

Star Trek: Independence Confidence

By Dnoth

*Three things cannot be long hidden: the sun, the moon, and the truth.
~ Siddhārtha Gautama (The Buddha)*

CHAPTER 1

Stardate 53012.2 (5 January 2376)
USS Independence, Captain's Ready Room
Cardassian Badlands

"Captain's Log, stardate 53012.2. We're holding position just outside the Badlands. We're still licking our wounds. ... And I get to tell Command that I've failed my first mission on the Independence."

When Sintina was eleven, she programmed the replicator to make *gagh* when poppy seed muffins were ordered. The muffins had been her little brother's favorite breakfast. He made such a girlish screech when he saw the worms materialize. Her father soon forced her to confess and apologize. Sintina was experiencing a similar sensation now.

Admiral Ross stared at her from across sub-space in her ready room. "So they used that Maquis maneuver against you, huh?"

With that kick in the gut, she thought, *'did everybody know about this but me?'* She gathered what remained of her ego and sputtered, "Yes, sir."

Ross wasn't pleased, but wasn't upset either, "Well, unfortunately, there have been a number of Cardassian ships that have refused to surrender. The one I sent you after was the tip of the ice burg." He intertwined his fingers, "I fear this is the beginning of a much larger problem."

Ironically, Aurelia was consoled somewhat by the comment but she said nothing in response.

Ross continued, "At the moment, however, there's a situation developing at Cardassia Prime. I want the *Independence* there to make anyone think twice before trouble starts. It seems our allies are having a bit of a squabble over some toys. I'm sending you details on another channel."

"Aye, sir."

"How long until your repairs are complete?" inquired Ross.

"We should be underway in an hour or two."

Ross reached for the control to end the transmission, "Very well. Admiral Whatley will be expecting you there in three days, Ross out..."

"Wait, Admiral!" Aurelia ordered more than asked.

Ross' face stiffened. Aurelia took on an apologetic tone, "I'd like to talk about my first officer."

Ross slowly moved his hand back and rested it on the desk, "Continue."

"He was assigned here temporarily. When could I expect a replacement?"

Ross got more comfortable, "That depends on the investigation. To be honest, the evidence we have is sketchy. He could be reinstated as captain and off your ship in a month or two."

Aurelia leaned forward, "I've looked in his eyes. That man is guilty. He shouldn't be in the uniform let alone in command of a starship."

Ross countered with, "Despite this incident, Captain Windslow has served honorably in Starfleet for nearly 25 years. I'm not so willing to over look that."

Aurelia fought the urge to argue with the Admiral and decided to let it slide.

Ross didn't follow her example, "Furthermore, he helped design many of the systems on that ship, via the Defiant Project. The technology of pulse phasers,

ablative armor, quantum torpedoes, bio-neural circuitry; they're all fairly new. He has experience with them."

Aurelia bit her tongue; wanting to defend her own engineer, though, he wasn't being insulted.

He put the nail in the coffin of the conversation, "He's there for a reason, Captain. I suggest you utilize him instead of judge him. Ross out."

Aurelia found herself in front of the UFP logo. It was the door slammed in her face.

Bin Nadal pulled his darts out of the board; 2 eights and a triple six. "...and according to Dr. Bashir, it was this Section 31 that infected their security chief so he could infect the Founders." He moved back to the throwing line, where Kimula stood, a regenerative cast on her leg.

Kimula, now on medical leave, wore a traditional Andorian kimono. She lined up her shot, "And the Starfleet security reports say it was a covert action by the Tal'Shiar?" The projectile left her hand.

Karim grimaced as she nearly got a bull's eye. "Exactly." Kimula launched another; triple 20. "The thing is," Karim continued, "I worked for Starfleet Intelligence for nearly 2 years and I've never heard of such an organization."

The Andorian turned to face Karim, her antenna slumping. "Well, if it's as covert as Bashir says, it would stand to reason that only a handful of people even know about it." Her lips formed a smirk, "Sorry to wound your ego, but you probably weren't important enough."

Bin Nadal was glad to be able to share a light hearted moment. "Maybe, I'm just gullible to believe such a thing."

Kimula admitted, "I don't tend to believe it either." Kimula didn't want to dismiss Karim; he had never been the gullible type. "But ...maybe you should follow the evidence; see where it leads you. Did Bashir give you any proof?"

"No, not really."

Kimula tossed her final dart, "Maybe you should start a correspondence with him to see if he has any. Then, you can decide for yourself." She began to recover her darts.

Needing to tell someone, bin Nadal suddenly blurted, "I saw Admiral Boral's people torturing the Founder."

Kimula stopped in her tracks, she spun around on her wounded leg; causing her to wince in pain, "What?"

"They said, it was a restraining device but she was in pain and they tormented her."

She considered, "Does that really qualify as torture?"

