked back with a mixture of anxiety and relief. He was in charge of gamma shift that night. "Captain, Commander, there you are! We detected an unauthorized use of the transporter and I think their might be a cloaked ship nearby!" He added without a breath, "I tried to contact you and the XO, but you weren't responding and the computer said you weren't detected on the ship. I woke Commander Windslow up and he's conducting a sensor sweep from engineering to search for...you."

Sharing a smirk, Sintina and Karim looked at each other. It was obvious, they wanted to chuckle. Sintina was more effective restraining herself than the Persian.

She addressed the science officer with an approving nod. "Carry on," without further regard to the dumbfounded lieutenant, the two walked toward the ready room. Before the door closed behind them, she added, "Tell me when Windslow finds us."

\*\*\*\*\*

The Latina captain didn't sit right away. Instead she approached the replicator in the aft wall. "Mocha with mint." She silently inquired what Karim wanted.

He sat in the visitor's chair, "I could go for Mango juice, thanks."

Once the drinks materialized, she gave her first officer his and sat down. Her expression visibly changed as her mind refocused on the task at hand. She took sip, set it down, and started somberly, "I don't like doing this, Karim."

"Covert ops can be..." he started.

She cut him off, "I don't think you appreciate my situation. I now have two totally conflicting orders. One from my legitimate authority..." She leaned back and flung her arms out, "and another supposedly from a former Fleet Admiral. But I can't check that. I can't confirm that. And even if I did, it's probably an illegal order." She leaned in and added with an evil sarcasm, "And to top it off, Nechayev's order came via a Klingon with a ...questionable history."

Bin Nadal didn't have an immediate response.

She stood and paced to the window, "I want one chain of command, not two."

After a moment, Karim offered, "That would certainly be easier."

Aurelia cocked her head in agreement.

"That way," he continued, "the hard decisions would be made by someone else. All you'd have to do is carry it out."

She looked over her shoulder ominously, "Tread carefully, Karim." She went on, "I'm in no mood for one of your little lessons." She stepped closer, "You've been drawn into this whole covert war of Nechayev's far too much."

"She didn't start this...war, Sintina. She's trying to..."

"To what?" interrupted Aurelia. "To *save* the Federation? From what?"

He had an answer, "From the worst part of itself."

Sintina crossed her arms and puffed. She stood there for a moment. A few seconds later, she started up again, "You're getting yourself too wrapped up in these people."

"I'm passionate about their cause."

She nodded, "You instantly trust anyone who claims to talk on behalf of Uhura or Nechayev. Do you realize you just exposed one of your contacts to Wo'toth?"

The accusation genuinely concerned the Persian officer, "What?"

Aurelia remembered, "The doctor from DS9, you referred to him."

Bin Nadal leaned back in disappointment. He sighed deeply. It was a cardinal sin in the intelligence agency to expose contacts, regardless of the company you're in. He *was* getting too trusting. He was getting sloppy.

The captain pressed the point, "How do you know we can trust Wo'toth?"

Recovering somewhat, he defended himself with, "A known Nechayev representative told me to expect Wo'toth."

"Not the Admiral herself?"

He shook his head, "No." He added, "But that person has spoken for her before."

Aurelia sat back down and contemplated. She thought hard about her options at this point. She could ignore anything coming from the counter 31 group and play by the rules. Or, she could go along with them. One thing she knew she couldn't do was sit on the fence. Somewhere in her mind, she knew it was too late for the first option. She was becoming more than just a Starfleet officer and she didn't know if she liked it.

Then, memories of the mass funeral on the *Gibraltar* flooded her mind. She read all eighty names aloud. She'd lost people before, but it was different. Those eighty people didn't die in battle. They died because some small group of powerful people identified her as a nuisance.

She never forgot what Nicole Chase, a 31 'sleeper' operative, told her before she knocked out most of the crew...

*"...I want you to know the respect I hold for you. The Midas was responsible for 26 enemy kills during the war. That's rather impressive for an Ambassador-class." She shook her head, "It's a shame, really. You were chosen for this assignment because of your skills in battle. But then, Karim put a seed of doubt in your mind, and he dragged you down with him. **He** was your undoing."*

Sintina looked at Karim, her friend, from under her brow. A very small demon spoke, 'You're responsible for the deaths of 80 people. You're responsible for taking my ship away...for putting me in this situation.' She closed her eyes and pushed the demon away. She knew it wasn't true – at least, he's not the one she wanted to blame.

The decision was made. In fact, it was made some time ago. She just needed to solidify it. She said to Karim with a new resolve, "If we're going to play this game, I don't intend to get burnt."

Bin Nadal nodded soberly, "Understood."

\*\*\*\*\*

**Supplemental**  
**USS *Independence*, Main Bridge**  
**At Rally Coordinates in the Neutral Zone**

Captain Aurelia stood next to Lieutenant Faltyne at the freestanding tactical station directly aft of the command chair. Both watched the warp signature of the *Philadelphia* approach, represented by a Starfleet icon. Another ship, the *Odaus*, neared from another vector. Both would be on them in a few minutes. Sintina couldn't help feeling like she was being surrounded.

"Faltyne," she began, "I want you to watch those ships like a hawk."

The Andorian assumed, "Hawks have good eyesight, I take it."

She grinned slightly, "That's right, Lieutenant."

"The *Odaus* won't be able to activate an RCS thruster without me knowing about it," he offered.

"Watch the *Philly* too," she corrected.

Jonin's antennae flickered, "Ma'am?"

With deadpan features, she elaborated, "Treat both the *Odaus* and the *Philadelphia* as potential hostiles."

He knew about the captain's previous battle with the *Sovereign* class vessel – half the fleet knew – but he didn't know the whole story, or her concern now. "But Captain, what threat would the *Philadelphia* pose now that her former captain is no longer in command? Didn't he commit suicide during your battle?"

"It's not her former captain that I'm worried about," she rejoined. "Do it."

Faltyne knew better than to argue the point. In his three months of being on board, he saw nothing to discourage confidence in his captain. She didn't necessarily want to explain herself, but that was the captain's prerogative. In fact, in the day to day operations of the ship, she was rather efficient. Her relationship with the crew revolved around that efficiency. If she didn't want to get to personally know her crew that was fine with him. *'Now, if I could only get Counselor Soma to leave me alone,'* he joshed to himself. He stated with a professional pride, "I'll keep a close eye on them, Captain."

Satisfied, she returned to the center seat.

It didn't take long for Jonin to report, "The *Philadelphia* has dropped out of warp, bearing 139 mark 162, range: 132 thousand kilometers and closing in on impulse."

The captain stood from her chair and glanced at Karim, who sat at mission ops. There was caution in his eyes. "On screen," she said.

The large, forward display came to life. Without order, Jonin magnified the image. Aurelia chuckled internally a bit when she noticed two, intact nacelle pylons. The *Sovereign* class glided silently toward them. She resisted the impulse to go to yellow alert.

Kimula reported from communications, "They're hailing."

Sintina didn't take her eyes off the image, as though if she did, they would attack. After a moment's hesitation, she responded coldly, "On screen."

## CHAPTER 7

### **Supplemental USS *Independence*, Main Bridge At Rally Coordinates in the Neutral Zone**

The screen afforded each crews a wide shot of their respective bridges.

Karim's eyes fell upon the homicidal captain. He underestimated his ability to control his reaction. Upon seeing Zackary Collins, he unconsciously stood from his station. He shot daggers at the man. Bin Nadal didn't know his name at the time, but the *Philadelphia* captain was able to best him in mortal combat. Karim held his own, but he neglected to account for Collins' underhanded tactics. The only thing that prevented Collins from ending him was an ingenious delaying tactic by Retired Admiral Uhura and Commander Cherenkov showing up.

Captain Collins returned his gaze. He's cold eyes mocked him. Collins grinned...he actually grinned.

His voice was synthetically warm and taunting, "Commander bin Nadal, you look better than the last time I saw you."

The comment boiled Karim's blood. He was referring to the damage inflicted during the fight. Collins cut one of his forearms and smashed a glass table into his face. He could barely contain his rage. It occurred to him, *'The bastard is actually enjoying this.'*

Aurelia stepped forward, "Let's cut the shit, Collins. You know who we work for and we know who you work for."

If anything, he seemed pleased with Aurelia's outburst. He chuckled dryly, "Alright, Captain. Let's drop the pretence then. Despite our past, we have to work together in some fashion."

Sintina looked at the bridge crew of the *Philadelphia*. Collins didn't seem to hold back in front of them. None of them reacted too much to their conversation. She didn't look, but assumed the same couldn't be true of her crew. She concluded his people knew full well the type of ship they were on. The fact that Section 31 could find enough Starfleet officers to willingly man such a ship sent a chill down her spine. She replied with more restraint than she expected, "Our mission is to find the *Fothmar*. The only 'working

together' we have to do is coordinate our search. Beyond that, I see no reason to talk to cold-blooded, murdering, son of a bitch, such as yourself."