Karim sarcastically nodded his head, "By my definition, yeah."

The Andorian shrugged her shoulders, "Well, consider what she's done. It's not like she needs to be treated..."

"Humanely?" interjected Bin Nadal.

Kimula then focused on the carpet and bit her bottom lip. She again looked at Karim, atonement in her face.

Karim reluctantly added, "There was something else."

Kimula genuinely looked curious, "What?"

"When we were transporting the Founder, she claimed that the attack on San Francisco was detected by Starfleet and allowed to happen anyway."

Kimula couldn't help herself as she jested, "Now, I know you're gullible."

Bin Nadal raised his hand, conceding the point, "I'll have you know, I dismissed it as a lie as well. But..."

"But, what?"

Karim sat down, forgetting the game, "Do you remember when the power grid on Earth was sabotaged by Red Squad?"

Kimula joined him, "Sure, it was my junior year."

"It was my senior year. I was actually in Red Squad. I had a good friend that went to prison because of it."

Kimula asked with concern, "Not to be unsubtle, but why didn't you go to prison too?"

Bin Nadal forced a smile, "That's why I like you. You must be the most blunt counselor in the fleet."

She raised her arms in mock confusement, "What can I say? It's often best to go straight for the throat."

Karim continued the narrative, "Because, I didn't have an engineering background. They didn't need me."

"But you knew about the plan?"

The security officer slowly shook his head, "No, I just knew something was happening. When I asked, my friend he told me it'd be better if I didn't know." He let out a big breath, momentarily looked at nothing and concluded, "Anyway, the Founder implied there were more people behind it than those who were arrested."

Kimula tried her best not to have any disbelief in her voice, "This Section 31, maybe?"

There was almost no emotion in his face as he turned, "It makes me wonder. ...And IF elements of the Federation could sabotage Earth's power grid, what else are they capable of?"

CHAPTER 2

Supplemental USS Independence, Main Bridge En-route to Cardassia Prime

Sintina was relieved not having to share the bridge. Her XO was working out duty shifts in his office.

“ETA to Cardassia Prime?” quizzed Aurelia after they were underway.

The answer came from D’nas at the helm, “Sixty-eight point six hours.”

The port turbolift to the bridge slid open. No one seemed to notice until a woman in civilian clothing emerged from the passage. A woman of European decent, a bit taller than the captain, scanned the room until she found the command chair. She made for Aurelia smiling with a hand outreached, “Captain Aurelia.”

Sintina became annoyed at the sight, but still accepted the hand, “And you are?”

“Susan Windslow.”

Great, Aurelia thought. “Mrs. Windslow, though I haven’t had a chance to make an announcement, this deck is restricted from civilian personnel.”

Susan sounded regretful, “Oh, I’m sorry, Captain. It’s been awhile since I’ve been on a starship.”

Aurelia saw no need for continued pleasantries, “How can I help you, Mrs. Windslow?”

Susan yielded to Aurelia’s no non-sense dialog, “I wanted to request a position on the ship.”

The solicitation was not what Sintina was expecting, “Oh, what position?”

Mrs. Windslow elaborated, “On the *Mendez*, before Ethan took command of the *Bismarck*, I served as the ships recreation coordinator and teacher.”

Aurelia didn’t intend to vocalize, “Umm ...”

Susan felt the need to sell her argument, "I'm already familiar with the facilities on ship and there are 4 other children onboard not including my own sons..."

"Let's continue this conversation in my ready room," as she gestured the way.

The door hissed closed behind Aurelia as she offered a chair to Susan.

Aurelia was still surprised the topic of her husband hadn't yet come up. "I don't doubt your capabilities, Mrs. Windslow..."

"Please, Susan."

"...Susan, but it's possible this could prove to be a temporary posting for your husband."

The inquisitive wife asked, "Do you know why?"

Aurelia inhaled a burst of breath through her nose, "I can't talk about it."

Susan had questioned her husband about his reduction in rank. Ethan's immediate answer cited the loss of the *Bismarck* and a standard investigation when one loses a ship. She knew there was more, but didn't press the matter. Aurelia's cryptic response only added to her suspensions. She decided to fish for more information, "Captain, I've been married to Ethan for 15 years. But I wasn't able to travel with him once he took command of the *Bismarck* because that Starfleet order..."

The captain's eyebrows crinkled, "What Starfleet order?"

Susan looked confident and wondered how a captain wouldn't know, "The one that forbid family on ship during the war."

Aurelia leaned back, "There was no such order, it was left up to the captains and most captains left it up to the individual families."

Susan slumped down, looking at a random point on the bulkhead, "He tricked me. He figured it was the only way I'd go. That son of a..." She suddenly remembered her surroundings, "That's something I'm going to have to talk to

him about later.” She overcame her shock, “What I wanted to say was, obviously something happened to him during the war. He’s not the same person he was before.”

Sintina’s mood became aloof now that the subject had changed to what she had feared, and known it would, “The war changed us all, Susan.”

Susan continued, “When he’s home, he’s either hostile or remote. He goes from one extreme to another.”

Aurelia sounded as uninterested as possible, “I’m sorry for your family, but I don’t understand what you want me to do.”

“Well, you are his superior. I was hoping you could order him to the ship’s counselor. If he won’t talk to me, maybe he’ll talk to her.”

Aurelia sat back, considering the situation. She felt nothing but contempt for the fact she had to deal with it in the first place. No, no she wouldn’t have to deal with it; Kimula would. The captain really didn’t want to expose her friend to such an unstable person alone. Despite her thoughts, Aurelia found her head beginning to nod. “Alright, I’ll order him to Lieutenant Kimula.”

Susan stood, “Thank you, Captain.” She headed for the door, paused, and turned back at the captain, “And Captain, whatever first impression you had of Ethan, just know that that’s not who he really is. He’s a wonderful person...it’s just...hidden for the moment.”

Aurelia had little reaction to the characterization.

Susan moved to the exit once again.

This time, it was the captain who spoke up, “Susan.”

She faced Sintina, “Yes, Captain.”

“As long as you’re onboard, you’ve got the jobs of ship’s teacher and rec. director.”

Susan cracked a smile, the first one since greeting her husband at *Deep Space Nine*, “Thank you, ma’am.”

Aurelia bowed her head. Panels slid behind Susan; leaving the captain alone again. She elevated her chin, "Computer, locate Lieutenant Kimula."

"What do you mean, 'The Founder never left the Bajoran system?'"

Bin Nadal contacted one of his friends that still held a position in Starfleet Intelligence. He knew of certain ways to hide the destination of transmissions. The fact that he was security chief made the task much easier. He now sat at a seldom used terminal on deck 6.

The image on the screen was that of a Tellarite male. He didn't wear a Starfleet uniform, but Karim knew he held the rank of Lieutenant Commander. "It was never in the media, there are no Federation or Starfleet records of the *Midas* ever transporting the Founder."

"I shared the same room with the changeling 12 hours a day for six days!"

"It's not that I don't believe you, damn it!" his large, red beard shaking. "The fact is, I could send your report in anomalously, but no one will believe it."

Bin Nadal held his hand over his mouth for a moment while he considered, "So why did the *Midas* go to *Starbase 375*?"

"According to the mission logs: to be decommissioned for an extensive refit."

"No mention of the Founder?"

"No." The bulky man then construed the question into an insult, "I know how to read!"

Karim dismissed the hostile tone of the Tellarite as a form of affection. His mind began to find alternative means of proving his story, "We had escorts, the *Diablo* and the... the *Saber*. What were they doing on that date?"

"Hold on." The Tellarite looked down for several seconds. "The *Diablo* did go to 375 on that date for repair parts and the *Saber* also went there to pick up and disembark crew members." He raised his head, "There is no mention of either of them escorting the *Midas*."

Bin Nadal looked down and said more to himself, "Command sent you falsified logs."

The Tellarite's eyes were nearly hidden in the folds of his face, "As I said, I could send your report up to the Federation Council. At best it would be ignored; at worst, people would think whoever sent it was crazy."

For the first time, Karim truly began to appreciate the situation he had found himself in, "No. At worst, whoever is responsible for altering those logs would come looking for me."

CHAPTER 3

Supplemental USS Independence, Counselor's Office En-route to Cardassia Prime

One of the first things Kimula did once she arrived on Earth was to see the *Kerepakupay Vená*; more commonly known as Angel Falls in Canaima National Park, Venezuela. The very idea of a waterfall had never occurred to her as she grew up on the frozen world of Andoria. She was so overwhelmed by the sight; she acquired a two meter tall, self contained waterfall. Kimula had it in her dorm at the academy, in her quarters on the *Midas*, and now in her office on the *Independence*. She had just activated it. Instantly, she began to loose herself in the sound of the cascading water. The door chime interrupted her tranquility. "Enter."

Aurelia strode in casually. She had a smile on her face and looked around a bit before speaking. "I see you found your office."

The Andorian came back with, "I actually found it before I found my quarters. I've just been procrastinating."

"I'm surprised your waterfall isn't in your quarters."

Kimula shrugged, "I decided not to horde it anymore." She then, sensed something more, "Is this a social visit?"

"No," Aurelia placed her hands behind her back, "I've got your first customer."

"Commander Windslow?" Kimula hopefully asked.

Only a minor hint of surprise crossed Sintina's face, "Yes."

Kimula crossed her arms and widened her stance, "It's about time you sent him to me."