"Now, now, Captain," he rejoined smoothly, "such words thrown about haphazardly might cause me to get the wrong impression about your feelings towards me."

His shrugging off of her insult only caused Aurelia to become more annoyed.

That eternally, mocking grin of Collins' grew once more. He crossed his legs as he sat in his chair, "Might I recommend a face-to-face conference here on the *Philadelphia* once the *Odaus* arrives."

The sentence wasn't finished when Aurelia scoffed at the idea. "I wouldn't transport my fish to your ship. We can have a conference from the comfort of our ready rooms."

"What about naval tradition?" weakly persuaded Collins.

"Tradition be damned...just like you."

Collins snickered, "You really must let go of all this aggression, Sintina."

She was about to lash out about his use of her first name when he continued.

"For the sake of our Romulan counterpart, we really should keep up appearances," he said. "How would it look if Commander Hanora reported infighting among Starfleet to her superiors?"

She hated that he had a legitimate point. "Fine," she relented, "but we meet here."

He shrugged, "If you insist." He looked over to a chronometer, "The *Odaus* will be here in 8 minutes. See you then."

The screen reverted to an exterior view of the *Philadelphia*.

Karim, Soma, and Aurelia all shared glances. All thought the same thing: '*Did we just get set up?*'

\*\*\*\*\*

**Supplemental**  
**USS *Independence*, Transporter Room One**  
**At Rally Coordinates in the Neutral Zone**

Kimula pulled back her long, white hair into a tail as she entered the transport room. She acknowledged the operator, made a final review of her uniform and said, "Energize."

Two pillars of light formed. Seconds later, two Romulans, a female and a male materialized. Both wore the newly issued Star Navy uniform. Soma didn't know until recently it was actually a re-issue of a uniform wore by Romulans several centuries ago. Kim had a fleeting thought of how prettier the female, Commander Hanora, would be if she grew her hair out. Then, the Andorian set about to business.

Lieutenant Soma dipped her head slightly, and greeted her, "*Jolan tru, Riov Hanora.*"

The Romulan commander seemed pleasantly surprised at the use of *Rihannsu*. It was her impression that very few outsiders bothered to learn it, even if it was just a sentence. It was a gesture she appreciated. She stepped down off the dais, "I'm afraid I don't know how to return the courtesy in Andorian."

Kimula smiled, "That's quite alright. Welcome to the *Independence*."

"Thank you," she gestured to the man beside her, "This is my second in command, Jaliv."

Jaliv didn't seem nearly as sociable as his superior. He curtsied respectfully, but without warmth.

"Well then," prompted Soma, "if you'll follow me, I'll take you to our conference lounge. Captain Aurelia is there."

"Very well."

\*\*\*\*\*

**Supplemental**  
**USS *Independence*, Transporter Room Two**  
**At Rally Coordinates in the Neutral Zone**

When Captain Collins formed on the transporter pad, he was greeted by the sight of Commander bin Nadal and two armed security officers, Faltyne and Runningfox.

Abreast of the *Philadelphia* captain was a Caitian male. He scanned the room with amusement. He asked in mock ignorance, "Permission to come aboard?"

Karim was having none of it, "Stow the nice guy act. It doesn't suit you." He turned to the transporter operator, "Double check the scan, hidden weapons, bio-explosives, nano-technology, anything."

Collins reached out slowly with his finger to test an assumption. It was confirmed when his finger made contact with a forcefield surrounding the pad. He nodded in approval, "I'm mildly impressed."

"They're clear, sir," the young enlisted woman reported.

The 31 associate waited patiently for bin Nadal to release them. He could see the disappointment in the Persian's face. Finally, he asked, "Well?"

Reluctantly, Karim ordered, "Disengage the field." Nearly instantly, a wall of blue light shimmered and then it ended.

The *Philly* captain looked at, presumably his first officer, "Not very hospitable on this ship, huh H'gaws?"

The menacing-looking, brown furred Caitian growled. It might have been a chuckle.

"Come with us," stated bin Nadal. "We'll escort you to the meeting." He gestured them forward.

H'gaws began to follow, but Collins stopped him. "You still haven't granted us permission to come aboard," he coldly observed.

Karim huffed out his nostrils and crossed his arms. It was his turn to be amused. "You really like this mind game crap, don't you?"

When bin Nadal refused to take the bait, Collins' demeanor turned sour.

Enjoying the fact that he had finally chipped at his façade, Karim continued, "Legend has it, a demon can't enter one's home without permission. Let's see if it's true." He addressed Faltyne, "When Captain Collins is ready to go to the conference lounge, take him and his XO there." Without looking back, Commander bin Nadal exited the transporter room.

\*\*\*\*\*

In the corridor, seconds later, Collins and H'gaws emerged from the room. Faltyne and Runningfox came out behind them, but not too close behind them.

The Indy first officer looked back, "I guess not."

Collins caught up with bin Nadal. He had regained a bit of his cool, controlled behavior. "Well played. It's a shame Uhura and her band of merry men got to you before our group."

Unfazed, Karim kept walking, ensuring the man was directly abreast of him. He rejoined, "I'm afraid my soul isn't for sale."

The *Philly* captain guffawed, "Suit yourself."

The five walked in silence for a few moments.

Collins decided to play one of his cards. He started, "I heard what happened with your girlfriend, Nicole Chase. I bet that stung when..."

Bin Nadal violently slammed the captain into the bulkhead and began choking him with his forearm. "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't kill you right now," growled the XO.

Once again, Collins' smirk returned. He said, "I'll give you two. Look at your security officers."

Karim chanced a glance. Faltyne had his hand on his phaser. Runningfox already pulled his. The junior officer looked shocked. The Andorian was more professional. He seemed to be willing to let the situation play out a bit before acting.

Collins continued in a whisper, "They are witnessing you assault a captain. See how they are looking at you? They see the rage in your eyes, the anger.

There is no anger in my eyes. Who will they side with? Who will they see as the aggressor?"

Beginning to restrain his breathing, Karim eased up.

Zack leaned in, "Do you really think you caught me off guard just now?"

Bin Nadal pushed off the man, "You're a manipulator, Collins. That's all. I'm not impressed."

The wicked grin remained. He gestured ahead, "Shall we continue?"

## CHAPTER 8

### **Supplemental** **USS *Independence*, Conference Lounge** **At Rally Coordinates in the Neutral Zone**

Jonin Faltyne entered just after the captain from the *Philadelphia*. The XO led the group. Behind the security officer was the Caitain commander and then PO Runningfox.

The Andorian noticed the sneer on Captain Aurelia's face as they positioned themselves. Two Romulans already sat at the table. The party from the *Philadelphia* sat without comment. Obviously, there was some bad blood between his commanding officers and those of the *Philly*. He assumed it was residual from their encounter last year. Perhaps the crews still held it against each other.

Faltyne nodded to the petty officer to assume his post near the far exit. That bin Nadal ordered a security attachment at this meeting was not unusual. The fact that they escorted a Starfleet captain and his XO to it was.

Ever since the captain received their orders, things have been out of sorts. Aurelia and bin Nadal seemed much more tense. Odd orders like treating a *Sovereign* as a potential hostile didn't help matters. Then, the incident in the corridor... *'What is going on?'* he asked himself.

Captain Aurelia didn't greet her Starfleet counterpart. Instead, she got down to business, "Where was the *Fothmar's* last location?"

Apparently ignorant of the dynamic in the room, Commander Hanora informed them, "In the Rator System. He warped away on a course of 198 mark 097, but I doubt that will help us. He will take an erratic course to...where ever he's going."

H'gaws asked, "Have you been able to determinmmine this alien's intentions in control of his mind?"

Bin Nadal and Aurelia shared a look of dubiousness.

"No," the Romulan commander stated. She added with genuine regret, "It is possible the entire crew is affected. We may have to destroy the vessel."

Surprisingly, Collins took the words out of Sintina's mouth, "And what if P'nav and his crew are not possessed?"

Hanora was hesitant to answer.

Her sub-commander somberly chimed in, "Then Captain, he is acting without the approval of the Emperor and must be executed."

Sintina puffed, "Let me get this straight. You would turn our mission from apprehending P'nav to killing him. Is that right?"

"That is not what I desire..." began Hanora.

"But we have to face facts, Captain," finished Collins, "It most likely will come to that."

Aurelia crossed her arms, and began to wonder if Hanora and Collins were in on this together. At that point, she knew what it felt like to be in the lion's den.

"Unfortunately, I concur," stated the Romulan commander.

Karim offered, "There still might be away to capture him and his crew."

"If there is," Hanora commented, "I am open to it." She then asked, somewhat sardonically, "Do you have any suggestions?"

The *Indy XO* admitted, "No, not at present, sir."

After an uneasy moment, Captain Collins prompted, "At any rate, we're getting ahead of ourselves. We need to find him first. My question is: do you opt for sticking to a tight or wide formation in our search?"

"I recommend a tight formation, within several thousand kilometers" said Hanora, "otherwise, he could have the opportunity to single us out."

Aurelia leaned in, "I disagree, if we stay just inside each other's long range sensors, we could scan more space and still be relatively safe."

H'gaws suggested, "Could we implement a tachyon field to help us?"

"With only three ships," answered bin Nadal, "it wouldn't be very effective."

"Please believe me," added Hanora, "we have attempted to break through his cloak by every means we know, with no success. P'nav spent several years as an engineer. He knows how to maintain his stealth. However," she handed a hand-held display device to her counterparts, "We have plotted his known locations over the last two weeks. There is a pattern."

The display was a grid of several sectors. Dots represented encounters with the *Fothmar*. There was one thing in common. The general direction of the ship seemed to be from the Romulan Vendor sector into the shared Hyralan sector. A cone appeared showing his most likely destinations. Among them were Algeron, Beta Pictoris, and Miridian.

"A large area of space for three ships to search," said the Caitian first officer.

Collins informed them, "The Border Service has already been alerted. Maybe they could establish a tachyon grid at the border and we could pressure P'nav right into them."

"Despite what many in the regular fleet think," rejoined Sintina, "I doubt they could afford to be taken off their patrol routes and sit and wait for a ship that may or may not pass them."

Without missing a beat, the Philly captain said, "Then we need to find a way to bait him. We're never going to find him just meandering about."

Aurelia's stomach dropped as she reached the natural conclusion. If she were with any other group, she'd do it without hesitation. She believed she saw a piece of the puzzle fall into place. Collins then made the very same suggestion she would have.

"We have to have a wide formation, maybe one fifth of a light year apart. We'd be about an hour away from each other." He looked at Sintina with his nearly lifeless eyes, "We'd be the bait."

"Once he attacked," concluded Hanora, "We'd have to converge quickly to come to the...bait's assistance."

Knowing full well the implications, Karim asked, "What makes you think he'll attack?"

"It's how he operates," replied the Romulan, "He knows he's being hunted. He will attempt to disable us first, then proceed on."

She felt sick. Aurelia didn't want to say the words, but she knew it was their best shot at recovering P'nav. "I agree with Captain Collins."

He took note of her decision with a very subtle smirk. "Alright then."

Once the details of the collaboration were worked out, the meeting broke up.

Zack lingered and addressed Sintina, "Captain, might I have a word alone?"

"I recommend against that, Captain," piped up Karim. He knew Aurelia would want to demonstrate her lack of fear. He hoped Collins wouldn't use that to his favor.

A few seconds passed. Then, Aurelia looked at Faltyne, "Go back to the bridge. Monitor this room visually, but don't listen in."

The Andorian did as he was ordered. He and his subordinate exited. Bin Nadal wasn't so willing to leave.

She reassured him, "I'm a big girl, Karim. I can take care of myself."

Reluctantly, the Persian exited. The door slid shut behind him.

Now alone with the murderer, Aurelia suddenly found herself expecting a fight. She started, "No bullshit, get to your point and get out."

He smiled, "I do like you, Captain. I don't share the animosity you have toward me."

"You blew up my ship," she glared.

"I had nothing to do with that."

She corrected, "Your bosses, Section 31 ordered it."

He was amused once again, "I still can't believe Chase admitted that, way too overconfident, that one." Collins continued, "I know your motivation against us, because of your ship and the crew that were killed. It's revenge. I

understand and respect that. Hell, I don't even blame you. But have you ever considered the motivations of Uhura's group?"

"Ha," she spouted, "I suppose now you're going to try to convince me I'm on the wrong side?"

He wondered a bit around the room. A moment later, he offered, "There's a song from the twentieth century...I forget the artist. But there is a monologue in it. It goes something like this:

I'm a gun for hire, I'm a saint, I'm a liar  
Because there are no facts, no truth, just data to be manipulated  
I can get you any result you'd like  
Because there is no wrong, there is no right  
And I sleep very well at night."

"How wonderfully cold and amoral," Sintina commented.

He said genuinely, "It's honest, Captain. Does Uhura's group offer such brutal honesty? Or do they hide behind words like democracy and freedom?"

Her silence promoted him to continue.

"Do you really think most citizens of the Federation have any concept of what freedom is? Most of them live their lives in a state of sleep walking. They just want to go about leading their happy little lives. They don't really care who's at the helm or how they got there."

Mordantly, she returned with, "A murderer and a philosopher."

"How many people did you kill during the war?"

"That was different."

He laughed aloud, "You know the only difference between you and me? I've accepted what I am, but you're still hiding behind semantics."

Her face flushed with anger. She wasn't a heartless murderer! She was nothing like him! She growled, "Get out."

Collins was content enough with himself to concede. He cocked his head slightly and found Runningfox on the other side of the door. "Lead on," Collins told him.

She was now alone. Fists clinched, Sintina looked out the window. The *Philadelphia* could be seen not far away. Somewhere in the recesses of her mind, she made an admission. She was playing out of her league, in more ways than one. She fought a battle against a tear of frustration, rage, and self-doubt. She lost.

## CHAPTER 9

### **Supplemental** **IRW *Fothmar*, Commander's Office** **Running under Cloak in the Outmarches**

Commander P'nav stared at his desktop computer. He debated whether to take this precaution. Too much was at stake. He trusted Xil and if anything happened to him... The elder Romulan tapped the console. "Begin dictation."

He started, "Sub-Commander Xil, if you are watching this, then I am dead. It is imperative that you complete my mission." He sighed somberly, "Which requires me to take you into my confidence. I have no doubt of your abilities or your resolve, but this information carries with it a heavy burden.

Where shall I begin? I suppose it began, like so many things within the Empire, with Koval. As I'm sure you're aware, Koval was the Chairman of the *Tal'Shiar* and is a sitting member of the Continuing Committee in the Senate. I've had a...working relationship with him for many years.

He came across some information that a very elite group in the Federation, which he once worked with, has started fermenting unrest among the Remans. Koval believes they intend to use the Remans to destabilize the Empire." He darkly grimaced, "Or should I say destabilize it further. As you know, the *Tal'Shiar* is not what it once was. So in an effort to combat this threat, I was tasked to find some allies. It took some time, but it appears I've found some.

I am to meet them in the Beta Pictoris proto-system. You must go there and give my contacts the information I'm attaching to this message. A Starfleet ship named *Independence* is supposed to be at the exact coordinates I've inputted. It's important to be there. Otherwise, two ships would never find each other in all the dense rock, ice, and gases; not to mention the radiation emitting from the hyper-active star. That ship will take you to another location. The crew will know what happened, but they won't know why and, hopefully, they won't detect the Starfleet ship in the proto-system. I am told this whole incident will be blamed on mind-controlling aliens trying to get back to their home in the proto-system."

P'nav leaned in, "I am sorry my friend. Once you do this, you will be an exile. It was decided, I must appear to go rogue so Koval and others can have

deniability. Download this to a secured padd and erase any trace of it from the ship before you leave.”

He concluded with, “Do this for me. Do this for Romulas. *Bed aoi dypshj.*”

“End dictation. Save in encrypted memory.” He leaned back, “Computer, begin continuously monitoring my life signs. If they stop, deliver this message to Sub-Commander Xil.”

The computer confirmed the order.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Supplemental USS *Independence*, Ready Room In the Romulan Neutral Zone**

Once the task force was in formation, Aurelia retreated to her office. The game had begun. Unfortunately, she had no idea how it would play out. Her instincts told her to break formation, and warp the hell away from here. But she couldn’t do that.

She searched for the song Collins quoted, Don Henley’s “Garden of Allah,” and listened to it a few times. It provided no insight...other than confirming he was completely ruthless and lacked any conscience.

Sintina sat down and rested her head in her hands. The moment she did, the enunciator chimed. She groaned while she straightened up, “Come in.”

Jonin Faltyne entered. He had a padd in his hands. The Andorian stated stiffly, “Captain, it is my duty to report an assault early today.”

“Oh?” she said, “That’s Karim’s area, why tell me?”

He offered the padd to her, “Commander bin Nadal perpetrated the assault.”

“On who?”

“Captain Collins.”

“Pifft,” Sintina guffawed, “hell, I thought it was something important.”

His brow crunched up, “Ma’am?”

She rubbed her temples. Jonin deserved something. He was just doing his job. “Lieutenant Faltyne...” in mid-sentence she decided to ease her tone, “Jonin, as I recall, you were held captive by Cardassian insurgents for several months.”

He tightened up at the turn in conversation, “Aye, ma’am.” Something changed in this face for a moment. Memories he didn’t want to revisit came hurtling back.

Sintina regretted bring it up now, but it was too late to go back. She continued, “If you happened to meet one of those Cardassians at a spaceport, what would you do?”