Aurelia knew a potential fight was brewing, but wished to avoid it. Kimula was one of the few people Sintina listened to. She often viewed the Andorian as a possible future version of herself. The captain secretly admired how Kimula was able to be pushy, direct, and cold without coming off as ... well, a bitch. From past experience, Sintina knew her best defense was to say nothing.

The counselor continued after the moment of silence, "I already suggested he see me, but he was...unenthusiastic about the idea."

Aurelia disregarded the comment, "I want you to be careful with him."

Kimula, arms still crossed, closed the gap between her and her captain. "Is that why you didn't order him to see me sooner? You were trying to protect me?"

Had it been any other person, Sintina would have fired back. Instead, she avoided the judging eyes of her friend.

The Andorian took Aurelia's silence as an affirmative. She began with a deep breath, "It's my job to deal with people who are upset, disturbed, or even violent!" She uncrossed her arms and took a step back to calm down. Kimula then thought of a whole new reason to be upset, "And you need to stop sheltering bin Nadal, Jinal, and me or else you will not make a very effective captain."

Aurelia then, took offense, "Are you saying I wasn't an effective captain on the *Midas*?"

Instead of retreating, Kimula stood toe-to-toe with her superior officer, "No, you cared for anyone on that ship. But now there's 'us' and 'them.' You care more for us that came from the *Midas* than your new crew. If, however, you cared for your new crew just as much as us, you would've sent Windslow to me as soon as he stepped onboard because you *knew* something was wrong! Instead, you let it slide since you didn't care for him enough!"

Aurelia made a quick movement of her entire body as if she were ready to pounce. The slightly larger Andorian didn't budge or break eye contact.

Aurelia's instinctive bluff had been called. She had lost the battle of egos. The fact that she knew Kimula was right didn't help. Her anger shifted to Kimula to Windslow to herself. Words evaded her.

Content with her success, Kimula's voice lowered, "These people are your new family. You have no choice in the matter. Either you start taking care of them...all of them, or I will personally send a report recommending that you be relieved of command."

Aurelia examined her counselor's eyes, looking for any hints of a hoax; she found none. "Would you really do that?"

"The wellbeing of the people on this ship are more important to me than our friendship." Kimula leaned in and whispered, "By the way, that's how it should be."

The captain's stomach turned. She felt the adrenaline pass from her system. She exhaled deeply. After several moments, her focus returned to Kimula, "It really ticks me off when you bring my faults to my attention."

Kimula chanced a smile, "I know."

Aurelia turned to the door, "Windslow will report to you first thing tomorrow."

Kimula's good-hearted nature couldn't be restrained, "...and when is your counseling session?"

Sintina looked over her shoulder. For a second, she faked anger at the question. Then, an ever so small hint of a grin appeared, "Tonight, in the Game Room."

The counselor was pleased her jovial comment was received in the intended manner. "I'll be there."

The captain disappeared into the corridor.

The security chief returned to the modified workstation to send another covert message. Lieutenant Commander Laarim, the Tellarite he spoke with earlier had no knowledge of Section 31. Karim trusted Laarim, at least as much as he could trust anyone.

They had worked together undercover on Tzenketh. Their mission was to determine if the Autarch intended to remain neutral or join the Dominion. Ultimately, the mission was a success; but on 50424, bin Nadal was captured by the local authorities. He was being held, awaiting his impending torture, when Laarim broke into a transporter station and freed him. The Tellarite saved his life, but that didn't mean he was telling the truth now.

Then, Karim began to contemplate the useless debate of who to trust. It was a circular train of thought and bin Nadal quickly abandoned it.

He had decided not to inform Captain Aurelia about the situation for a couple of reasons. First, the only thing she could do was to attract unwanted attention. Second, she never stuck bin Nadal as someone who would buy into a conspiracy theory.

He needed more information. So, he took Kimula's advice. Dr. Julian Bashir faced him from light years away. "Not that I mind, Commander, but why have you contacted me?"

"You peaked my interest in our previous conversation."

The doctor turned his head about a centimeter, "...and?"

Bin Nadal rested his elbows on the console, "And I was hoping you could provide some evidence or leads that I could follow up on."

Bashir seemed amused, "You want to research Section 31?"

The ex-Intelligence officer reassured him, "It's what I do, doctor."

Bashir stood a few meters away from the transmitter; he crossed his arms in contemplation. "I'll send you what I have, but it's not much."

"Thank you, doctor."

Julian thoughtfully stepped closer to the monitor. "For what it's worth, Commander bin Nadal, I hope you find them. The Federation will be better off with these people exposed."

Bin Nadal somberly stated, "I'll do what I can."

CHAPTER 4

Stardate: 53014.3 (6 January 2376) USS Independence, Main Engineering En-route to Cardassia Prime

Jinal was always looking for a way to keep a step ahead. His persona required nothing less. He never felt comfortable enough to socialize with the rest of the crew; fearing perhaps something would slip. Instead, he kept to himself and remained isolated in his quarters; constantly reading technical manuals and engineering journals. Vulcans always seemed to have an answer...so he always had to have an answer. The pressure to perform was unbearable at times.

Now he had a new input for information, D'nas. Jinal knew the Tamarians led the Federation in certain areas, engineering among them. He requested the honorary ensign to join him in engineering this morning. The exchange officer was only too pleased to oblige.

The pointy-eared engineer began, "How much engineering knowledge do you have?"

The stockier Tamarian replied, "At 15 years old, a group of my peers and me dismantled and rebuilt a warp core."

Jinal had mastered the classic Vulcan eyebrow raise, "Really?"

D'nas nodded, "It is required of all Space Force initiates."

Jinal couldn't stop the change of perspective he had for D'nas. First, he was a potential dispenser of knowledge. Now, he saw the Tamarian as a potential threat. He decided to stick with his goal for the moment. "How much Tamarian engineering technology are you allowed to share with me?"

"The TSF gave me no restriction on the sharing of knowledge. Specific technological items, however, would have to be requested from my government."

The thumping of the *Independence's* M/AM reactor could be noticed in the few seconds of silence that followed.

Jinal altered the conversation slightly, "Very well. I have no specific requests at this time, but I would like to utilize your knowledge and experience when circumstances call for it."

"I am at your disposal, Lieutenant." D'nas decided to offer a suggestion to prove his worth to his superior, "Tamarian phasers are more powerful than your Type XII's. In an unfortunate incident with a Federation *Galaxy* class ship, we were able to bring down their shields with only a few discharges." Jinal's eyebrow again rose. D'nas then realized what he said could be interpreted as bragging, or even a threat. He came to the point, "Perhaps, I could improve your existing phaser arrays."

The chief engineer simply said, "Perhaps." He looked at D'nas and saw only the desire for respect and approval. *'Maybe he won't prove to be a rival,'* Jinal thought. "I am curious. Tell me more of your education."

It was high praise in Tamarian society for a superior to inquire about one's past; even if the superior already knew it. A smile exploded on D'nas' face as he began, "I was 12 years old when I heard of the Dathon and Picard at El-Adrel contact. I immediately began to study what information we had on the Federation, including samples of your language. I listened to it for hours at a time. Slowly, I began to understand it. Since I understood the language, I was sent to the Tamarian Space Force."

"Sent? You did not choose to enter service?"

A puzzled look replaced the one of excitement, "I had a talent that could be used for the greater good. It is only logical that my government utilize it. As a Vulcan, I thought you would agree."

Jinal stepped back and rounded the situation table in engineering, as if the physical distance would help him with the emotional distance. "It's not that I disagree. Vulcans have a saying: 'the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few, or the one.' But that phrase can be warped and perverted to serve the few that decide what the 'greater good' is."

D'nas' eagerness had been drained by the judgment of the Lieutenant. He only looked up and uttered, "Perhaps."

Kimula heard several types of bird calls with the rhythm of water falling in the background. She took several slow, methodical breaths from her muladhara chakra, or root chakra, something she picked up while learning Tai Chi Chuan on Earth. After years of only using her upper lungs to breathe; she was amazed how it felt to take in air using her lower lungs. Her instructor taught her even more. Eventually, she was able to take such deep breaths; it gave the illusion that her lungs went down to her groin. She noticed the more she meditated in this fashion, the rounder her stomach looked. He said it would give you, what he called 'a budda belly.' She wasn't sure what he meant at the time, but she soon found out. After trying several other techniques, she found nothing that relaxed her more effectively.

Commander Windslow would...should join her shortly. She wanted to be centered for the encounter. She heard what seemed to be a distant noise. And again. Only then, did she realize it was the door chime. Her eyes jolted open, "Computer, stop bird recording and raise light levels to standard." She stood and straightened her uniform, "Enter."

Ethan Windslow trudged inside like a boy being sent to the principal's office. He made eye contact with the counselor, but said nothing.

His body and face, however, did all the talking Kimula needed. She pretended not to notice his disposition, "Ah Commander, please have a seat."

With a sigh, the man plopped on the couch. Ethan mentally punished himself when his first thought was how comfortable the couch was.

Kimula understood she would have to initiate conversation. She found that skipping the pleasantries often had a type of shock effect on people and they were more willing to talk about the core issue that bothered them. It was a disruptive, but rewarding tactic. "I understand you were in command of the *Bismarck*."

The former captain looked up from underneath his eyebrows, "That's right."

"Why were you demoted?"

A rather loud "humph" came from the commander. "Damn, you don't beat around the bush do you?"

Kimula honestly answered, "I don't like treating symptoms. I prefer going to the root cause of problems."