“Forgive me for being blunt, ma’am,” he rejoined with malice in his eyes, “but I’d rip off their neck ridges.”

She stood and walked to him, “I won’t go into details, but let’s say Commander bin Nadal...and others...received severe injuries from Collins.”

Still angry from injustices of the past, he nodded. He looked down at the padd, which Aurelia hadn’t taken, and tapped it a few times. The Andorian again addressed his captain, “It appears my report has been deleted, ma’am.”

She grinned and headed back to her chair, “Thank you, Lieutenant.”

“Ma’am,” Faltyne ventured, “I don’t think I can perform my duties during this mission without more information.”

Sintina’s first reaction was to dress him down, but under the circumstances, she couldn’t blame him. She also didn’t have the wherewithal to explain everything. She hoped pointing him in the right direction might be enough. “All right, search for wanted criminals on New Sydney. That’s your opening into the rabbit hole.”

The Andorian wasn’t entirely sure what the analogy to a rabbit hole was, but he got her meaning. He nodded, “Thank you, Captain.”

\*\*\*\*\*

## **Supplemental**

**IRW *Fothmar*, Security Office**  
**Running under Cloak in the Outmarches**

Doctor Dren walked in with a report in his hand. He laid it on the desk and said, "The ship's medical scanners detected nothing unusual."

Despite the conclusion, Centurion Dulas examined the findings. It didn't matter to him that he wasn't a doctor and couldn't make out most of it. He quickly gave up and finding something Dren overlooked. He said, "So we are where we were."

"And that's not proof that he's not being manipulated," added the doctor.

Dulas pushed back from his desk and said frustrated, "So he's either under alien control or a renegade."

The other Romulan grimaced at the word. "It's possible he really is on an elaborate mission of some sort."

He stood and said indignantly, "We are on no training exercise." Dulas activated a display so Dren could see. It was a tactical map of the area. It was explained, "The *Odaus* has joined with two Starfleet vessels. They are hunting us."

"It would make more sense now," offered the doctor, "Perhaps the Romulan Guard is using this to examine Starfleet tactics. What better way than to have a joint mission to search for one of our ships." He chuckled, "If anything, I feel better now."

Dulas had considered that point. He was still very uneasy. He relented a bit, "We shall see."

## CHAPTER 10

### **Stardate: 54518.7 (9 July 2377)** **USS *Independence*, Security Office** **In the Neutral Zone**

Jonin Faltyne sat down with a cup of iced spice tea from his native Andoria. The blue-skinned chief of security took a long sip and said, "Computer, has the requested information from New Sydney been compiled?"

*"Affirmative."*

He leaned in, "Display results."

The night before Lieutenant Faltyne requested the computer to search for crimes committed on the non-Federation colony from stardate 53650 to 53750. The return was too numerous to scroll through. So he designed a filter algorithm that ran over the night. The computer identified eight crimes that met his criteria.

He examined them one by one. There was an incident in orbit where a civilian freighter, the *Ethiopia*, was destroyed. A series of crimes took place in a private residence: breaking and entering, attempted murder, and another murder of a police officer. Finally, there was a report of a small craft battle in the atmosphere.

Next, he looked up the Starfleet inquiry into the former captain of the *Philadelphia*, a human by the name of Dalton Russell. The inquiry found Russell and a few other crewmembers guilty of all the crimes. He looked on. The evidence provided was shaky at best. The main witness was Commander Zackary Collins, the executive officer.

The Andorian went back to the New Sydney reports. Even though Starfleet attributed the crimes to Russell, the NSPD still considered the cases open.

A survivor, Yanas Tigan... "Wait," Faltyne said to himself, "Tigan. Where do I know that name?" He thought for a moment. His memories went back to his days on *Deep Space Nine*, but he wasn't sure... "Ezri!"

He did a secondary search to confirm his assumption. Yanas Tigan had three children: Janel, Norvo,...and Ezri. Jonin went back to the police report with a

renewed sense of personal interest. Ezri was central in helping him cope with his...imprisonment.

Yanas Tigan was sent to a local hospital after getting stabbed in one of her lungs. She recovered and was questioned by the NSPD. A composite rendering of the assailant was made based off her description.

He scrolled down to see the image.

Immediately, he recognized the face. His stomach churned. Then, his fists clinched.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Supplemental IRW *Fothmar*, Main Bridge Running Under Cloak in the Outmarches**

The mood on the command deck was somber. The silver-haired Commander P'nav walked casually, but with purpose. His hands were neatly behind his back. He addressed the security officer, "Centurion, put your display on the main screen." A second later, a tactical image of the surrounding space appeared for all to see. Two Imperial Romulan icons represented the *Fothmar* and *Odaus*. Two Starfleet symbols were labeled in Romulan.

P'nav stepped closer to read the labels. Under his breath, he read, "The *Phil-a-del-phia*, *Sovereign* class." He paused. *Sovereign* class ships were not to be underestimated. Then, he went on, "and the *Independence*." He sighed with a mixture of relief and understanding. "I see now how this is supposed to be played out."

The senior Romulan spun around and addressed his crew with confidence. "The *Sovereign* is obviously the greater threat. We need not be concerned about the *Steamrunner* class vessel."

With meaning, Dulas asked, "And what of the *Odaus*, Commander?"

He grinned, "With any luck, we'll have no further encounters with Commander Hanora." P'nav continued, "I want to approach under cloak on the dorsal side of the *Sovereign*." He manipulated the image to clearly illustrate his attack plan. "We'll have to strike quickly and precisely. I want to disable their warp drive and be gone before they know what happened."

\*\*\*\*\*

**Supplemental**  
**USS *Independence*, Counselor's Office**  
**In the Neutral Zone**

Kimula was only slightly surprised when the door chime went off. She didn't have an appointment for another 45 minutes. It wasn't uncommon for Sintina or Karim to swing by. "Enter."

She was a bit taken back when another Andorian, Jonin, entered.

He came in with a rush and began to say something when he noticed a few things. He had successfully avoided counseling sessions so far. He didn't quite feel comfortable with Lieutenant Soma, yet. So, he'd never been in Kimula's office before. It was nice and cool in the room. Then, he noticed a large, recirculating waterfall on a far bulkhead. He grimaced at the liquid. It reminded him of how much he hated swimming.

Faltyne refocused, "What do you know about what happened at New Sydney?"

His fellow Andorian crossed her legs on her chair, "You mean with Collins?"

He nodded.

"Why ask me?" she asked. There was a mild playfulness in her voice.

"Because I know how close you, the commander, and captain are." He shifted around and added, "And because if worse comes to worst, I *might* be able to pull rank on you and order you to tell me." His demeanor wasn't solemn.

She grinned, "Well, let's hope it doesn't come to that."

He dropped any pretence of superiority, "Please. I want in."

"Have a seat," she said and gestured. He did and she continued, "It's not my place to 'let you in.' I'm not going to deny the three of us have a close relationship. Karim...Commander bin Nadal and I can say things to Captain Aurelia that would get most officers in the brig." She leaned back and sighed.

"If you really want to know more about what's going on, I think you should talk to Karim."

"Will he tell me?" he rephrased more to the point, "Will he trust me?"

The female Andorian shrugged, "I don't know."

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Supplemental USS *Philadelphia*, Captain's Ready Room In the Neutral Zone**

The bulky Caitian sat opposite of Captain Collins. "I've prrrrogrammed the computer. All I have to do is prrrress my combadge when the time comes."

The dark-haired captain commented, "That will make it easier. Timing will be critical."

"Ggrrrrfft," the Caitain dismissed his concerns, "I've had harrrderrr missions than this." He leaned in, "Have you accounted forrr the *Independence*?"

Collins grinned devilishly, "Of course." He acknowledged, "I'm sure they suspect something, but that won't make any difference. The situation is simply beyond their ability to change." He leaned back and his face showed shallow regret.

"What is it?"

"Oh," he rejoined, "It's just it would've been fun to end my relationship with Aurelia and bin Nadal with more of a...personal touch."

The Caitain's features became more serious...if that was possible...as his meaning sunk in. He observed, "You really do enjoy killing, don't you?"

An unabashed grin returned, "Everyone needs a hobby."

## CHAPTER 11

### **Supplemental** **IRW *Fothmar*, Main Bridge** **Running Under Cloak in the Outmarches**

"What's the status of the target?" asked Commander P'nav as he assumed the center seat.

Dulas reported from his port station, "The *Sovereign* is traveling at low warp. Its shields are down and its weapons are not active."

"Good. We'll be able to disable them with our first volley." He addressed his pilot, "Set our approach vector."

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Supplemental** **USS *Philadelphia*, Main Bridge** **In the Neutral Zone**

Despite the nature of some of their missions, the *Philly* was still a Starfleet vessel – more or less. Collins sat in the command seat while he put the finishing touches on a mission status report. After a moment, he got up and handed the padd to his Saurian communications officer. "Go ahead and transmit this to Admiral Amasov."