Windslow nodded his head and candidly spoke in return, "I can appreciate that."

"So, why were you demoted?" persisted the counselor.

Ethan put his left ankle on his right knee; getting a bit more comfortable yet combative at the same time, "Don't you already know?"

The Andorian's antenna waved slightly as she shook her head.

Now that he was here, Windslow was relieved to be able to talk to someone; though, he wasn't about to show it. "Officially, I've been given no reason. After the destruction of the *Bismarck* and the war had ended, the regional JAG officer called me into his office and told me I would temporarily be demoted to commander. When I asked why, I was told it was due to an ongoing investigation."

Kimula inquired, "Do you think it has something to do with the destruction of the *Bismarck*?"

Windslow hesitated. That was exactly what he had told his family. After several seconds of contemplation, he decided to try the truth. "I doubt it. Lots of ships were lost; I haven't yet heard of a captain being demoted for loss of a ship during war."

"So what do you think it's about?"

It was the question Ethan was dreading. He knew damn well what it was about. If he were a stronger man, he might admit it. It might help end the nightmares...and the guilt. He had gone over what happened hundreds of times. Starfleet couldn't have much evidence. The fact that he was being so calculating about the whole thing only made him feel worse. He had reasoned the investigation would be inconclusive; and in a few months, he would be reinstated. In fact, Admiral Ross had told him as much. All he had to do was to keep his mouth shut and it would all go away. Being in debt to a powerful admiral seemed to be a better option than getting kicked out of the fleet. So he maintained his position, "I don't know."

Kimula examined the executive officer's face, "You're lying."

Windslow attempted to put on his best poker face, but didn't respond.

“If you don’t talk about this, you will remain in torment.”

Ethan looked down. He didn’t want to lie more than he had to, “I know.”

Kimula knew better than to pursue the issue for the moment. She had made her point for now. Only one more goal for today remained. “Do me a favor, Commander.”

“What’s that?”

The Andorian made sure not to speak until the Ethan had made eye contact with her. “Take it out on me. Take it out on the captain. But don’t take it out on your family.”

Windslow’s gaze shifted to the waterfall. He didn’t look at her when he finally said, “Agreed.” He then looked at the Andorian, “Am I dismissed?”

Kimula created a polite smile, “Yes, Commander.”

Ethan headed for the door, in the threshold; he paused and looked back, “Thanks.”

Before Kimula had a chance to respond, the doors slid behind him.

CHAPTER 5

Supplemental USS Independence, Sick-bay En-route to Cardassia Prime

The blues, silvers, and grays that adorned most of the ship, gave way to a more off-white color scheme in sick bay. It gave a more clinical and sterile feel to the chamber.

Dr. Zo’Kama’s tan reptilian skin reflected in the glass door that separated her office from the rest of the bay. Her image split vertically as the door opened. The supposed Vulcan entered.

Zo’Kama promptly returned to her desk. She had planned the meeting out. At least, she hoped so. “Lt. Jinal, please have a seat.”

The lieutenant complied. “What did you want to discuss, doctor?”

The Arkonian tapped on her console, bringing up Jinal’s medical records; including the physical she had performed on him once they left *Deep Space Nine*. “I want to ask you some personal, medical questions.”

If Jinal was nervous, he hid it well. “Of course, doctor.”

The doctor prefaced, “I spent nearly 5 years working at the Vulcan Medical Command. I know more about your species and culture than the average doctor.”

Jinal’s eyes shifted; he forced himself not to fidget.

Zo’Kama kept her hand underneath the table, “I know this is a personal matter, but I want to prepare for it medically when the time comes. ... Jinal, I want to know when you are going to start your *pan farr*.”

He was truly lost. He had no idea what she was talking about. ‘*Damn Vulcans and their secretive ways,*’ he thought. He didn’t have much choice but to admit ignorance, “*Pan farr*, doctor?”

The doctor stretched out her ploy, “There is no use in denying it. I need to know.”

Jinal could only respond with a slack jaw and a mild shake of his head.

Zo’Kama continued, “You’re 28 years old. You should have had at least one *pan farr* by now.”

He was desperate to think of something. He only managed, “Um...perhaps...” before the Arkonian interrupted him.

Her hand finally came up from under the desk, phaser in hand, “Perhaps, you’re not a Vulcan at all.”

Jinal’s eyes grew large; he dared not move. Out of panic, he blurted, “What are you doing?”

Never lowering the phaser, the doctor explained, “Most non-Vulcan doctors probably wouldn’t catch it, which explains why you got this far. You don’t have a second eyelid. Your mesiofrontal cortex is nearly nonexistent. If you were Vulcan, your emotions would be impossible to control. You weren’t even born in the Federation. All Vulcans are given antibodies against Choriocytosis; you don’t have them.” She stood, still targeting the imposter, “You do, however, have antibodies for a disease found on only one planet...Romulus.”

Jinal began to feel an extreme vertigo. It was ten years ago when he had entered Starfleet. He knew there was a ban, but he was so angry back then. Starfleet seemed the only way to get back at his parent’s murderers. He began to feel nauseous. His consciousness focused a bit upon hearing Zo’Kama’s accusations.

“Who are you? Tal’Shiar?”

He found himself when he heard the words, “I am not Tal’Shiar.”

“Romulan Imperial Intelligence, then?”

The Romulan found the courage to adjust in his seat, “No. I promise you, I am what I appear to be: an engineer loyal to Starfleet.”

The Arkonian lowered her guard only marginally, “I don’t like being lied to; neither does Starfleet.”

Jinal rested his elbows on his knees in a submissive posture, "I did lie to get into Starfleet." He sighed, "Then in my second year at the academy, I heard of Simon Tarses."

She was surprised for a moment, then quickly became somber again, "Who's he?"

"He was a medical tech on the *Enterprise*. He was only one-fourth Romulan and was harassed by some overzealous admiral."

"He made the same mistake you did. He lied on his application."

Jinal stared at the deck as he continued, "It seemed my only option at the time." He looked up, "Are you going to tell the captain?"

Ignoring the question, "How did you get into the Federation?"

He reluctantly told the story. "My father was an aid to a Romulan senator. The senator was a moderate. He smuggled my family across the Zone to send a vital message. He hoped to prevent a war." Jinal knew Zo'Kama was still skeptical because he continued to look down the barrel of a phaser. None the less, he pressed on, "My father was to tell the Federation about massive attacks on Romulan colonies and the Praetor had decided to end our isolation because of it...We now know the attacks were the Borg."

Zo'Kama had still not ruled out the possibility of the Romulan being a spy, "If that's true, what happened to your parents?"

Jinal clasped his hand and began to rub them gently, "Somehow, the Tal'Shiar...at least I think it was the Tal'Shiar, managed to track us down. We had just entered the Draken system when our Corvallen transport took fire. My father tried to rush my mother and me to an escape pod. We were confronted by masked attackers. My father attempted to hold them off long enough for my mom and me to make it." His eyes began to water, "I made it to the pod. My mother was shot down before she joined me." Jinal's head came to rest on his hands as a single tear hit the carpet. "I had to close the hatch before they got to me." More tears followed, "The pod launched. I saw a Romulan *P'dan* class destroyer out the portal. I thought they were going to fire at me." He straightened up, wiping a tear, "And they might have, but the *New Orleans* was at the Draken IV base and chased the destroyer away."

Zo’Kama began to believe the Romulan but she wasn’t naïve enough to put down her weapon. “How’d you get into the academy?”

“I made up a story about my parents being Vulcan merchants. You have to understand, I had grown up not trusting humans. At the time, I didn’t know what else to do.”

“So you never told Starfleet about your father’s mission?”

“No.”

“I told them I had no other family. Soon, one of the officers on Draken IV took me under his wing. He sponsored my application to the academy.”

Zo’Kama attempted to console him, “Well, Federation-Romulan relations are much better now. Maybe you should come forward.”

Jinal gave a sarcastic grin, “Like you said, Tarses was punished for lying; not for being a Romulan.”

The doctor finally lowered her phaser, “I lied too.”

A few wrinkles appeared on the Romulan’s face in his confusion.

“I had heard of Simon Tarses before.” She sat back down, laying the phaser on the desk. “Who do you think verified for Norah Satie that Tarses had a Romulan heritage?”

Jinal again felt his jaw go ajar; his face still wet with tears.

The Arkonian continued, “Never again will I ruin an innocent person’s life just because he’s of a particular species.”

For the first time since the conversation started, Jinal began to feel this would not be the end of him.

“I’ll keep your secret, Lieutenant.” She leaned across the table fetching the phaser, but not pointing it directly at him. “But if I ever, get even a hint that you’ve lied to me, I’ll kill you in a most painful way.” Now she directed the weapon at him, “Don’t think I don’t know how.”

The Romulan could only think to reassure her, "I swear everything I've told you is the truth."

"It had better be," she made for the exit. "I'll give you a few minutes to regain your composure. You have to play Vulcan again."

A deep sigh came from Jinal. She was right; he would have to endure this lie. He had resigned himself to that fact years ago. But being so close to having his cover blown was a tease. He really didn't like Vulcans.

CHAPTER 6

Supplemental USS Independence, Captain's Ready Room En-route to Cardassia Prime

The kneading and rotation on Sintina's lower neck was turning her into putty. It had been years since someone had given her a back rub. The forceful hands of the masseuse worked her knots. The captain sat forward in the chair at her desk, with a female medical officer standing behind her. The medical officer had no rank and seemed to be a blonde Lurillian. Lurillians look mostly human with the exception of a pair of ridges on either side of the upper nose.