The deceptively normal-looking captain didn't quite make it back when the officer at tactical called out, "*D'deridex* decloaking!"

Only a fraction of a second passed before Commander H'gaws stood and pressed his compin. A second later he disappeared in the transporter effect.

Even before his first officer faded, Collins looked over to the tactical chief, "Get ready."

At the same moment, the ship rocked from torpedo impacts.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Supplemental** **USS *Independence*, Executive Officer's Office**

## In the Neutral Zone

"Lieutenant Faltyne," said bin Nadal by way of greeting, "What can I do for you?"

The Andorian was comfortable here, but he was still considered new. He didn't know if he had earned the trust he solicited. At this point, it didn't matter. He was going to find out one way or the other. "Sir," he began, "I found out what Captain Collins did at New Sydney. I saw a description from a victim. It was Collins...but you already know that, don't you, Sir?"

Karim's light-heartedness faded. He considered his next words carefully, "What do you want from me, Lieutenant?"

Jonin started saying what he been planning to say for the last several minutes, "Sir, I have no delusions about the more...shady aspects of Starfleet. In most cases, I'm sure it's justified. But I want to know why this man was allowed to go free."

The Persian interlaced his fingers and placed them on his desk. He thought for a moment. A part of him didn't want to shake his...loyalty...his beliefs about the type of world he lived in. Bin Nadal noted the change in Sintina since she became aware of these dark secrets. With a sigh, he said, "It's a complicated situation."

"Who's protecting him?" asked Faltyne a bit more forcefully, but still well within professional limits.

Karim was honest, if not giving a full disclosure. He had learned his lesson with Wo'toth. "That's part of the problem. We don't know exactly."

Insistent, the security chief asked, "Who is 'we?'"

The question sent chills down Karim's spine. He made a mental note to research Faltyne's history more thoroughly in the near future. *'Could he be working with them?'* Bin Nadal sat straighter, "I'm not prepared to answer that question, Lieutenant."

The Andorian began to protest, "Sir..."

Red alert klaxons stopped him in mid-sentence. It was followed with Aurelia's voice, *"Senior officers to the bridge."*

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Supplemental USS *Independence*, Main Bridge In the Neutral Zone**

Bin Nadal and Faltayne felt the distinctive shift into subspace while they exited the lift to the bridge.

Aurelia didn't waste time briefing them, "The *Philly* is under attack." She looked to Ensign Weston at the helm, "ETA?"

The young ensign made one-eye contact, "Fifty-one minutes."

For an instant, she wondered if Weston had ever flown in real combat before. She didn't think so. At any rate, now was no time to worry about it. Sintina said, "Bridge to Engineering."

*"This is Windslow, ma'am."*

"I need more speed, Commander."

*"I can get it up to nine point eight four, but that's it, Captain."*

"I'll take it." She prompted Weston for an update.

He checked, "Forty-two minutes, Captain."

Karim chimed in, "We should've kept a tighter formation. It'll be over in forty minutes."

There was a crisp harshness to her voice, "Too late to bitch, now." She turned aft, "Jonin, long range scans. I want to know what's going on."

*"Aye."*

"The *Odaus* is also en route," the security officer added. A second later, a tactical overlay appeared on the main viewer. Faltayne began to relay sensor information, "The *Philadelphia* has been forced out of warp. It looks like the *Fothmar* isn't following up. She's recloaked." He looked up with a bit of relief, "It was just a hit and run."

“Open a channel to the *Philly*,” ordered Aurelia.

Collins responded a moment later. She was pleased to see him a bit shaken.

“Captain Aurelia,” he said, “I’m afraid our response time wasn’t that great. He caught us with our shields down.”

“What’s your status?”

He glanced down, “Our plasma transfer conduits are offline. We’re still not sure how bad the...”

The transmission fizzled out.

“What happened?” Aurelia demanded to anyone with an answer.

Both the tactical and science stations received the news. The Andorian hesitated less in reporting it than the Asian.

“She’s gone,” he vacantly said.

A silence permeated the bridge a moment.

Faltyne elaborated, “There was a matter/anti-matter explosion at their location.”

“The damage must have destabilized their core,” surmised Karim.

Aurelia looked up. There was no satisfaction in her eyes, “Scan again. Maybe they ejected it before...” There was no need to finish the sentence.

Faltyne buckled down and did as he was ordered, “I’m reading some debris. It looks like most of it was vaporized.”

“Ma’am,” offered Science Officer Tang, “we have to get closer to be sure there are no survivors.”

“Survivors from a warp core breach?” grimly jibed Weston.

Karim stated, "It's been know to happen," referencing the former *Independence*. Most of the command crew and many others survived, but only because they were in a nacelle.

Everyone else let the comment slide.

An indicator beeped at the comm. station. Soma reported, "Ma'am, the *Odaus* is hailing."

Still in a dazed from recent events, she nodded, "On screen."

Commander Hanora didn't seem very grief stricken. She started with, "Captain, we've been able to track the course the *Fothmar* took. If we stay in close enough, we'll be able to track him as long as he stays at warp, but we must proceed now!"

Before Sintina responded, bin Nadal ordered to mute the communication. Kimula did.

He whispered to Aurelia, "Remember our mission."

She spat back in a hushed voice, "He just killed a ship load of people. Let's track his ass down and..."

"You're losing perspective, Tina," he continued to delay her wrath, "Remember who was on that ship, he just did us a favor."

"A favor? What about the people on that ship that had nothing to do with 31? What about them, Karim? Did they deserve to die?"

The retort took the wind out of his sails. He continued with more reservation, "We have to get to P'nav. We know where his going. We have to..."

"We don't have to do shit!" she snapped for all to hear. Everyone stopped their duties for a split second before remembering they had to look like they didn't hear it.

She noticed the glances. She forced herself to control her breathing. Karim was right. She had to think about the big picture here. Besides, it was fairly obvious to any starship veteran; the enemy commander had no intention of destroying the vessel. Finally, she realized this was an opportunity to ditch the *Odaus*.

With a long, deep sigh, she reasserted herself. She gestured Kimula to demute. Aurelia said to her counterpart, "Proceed without us. We're obligated to search for survivors from the *Philadelphia*."

Hanora nodded reverently, "I understand."

"Good hunting," Sintina offered.

The Romulan commander acknowledged and closed the channel.

## CHAPTER 12

### **Supplemental** **IRW *Fothmar*, Main Bridge** **Running Under Cloak in the Outmarches**

"I wanted them disabled, only!" The normally very mild commander yelled to his tactical officer.

Dulas came back with, "The torpedoes hit their mark exactly, Sir." He searched his mind for an explanation. P'nav was a forgiving man, but not that forgiving. "Perhaps our intelligence of the layout of those ships is inaccurate."

"*Fvadt*," P'nav cursed. "This will complicate things." His eyes fell on his tactical officer. The younger Romulan seemed genuinely concerned for his immediate future. The commander let a tense moment exist. It was good for the centurion. "Very well. Evade the *Odaus*, and then return to our non-direct course."

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Supplemental** **USS *Independence*, Captain's Ready Room** **In the Neutral Zone**

"Right now, I really don't care what information that man has," Sintina griped. "This has gotten way out of hand."

Karim knew the best thing to do right now was agree, so he did.

She continued, "Accident or not, a ship load of scum or not, P'nav needs to answer for what he's done."

"I don't know that he will," ventured the first officer, "I was under the impression Nechayev was going to protect him in exchange for..."

"I'm tired of this shit, Karim. I really am. Do you realize how much outrage the destruction of the *Philly* is causing back home? How much pressure there is for me to get him?" complained Aurelia. She finally sat after pacing, "I never wanted to get sucked into this."

A wave of guilt washed over bin Nadal. He understood the implication, even if it went unsaid.

A quiet moment later Windslow's voice could be heard in the room, "*Captain, we've completed all the scans we could.*"

"And?"

The hesitation preempted his verbal answer, "*No life signs.*"

She took a second before responding, "Understood. Anything else?"

*"It will take awhile to review all the data. I'll have a full report in a few hours."*

"Alright, Aurelia out." She looked up under her brow, "Set a course for Beta Pictoris. It's time to meet this Commander P'nav."

He nodded, "I suggest we take an indirect course, so the *Odaus...*"

"No," stated Aurelia with finality, "Take a direct course."

Karim considered objecting. But he fully understood how thin Sintina's patience was stretched. If he pushed her, she'd push back...and start doing things out of spite. He couldn't stop a disapproving grimace, however. With a slight bow, he exited.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Supplemental IRW *Fothmar*, Commander's Suite Running Under Cloak in the Outmarches**

As the door slid shut behind him, the Romulan commander ordered, as if out of habit, "Secure these quarters."

A confirmation tone sounded.

P'nav's *set'leth*, a pet resembling an unnaturally muscular Terran house cat, greeted him with a deep purr. The elder man crossed the room and laid down on a couch. One hand fell on his forehead, the other stroked the *set'leth*, whom jumped on his stomach the moment he went down. It was obviously their routine.

“Play Thue’s fourth symphony,” he said. A second later, very soothing music began.

A few minutes later, the *set’leth* could prompt his master to pet him no more. P’nav was asleep.

He dreamt of powerful hands around his throat.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Supplemental**  
**IRW *Fothmar*, Sub-Commander’s Office**  
**Running Under Cloak in the Outmarches**

Xil was working late, as he always did. He was well known to the crew to be a compulsive administrator.

While reviewing the latest diagnostic reports, a message came in from the commander.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Supplemental**  
**IRW *Fothmar*, Outside the Commander’s Suite**  
**Running Under Cloak in the Outmarches**

It was the third time Sub-Commander Xil pressed the enunciator. He was nearly in a frenzy. He had enough waiting, “Computer, unlock Commander P’nav’s quarters. Security code...”

The entrance slid open. P’nav, looking rather irritated, blocked the gap.

Xil felt intense relief, “Commander, are you alright?”

“Of course, forgive me if I seem out of sorts. My sub-commander felt it necessary to wake me in the middle of the night.”

The light jibe served to calm Xil, “I was concerned. I received this message and I wanted to make sure you were alright.” He held up a padd with the information.

"I'm sorry, I send so many messages in the course of the day, which one are you referring to?"

His mind still racing, Xil handed over the padd, "This one, Sir. The one explaining..."

As the elder Romulan examined the data, the sub-commander got an uneasy feeling. It was a simple enough thing at first, P'nav's *set'leth*, HHirl, wasn't trying to run out. That damn animal took every opportunity to escape. There was a running joke about it on the ship.

Xil cursed himself when his mind caught up. He took a step back and said, "Computer, locate Commander P'nav using his bio-signature."

The old Romulan looked up at him with a malevolent glare.

*"Commander P'nav's bio-signature is not located on the ship."*

Before his eyes, P'nav morphed into a large, primitive, lizard-like humanoid. The creature had razor sharp claws. Xil didn't have time to yell. The reptile grabbed his head like a melon and threw him inside the suite. The doors slid shut.

Muffled screams could be heard seconds later. They didn't last long.

## CHAPTER 13

Karim took his uniform jacket off as he entered his quarters. He plopped down in a chair and allowed some tensions of the day to fade. It didn't take long, however, before his mind became active again.

He loved the intrigue he found himself in. It was exiting. He was fighting the good fight against forces that wish to undermine the Federation Constitution. It was a noble effort, he thought.

Sintina didn't share his enthusiasm. She never really paid attention to politics. Despite some of her reckless actions, she did value order. She needed it.

He knew, on some level, she blamed him for throwing her life into chaos. He said to no one, "Maybe I'm the reckless one."

He activated Fednet and searched for newscasts mentioning the *Philadelphia* in the last day. There were several hours worth of coverage. It was a big story. He picked one.

*"This incident is the first time a Romulan ship has been responsible for the destruction of a Starfleet ship since the Norkan Campaign.*

*The Federation Council and several planetary governments have condemned the attack. The Imperial Senate has issued a statement claiming the vessel is commanded by a mentally unstable captain and possibly under alien influence. This has not been confirmed by any other source.*

*There is already one Starfleet vessel searching for the Warbird. It is likely additional ships will be added to the search. Since the aggressor is thought to be in the Neutral Zone, a fleet build up in the area might make the situation even more dangerous than it already is."*

The XO turned the display off. He cursed in Farsi.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Supplemental**  
**IRW *Fothmar*, Main Bridge**  
**Running Under Cloak in the Neutral Zone**

P'nav strode onto the command deck. Immediately he began, "Centurion Dulas, I want a ship wide lock down of all non-essential personnel."

"Sir?"

"Sub-Commander Xil attacked me in my quarters. I was forced to vaporize him."

The revelation nearly caused the security chief to stumble, "Why, sir? What happened?"

"Isn't it obvious? Xil was a *Tal Shiar* operative. He found out about my mission and tried to stop me."

"What?" Dulas was bewildered for a moment, before finding his courage, "Sir, I must demand you tell us what this is all about, now."

"Quite right, Centurion," nodded P'nav, "Since you are now acting first officer I must take you into my confidence. Join me in the wardroom."

A moment later, the two were alone in the adjacent room.

P'nav sat down and offered Dulas a chair.

"I prefer to stand, sir."

P'nav noticed the security chief rested his hand on his disruptor. He started, "Do you remember how the Empire entered the Dominion War?"

"Of course, Senator Vreenak's shuttle was destroyed by the Dominion after he got evidence they were planning to invade Romulus."

"Yes, that's what everyone believes, but it's not true," calmly stated the elder Romulan. He continued after a pause, "I learned from Koval that the *Tal Shiar* knew the evidence was fabricated."

Still not off his guard, Dulas asked, "Fabricated by who?"

P'nav rapped his fingers on the table before rejoining, "By the *Tal Shiar* itself. They faked the evidence and blew up the senator's shuttle."

Dulas was stunned. "But why?" he demanded.

The Commander stood and began to pace, "To lie us into a war they wanted, they needed." He went on, "Do you know how many people in the *Tal Shair* wanted revenge for their failure to destroy the Founder homeworld?" He stepped closer to Dulas, "They lied to the Romulan people to get their way."

"I...I find that hard to believe," he stumbled. "The Guard lost over a million people during the war...over half our fleet was destroyed. What monsters would...could..." he words faded.

"My mission," continued P'nav, "is to find other military leaders willing to do what needs to be done to right that wrong; to punish our leaders for their deception." He placed a hand on the centurion's shoulder, "If I should die, you must do what you can. Find Commanders willing to listen. I suggest you start with Suran, Toreth, or Donatra, they have no love for the *Tal Shiar*."

Unwilling to accept what his commander told him, Dulas pleaded, "Sir, is there any evidence of this?"

He produced a data device, "This is the original, unedited *Tal Shair* report of the explosion. As a show of how much faith I have in you, you keep that. Show others. This information must get out."

"I...will review if immediately, sir."

The aged Romulan nodded, "Good, good." He added, "Now, take us to the Beta Pictoris system. We will hide there until there is less pressure on us."

"Yes, sir." The centurion exited.

Once alone, P'nav grinned. Things were going even better than he originally planned.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Supplemental USS *Independence*, Main Bridge Entering the Beta Pictoris Proto-System**

On the main viewer, Beta Pictoris resembled a mini-spiral galaxy. Instead of super massive black hole in the center of it, there was a newly formed star.

The dust and stellar gasses hadn't yet coalesced into anything bigger than large asteroids.

"Weston," said Aurelia once they dropped out of warp, "Take us to these coordinates." She punched in some data on his console. "Enter the cloud at one-third impulse." She knew, with a reminder from Windslow, the impulse manifolds would overheat if they went any faster. She added, "Deflectors to maximum."

"Aye, ma'am," confirmed the young ensign.

The captain went over to mission ops, where Karim sat. She leaned in close, "I hope this son of a bitch is worth it." Without giving him time to respond, she walked away and assumed the center seat.

## CHAPTER 14

### **Supplemental USS *Independence*, Main Bridge Holding Station inside the Beta Pictoris Proto-System**

The chronometer display changed to 18:34:07...18:34:08...

There was uneasy quiet on the bridge. Most people were wondering what they were doing here, just sitting in the middle of a cloud of gas, dust, and ice. Only Kimula, bin Nadal and Aurelia knew their reasoning.

Finally, Faltyne offered, "Should I run a scan, Captain?"

"No," responded Karim out of turn.

Sintina let her irritation pass.

The silence continued.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Supplemental IRW *Odaus*, Main Bridge Patrolling the Outmarches**

Centurion Chruja cursed, "*Hnaev!*"

Commander Hanora strode up beside him, "I take it you have something to report?"

"I had them, Commander," he began. "They were traveling at warp seven and then..." The centurion took a breath and straightened up, "I'm sorry, Commander. I have failed you."

Hanora's demeanor became one of frustration, not at her tactical officer, but at the situation as a whole. "Commander P'nav has outwitted us at every turn!" She festered for a moment and then inquired, "Are there any onboard that served under P'nav? Anyone that might still be loyal to him?"

He whispered under his breath, "You suspect a saboteur?"

"Just get me that information, Centurion."

He nodded, "Of course, sir. I'll compile it immediately."

"Where is the *Independence*?" she asked.

"Off our scopes, Commander," he quickly added, "but their last known course took them to the Beta Pictoris star."

"Take us there."

\*\*\*\*\*

**Supplemental**  
**IRW *Fothmar*, Commander's Office**  
**Entering the Beta Pictoris Proto-System**

Dulas still overwhelmed at the revelations from his commander, said, "I've reviewed the report. I can hardly believe it. All those lives lost...all because of a lie."