Sintina made a note to thank Petty Officer Dorian for suggesting it to her; despite the fact he was probably trying to suck up to the boss.

Three tones in rapid succession indicated to Aurelia someone wished to enter her office. *'Damn,'* she thought. The captain turned to the medical officer, "Thank you, doctor."

The Lurillian put her hands on her hips, "Let's not make this a habit, Captain. The next time you call me, make sure it's an emergency."

"No promises." Before the doctor could voice her concern, Aurelia commanded, "Computer, end EMH program."

The female Lurillian vanished in a photonic blur.

The captain had a smirk on her face as she said, "Enter." Her counselor immediately took a seat before it was offered.

"What do you know about what is happening with Commander Windslow?"

Aurelia sat back and rotated her chair back and forth before she answered. "I told you before; I was instructed not to talk about it. *I* was told only as a courtesy."

The Andorian's shoulders sagged, "You can't tell me. Windslow won't tell me." She glared at her captain, "What can be so bad to make you think, he shouldn't be on your ship?"

Aurelia folded her arms on the edge of her desk, "I'm not falling for it."

With an exhale, Kimula pouted, "Fine."

"I take it your counseling session was unproductive."

Kimula straightened up, "Actually it was. Whatever this 'thing' is it's eating him up inside."

"Good," blurted the captain. She saw the disapproving look from her counselor and changed the topic. "Do you think I can trust him as first officer?"

The counselor considered the question. Sintina had an almost Klingon sense of loyalty. She valued it even more than performance. Kimula knew it was her most obvious fault. The Andorian had been actively trying to bring that to her superior's attention for months. It was a much more pressing issue with this new crew.

As for Windslow, she trusted him as much as anyone who had lied to her face. The fact that he was a really bad liar reassured her the most. He obviously had something to hide, but he wasn't used to subterfuge. She saw regret and shame in his face, but beyond that, she saw something else; a conflict within him. The counselor took in all of her encounter with the executive officer and responded, "Yes."

Aurelia nodded and turned her monitor so Kimula could also see it. "I've been reviewing his record up to his command of the *Bismarck*. It's impressive. He earned: the Campbell Award, the Star Cross, and the Grankite Order of Tactics." She returned the screen to its original position, "On top of all that, he's a pretty damn good engineer."

Even Kimula was taken aback by Aurelia giving Windslow so much credit. "So does that mean you're changing your opinion about him?"

Aurelia rolled her eyes in concession, "I've been told I don't give new people the benefit of the doubt." She saw the edges of her counselor's lip curl up.

'Two wins in as many days,' Kimula joked to herself. "I'm proud."

"I'm happy, you're happy. Now get out of my office."

The Andorian curtsied with a broad smile, "Aye, ma'am."

Admiral William Ross called the USS *Thunderchild* home. He had to check in. Ross had worked off and on with this organization since the destruction of the *Leonov* during the 2nd Tzenkethi war. He had no love of Section 31, but he realized the necessity of them. A familiar black-skinned human male appeared on the screen. The Admiral greeted his contact with a nod, "Morgan." Ross had no idea if that was his real name or not.

Morgan inquired in his deep, yet casual, voice, "How goes the crew for the *Philadelphia*?"

Ross hated these conversations, "I have most of the command crew lined up."

"Good, it will be nice to have a *Sovereign* class ship with a nice loyal crew at our disposal."

The admiral interjected without thinking, "You mean blackmailed crew."

Morgan tilted his head. In a jovial tone he asked, "Ross, you're not getting soft on me are you?"

Despite the bantering, Ross knew how serious the question it was. He dared not show any weakness. He thought to shift the conversation, "Are you sure Windslow's the person you want to captain?"

In his constant, nonchalant voice, the operative answered, "Honestly, he wasn't my first choice. But anyone who did what he did, and then lie about, has attributes we can use." Morgan shrugged, "And if he decides to evolve a conscience, we can threaten to expose him."

Ross dolefully added, "Barring any new information, the investigation should be dropped in a matter of weeks."

"Good, he's no use to us if he goes to a court martial."

As the entryway slid open, Jeff and Paul Windslow stopped their three-dimensional puzzle. They no longer knew what to expect from their father.

Ethan saw his sons. He saw the anticipation in their faces. They wondered if he would ignore them or yell at them. A great pain swelled in Ethan's gut. He stepped to the table with his sons. They still focused on him. He knelt next to the puzzle, looked at the faces of Paul and Jeff, fought back a tear, and asked, "Can I help?"

The tension had been broken. He was surprised to see the joy in even his older son, Jeff's, eyes. A duo of "sure's" followed.

No matter what happened, he decided then and there, he would not abandon them again. He pushed everything else aside and allowed himself the moment.

END