"I have an admission," started P'nav, "There is another reason for us coming to this system." The elder Romulan got up from his seat, "Soon, I will transport to another ship in the cloud. You are to make no scans. I should be back within an hour."

"Are you sure you will be alright, sir?"

"Quite sure."

\*\*\*\*\*

**Supplemental**  
**USS *Independence*, Main Engineering**  
**Holding Station inside the Beta Pictoris Proto-System**

"Tang," called Windslow, "Come here. What do you make of this?"

They were reviewing scans taken when the Philadelphia was destroyed. The results were displayed on a wall-mounted screen.

"Look at that spike in quantum energy," continued Windslow.

Zian examined it for a moment, "Are the Romulans using quantum torpedoes?"

"No, the *Fothmar* was firing their standard photons."

"Was it a secondary explosion from the *Philly*?"

The former captain shook his head, "The time index is too early for any secondary explosions."

Perplexed, the lieutenant asked, "Then where did that energy come from?"

Windslow reveled in solving riddles, "I'm not sure, but I'm going to find out."

\*\*\*\*\*

**Supplemental**  
**USS *Independence*, Main Bridge**  
**Holding Station inside the Beta Pictoris Proto-System**

The Andorian at communications looked forward, "Ma'am, I'm getting that message we've been waiting for."

Sintina shot up, "Finally." She walked aft. Karim was right behind her. "I'll take it in my ready room."

\*\*\*\*\*

The door slid shut once bin Nadal entered. They both sat. She activated her terminal. The face of an old Romulan appeared on the screen.

He began, "Federation captain, I am Commander P'nav. I'm under the impression you are to assist me."

Sintina confirmed coldly, "I've been..." She was going to say ordered, but there was no order. "...instructed to take you to Qualor II."

"Very well. Please transmit transporter coordinates and I'll transfer over with no further delay."

“Commander,” started Aurelia in an accusing tone, “What was your intent when you attacked the *Philadelphia*?”

The elder Romulan hung his head for a second, “Forgive me Captain, for that accident. I only wanted to disable her; not destroy her.”

His explanation didn’t serve to put Sintina at ease.

It took bin Nadal a moment later to put the mission back on course, “Commander P’nav, I’m transmitting those coordinates now.”

“Thank you. I’ll be there in a moment.”

The screen reverted to a Starfleet emblem.

She looked at Karim with steel in her eyes, “I want that man under guard at all times, Commander.”

Karim nodded, “I’ll do it personally.”

## CHAPTER 15

### **Supplemental**

#### **USS *Independence*, Unused Crew Quarters**

#### **Holding Station inside the Beta Pictoris Proto-System**

A green light grew in intensity. When it was gone, a Romulan remained.

The Persian officer raised his hand, "Welcome to the *Independence*, Commander P'nav." The Romulan took his hand. Karim continued, "Due to the nature of our mission, I'm afraid you'll have to remain in these quarters for the duration of our journey."

P'nav curtsied, "Of course."

Bin Nadal continued, "We'll be meeting Admiral Nechayev in a field of mothballed starships in orbit of Qualor II. After that..."

The Romulan interrupted "Admiral Nechayev. That's all I needed to know." Suddenly, P'nav shape-shifted into H'gaws, the *Philly's* first officer.

Karim had enough time to say, "A Founder!"

The large Caitian grinned with a row of razor sharp teeth, "Chameloid, actually." The massive feline back handed the human with devastating effect.

Bin Nadal spun back into a bulkhead with enough force to instantly render him unconscious.

The mock Caitian reverted back into the form of P'nav. He activated a recall transport.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Supplemental**

#### **IRW *Fothmar*, Main Bridge**

#### **Holding Station inside the Beta Pictoris Proto-System**

P'nav walked onto the command deck with a purpose. He barked, "Starfleet has discovered us. Scan for nearby ships."

“Confirmed,” said Dulas, “there is a *Steamrunner* class starship holding station at 126 mark 039. Its shields and weapons are inactive. It has navigational deflectors up only.”

The Romulan commander ordered, “Charge disruptors, ready torpedoes. Target their warp core. Prepare to decloak.”

\*\*\*\*\*

**Supplemental**  
**USS *Independence*, Main Bridge**  
**Holding Station inside the Beta Pictoris Proto-System**

Again Sintina glanced at the time. P’nav should’ve beamed over by now. “Aurelia to bin Nadal.”

There was no response.

She tried again, “Aurelia to bin Nadal, respond.”

Still nothing.

She looked over to Faltyne, “Lieutenant track down bin Nadal for me.”

“Aye, ma’am.” He said. Before he got too far, however, an alarm sounded at his station. He regarded his captain with wide eyes, “*D’deridex* decloaking.”

Aurelia seemed more confused than concerned, “Why would he want to...”

“Incoming!” came from tactical.

“Shields!”

The ship thundered. There were two impacts.

Faltyne reported without prompting, “We raised them in time. Dorsal shields down to 43 percent.”

“Return fire, all weapons. Target their forward tubes,” snapped Aurelia.

“Dorsal phasers firing,” said the Andorian, “Direct hit to their forward shields.”

The captain didn't wait to hear all the report. She ordered, "Helm, full impulse. Get us on their ventral side."

"Aye, sir," Weston said. He winced for a moment at his use of the "improper" salutation. Luckily, she was too busy to care.

A call came up from engineering, "*Captain, it's too thick here to go to full impulse.*"

Her response was quick, "Our best bet is to out maneuver them, damn it."

*"I'll give you the best I can,"* rejoined Windslow.

"Brace for a disruptor volley," advised the Andorian at tactical.

A series of rumbles followed.

"Ventral shields down to 76 percent."

Aurelia put the tactical display on the main viewer. They were now facing the warbird's bottom side. "Target their core. All forward tubes, fire!"

The results were satisfying. Three of the four torpedoes hit their mark. Though, the *Independence* was armed only with photon torpedoes, the enemy's shields were down by over sixty percent.

The *Fothmar* began to roll to port.

"Keep us on their ventral side!" commanded Aurelia.

Disruptor beams and bursts began raining from the *D'deridex*. The *Indy's* forward shields were being pelted.

"Forward shields are failing," came from tactical.

"Damn," cursed Aurelia. "Come about, continuous phaser fire. Line us up to use our aft tubes."

"Their forward weapons have line of sight."

"Weston, evasive: beta one."

“Beta one, aye.”

The whole bridge tipped forward as the barrage of fire hit the aft ventral side of the ship. Klaxon after klaxon went off. Aurelia was barely able to catch herself before she fell into the forward stations.

Over the noise, the captain yelled, “Report.”

Faltyne began the grim news, “Aft shields gone. Aft tube two disabled.”

“I think we lost our port impulse engine,” said Weston as he scrambled over his controls.

Sintina’s hair was a mess. She leaned over Weston, “Try to keep our starboard side facing them.” She looked back to Faltyne, “Fire aft tube one as we maneuver.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he hesitantly added, “Captain, I think a withdraw is in order.”

“Normally, I’d agree,” she was surprised to find herself saying, “but not this time.” She opened a channel from the arm rest of the center seat, “If you’re out there, now would be a good time, Captain.”

A moment later, a rough, heavy voice came over the comm., “*Not exactly the battle I was expecting, but I’ll take it.*”

Mild relief swept over Faltyne as he reported, “*K’vort* cruiser decloaking. They’re engaging the *Fothmar*.”

Aurelia couldn’t stop a smirk, “Fire all starboard phasers.”

“The *K’vort* is draining their aft shields. Their forward shields are down to fifty percent.”

The *Fothmar* was fighting on two fronts. Despite being outnumbered, the large Romulan vessel could still hold its own. Aurelia realized playing defensively might not work.

Even though the *Indy* had minimal forward shielding, Aurelia decided to risk it. “Line up forward tubes and fire!”

The disruptor fire was relentless. Once the *Indy* turned enough, the impacts began to slam into the hull. One blast demolished the starboard most launcher.

“Torpedoes away,” relayed the Andorian. A moment later, he reported, “The *Fothmar*’s forward shields are down and several of their weapons are offline.”

She asked, “How’s the *Heh,mup* doing?”

The Andorian assumed she meant the *K’vort*. “Their shields are holding.”

“Well don’t stop now,” pressed Aurelia, “Fire at will.”

After only a few more shots, Faltynne informed them, “The *Fothmar* is moving off. They’re cloaking.”

“Don’t let them get away!” ordered the captain.

The tactical officer did his best, but was disappointed. “I’m sorry, ma’am. It’s hard enough to track a normal ship in this mess; let alone one with a cloak.”

Sintina huffed. She paced for a minute. Adrenaline still pulsed through her veins. Slowly, she calmed down. Finally, she said to no one in particular, “What the hell was that all about?” There was no immediate answer. Then, she said, “Karim.”

## CHAPTER 16

### **Supplemental** **USS *Independence*, Unused Crew Quarters** **Holding Station inside the Beta Pictoris Proto-System**

Doctor Zo’Kama rushed to bin Nadal’s side as she entered. Her medical tricorder was out within a blink. He had a severe concussion. She readied a hypo and injected him.

Slowly his eyes opened. He blinked several times. Absently, he said, “Doctor, where am I?”

The reptilian cocked her head, “You’re in a crew’s quarters.”

He repeated with glazed eyes, “Where am I?”

He got hit hard. It would take a moment for him to recover. She simply stated, “Just lay back and relax for a while.”

“Ok.”

The Arkonian activated her compin, “Doctor to bridge.”

*“Aurelia here.”*

“He’s here,” reported Zo’Kama. “He’ll be fine. I’m going to have him transported to sickbay.”

*“Understood.”*

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Supplemental** **USS *Independence*, Sickbay** **Holding Station inside the Beta Pictoris Proto-System**

About an hour later, Sintina came to visit him. Karim had been kicking himself for being so foolish for the better part of that time.

She went to his bedside. “Zo’Kama tells me you took one hell of a hit.”

He was too frazzled for small talk, "They know. I gave them her name and now they know."

"What happened?"

"It was a set up," he continued, "it was all a set up to get Admiral Nechayev's name. P'nav was a Chameloid. He...it...was probably working for Section 31."

Dejected, Sintina sat on a nearby stool. "Goddamn spy shit."

"We have to warn her," Karim persisted.

She began to nod unenthusiastically, "All right. I'll tell Wo'toth before he leaves. He'll be able to get the message to her."

He shook his head, "I'm such an idiot."

She got up and offered, "Look on the bright side. We won the battle." The observation didn't have the desired effect. She smirked weakly and headed for the exit.

He said to himself grimly, "No. No, we didn't."

\*\*\*\*\*

**Supplemental**  
**USS *Independence*, Conference Lounge**  
**Just outside of the Beta Pictoris Proto-System**

The *Odaus* rendezvoused with them a few minutes ago. Commander Hanora and her first officer joined the senior staff for a partial debriefing.

"I must say," began Hanora purposely, "I'm amazed you were able to find the *Fothmar* in the debris disk at all."

The best cover story Sintina could come up with was, "I had a hunch."

"A hunch," repeated Hanora. She let the comment linger for a moment before moving on, "Well regardless, your ship is in no condition to continue the search." She and Jaliv stood, "On behalf of the Romulan Star Empire, I thank you for the efforts. Starfleet has sacrificed much on this joint mission. I mourn for your losses."

Everyone else went to their feet as well.

Aurelia said, "Thank you, Commander. I wish this little...venture was more productive."

"As do I."

The *Independence* captain asked, "What will you do now?"

Hanora considered the question. "He will eventually be tracked down and punished," she added with menace, "as those who support him will be."

"Good luck with your pursuit," Aurelia said genuinely.

The Romulans were escorted out a moment later, leaving the *Indy's* senior staff behind.

Aurelia opened up with, "Where do we stand?"

"I recommend we make a course for Starbase 23," said Windslow. "Our port impulse engine is shot, along with dozens of secondary systems. It'll take months to repair without help."

"Two torpedo launchers are out," added Faltyne, "and three phaser arrays."

"I have a bit of good news," commented the doctor, "There were only moderate injuries to seven crewmembers."

Aurelia resigned herself, "Alright, Starbase 23 it is. Set a course and engage at warp five. If there isn't anything else, dismissed."

Most people began to file out. Windslow and Tang stood fast. The chief engineer piped up, "Captain, we'd like to have a word with you and Commander bin Nadal."

The two stopped.

Sintina was tired, but she sighed and said, "Sure, what is it."

Ethan went up to the display and brought up some scan results. He explained, "When we were working on the report concerning the *Philadelphia's* destruction, we came across some odd readings."

He had their attention. So he continued, "There was an unexplained change in the quantum signature of the nearby space."

He waited for a reaction. There was none.

The science officer elaborated, "You see, everything in the universe has a specific quantum signature. There is no known way to change it."

"So how'd it change?" asked Karim.

"We searched for anything that might explain it," said Windslow. "In theory, the only thing that could do it is a molecular phase inverter."

He got blank stares again.

Tang explained, "In theory, a molecular phase inverter can change the quantum signature of matter and energy in this universe and shift it out of phase. The result is anything out of phase with the rest of universe is invisible."

"Not only that," added Windslow, "but if it's out of phase, matter and energy from our universe wouldn't have any affect on it."

"Soo," began Aurelia, "What are you saying?"

"We think the *Philadelphia* has some type of interphasic cloaking device," said Windslow.

"It wasn't destroyed at all," inserted Tang. "It phased slightly out of our universe."

Karim commented, "I've remember hearing something about that around five years ago." He searched his mind, "Um, some admiral was accused of developing it on an *Oberth* class ship."

"Wouldn't that violate the Treaty of Algeron?" asked Tang.

The Persian mused darkly, "I don't think these people really care."

"What people?" he rejoined.

"Nevermind that, Lieutenant," said Aurelia. "Thank you for bringing this to our attention. Dismissed."

Reluctantly, Tang left. Windslow went up to Aurelia, "Captain, it's a well known secret there is something...odd about some of the things we do on this ship. Most ignore it, but I have a...personal interest in what is going on this time. Remember how Admiral Ross promised me a special assignment if I kept my mouth shut about...about what I did?"

She nodded, "I remember. Maybe we can talk about it later. For now...good work."

The compliment took him back. "Thank you, Captain." He decided not to press the issue and exited.

Karim shared an ominous look with Sintina.

She said, "I knew that son of a bitch wouldn't go away that easy."

\*\*\*\*\*

**Stardate: 54521.3 (10 July 2377)**  
**USS *Independence*, Captain's Ready Room**  
**En Route to Starbase 23**

"Captain," said Kimula's voice, *"you have an incoming message on a coded channel."*

She put down the maintenance report, "Fine." She activated the computer. A blonde-haired human stared back at her. Her face was calmer than Sintina would expect her to be. "Admiral Nechayev," she said by way of greeting.

"Captain Aurelia," she began, "I've been informed of a problem with our last mission."

More than a bit perturbed, she responded spitefully, "Yes sir, it turns out your informant was a spy for Section 31. At least, that's what we suspect."

"The real P'nav is obviously dead." The admiral went on, "The fact that 31 has my name is to be expected. It was only a matter of time." She added, almost motherly, "Don't blame Karim too much. He had no way of knowing."

"We found out something else," offered Sintina, "We think the *Philadelphia* has an interphasic cloak."

Nechayev's reaction was neutral, "That doesn't surprise me. I'm sure she's now part of their shadow fleet."

"Shadow fleet?"

"A fleet of ships with no Starfleet or Federation markings. Ships that don't officially exist."

Sintina shook her head as the ramifications hit her, "So Collins is more dangerous than ever."

"Absolutely," she agreed.

The captain took a moment, "So why did you call, Admiral?"

The middle-aged woman took a breath, "I wanted to thank you personally for all you've done. All you've tried to do. I know you don't have as much faith in us as your first officer, but you've helped us more than you'll ever know."

Aurelia leaned in, "This is starting to sound like a good-bye, sir."

"Of sorts," she confirmed. She concluded, "I'm afraid I'm rather busy at the moment, Captain. So, I'll simply say, Godspeed."

"Thank you, sir."

"Nechayev out."

She leaned back. The odd conversation got her thinking.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Supplemental  
Location Unknown**

A narrow faced Romulan spoke to the agent with a silver tongue, "It was an unfortunate situation with P'nav. I should have told you about my plan to use him to expose the resistance cell before you had him killed."

A dark-skinned human male responded evenly, "Yes, it would have been helpful, Koval." He leaned back, "We were able to salvage the situation quite nicely, however."

"I am pleased then."

Morgan decided to bring up something else, if for no other reason than to gauge the Romulan's reaction. "My infiltrator read a very interesting letter from P'nav to his first officer."

Without missing a beat, Koval said, "Ah, yes. The story about the how the Federation was aiding a Reman revolt. Well, I had to tell P'nav something to properly motivate him. Why do you bring it up? There isn't any truth to it is there?"

Slyly the 31 agent responded, "Of course not. You're our man on Romulas. Anything we do in the Empire, we do through you."

"And I would be equally foolish," added Koval, "to subvert your efforts. I would have nothing to gain and everything to lose by going against your Directorate."

Morgan stated, "I'm glad we're in agreement, then." He concluded with, "We'll be in touch. Morgan out." He closed the channel.

The agent got out of his seat and approached a large window overlooking the refit station. Held in the scaffolding was a *Sovereign* class ship. A machine was slowly passing over top of the saucer section. It was spraying the hull with a black pigment. It passed over the word "Philadelphia."

**END**