

# Star Trek: Independence Crimes and Shadows

By Dnoth

*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed individuals can change the world. Indeed it's the only thing that ever has.*  
~ Margaret Mead

## PROLOGUE

**Stardate 53181.4 (7 March 2376)**  
**Starbase 17**  
**In Orbit of Althos IV**

In a darkened room, there were whispers. The room was lit only with a small monitor. Admiral Alynna Nechayev's short golden hair reflected what little light was being sent from the screen. Only a Federation logo and a security protocol were displayed.

*"What's your recommendation on the Independence and her crew?"* The voice from the speakers was one of an elderly woman. It was interrupted sporadically by static.

Nechayev thought before she spoke, "I think we need to make contact."

*"Why?"*

"Well, the security officer is already in contact with Bashir," elaborated Nechayev.

The elderly woman came back, *"If we know that, so do our adversaries. They watch Bashir constantly now."*

"Agreed," replied Nechayev.

*"What about the captain?"*

Nechayev looked down, "I'm more concerned about her. Her psych profile indicates she's not much of an independent thinker. She follows the rules and stays within the system." Alynna shrugged, "On the other hand, she certainly thwarted one of their plans. But that's simply because she stumbled upon it."

The voice began again, *"That's how most of our officers came to our attention. Just look at the Pegasus incident."*

"True," accepted the admiral. She continued, "The captain also sent in a report alleging one of her academy friends was complicit in a massacre. That says something of her character, doesn't it?"

*"Yes it does. The question is: did she do that out of her sense of integrity or because she was just following procedure?"*

Admiral Nechayev nodded in agreement. The old woman knew her enough to know what the silence meant.

*"Who put her in charge of that warship?"*

Nechayev didn't need to pick up the padd next to her to reveal the answer. "Ross signed off on the order."

A faint groan of acknowledgement was heard before she began to speak again. *"He obviously thought she could be an asset. No doubt, he read the same psych profile you did."*

"We still need to identify her as friend or foe," reasoned the admiral.

*"Agreed. Attempt to evaluate her when she gets there. Determine her character. We can proceed from there."*

Nechayev concluded, "Yes, ma'am." She touched her console. All the light in the room was removed.

## CHAPTER 1

### **USS Thunderchild**

**Stardate: 53190.8 (10 March 2376)**

**Current Location: CLASSIFIED**

The water felt cool and clean. Admiral William Ross breast stroked about a meter under the surface. Beneath him was a recreation of the Great Barrier Reef; though, he had the salt in the water removed. He went there as a teenager once. The corals and fish were at the same time a visual onslaught and the most serene sight he had ever observed.

He often swam after a stressful day. Today qualified. A few hours ago, Ross sent a communiqué to his contact... handler, more accurately. The admiral had been dealing with these people off and on since he was a commander on the *Leonov*. But had only started working with this “Morgan” after the death of “Sloan.” At any one time he only knew one person inside Section 31. It served not only to protect them, but him as well. Morgan would, no doubt, give new instructions to him now.

Morgan made contact just after the war ended. Section 31 had grown much, more bold from only a few years ago. Morgan instructed Ross to start transferring “controllable” officers to a new *Soverigen* class starship. Ross never asked why. He didn’t have to. The organization wanted a ship to use without interference from a self-righteous, or honorable, captain and crew. Ross would be the link between the shadow and the light. It was not a position he felt comfortable with. He only hoped Section 31 hadn’t realized that fact.

An unexpected event had come up regarding Windslow; whom was to captain the ship. Hiding a command code was one thing. But would he really have to silence two officers? If asked, he had little choice in the matter. One does not say “no” to 31.

He heard a voice muffled by the water. He began to tread.

“...Ross,” it was the bridge.

“Computer end program.” The admiral was instantly dry. The water, fish, and tranquility dematerialized; revealing the hard reality of the hologrid. “Yes commander, what is it?”

"Sir," the duty officer continued, "You have a priority code gamma transmission."

"Pipe it down here," said Ross. He ordered a robe, which he put on, as he made his way to the arch. He tapped in his security code and activated the display. As expected, it was Morgan.

Morgan was a dark skinned human male. He looked to be rather muscular with short hair and a fine mustache. He had a casual, almost jovial, façade. Ross wondered if that was just another deception.

"Catch you at a bad time?" mused Morgan.

Ross' expression was deadpan, "Would it matter?"

A laugh came from the Section 31 operative, "No, not a bit." He then recovered himself and came to the point. "So, it appears we have a snag with the Runner."

The admiral similarly didn't beat around the bush, "Do you want the two witnesses suppressed?" He dreaded the answer, but he'd rather know it now.

Morgan smiled silently for a moment; no doubt assessing Ross. He shook his head, "No, the Runner isn't worth the effort. We'll have to find someone else to captain the *Philadelphia*."

"What do you want done with him?" questioned Ross.

The operative shrugged as if Ross had just asked him what he wanted for dinner. "He's tainted goods. I don't care what you do with him now."

The weight of the world was lifted right then and there for the admiral. He pushed aside any guilt for giving Windslow false hope.

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**Stardate 53241.5 (29 March 2376)**

**USS Independence**

**Althos Star System**

The stars around the USS *Independence* seemed to become points of light again, from the lines they were a moment ago, as the ship returned to normal space.

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The quiet in the ready room ended abruptly. "Computer begin log," commanded Captain Sintina Aurelia as she put down a report of mundane ship functions. She just finished skimming them. She sat and twisted in her chair. The computer chirped in response.

"Captain's Log, stardate 53241.5," began Sintina with a large sigh, "I doubt the next few days will be good ones." The captain sat back in her chair and closes her eyes. "We'll be docking at *Starbase 17* in about an hour. We were ordered here for two reasons; both bad." She swiveled gently. "Given the circumstances of my promotion, I have never been through Starfleet's Captain's Course. An oversight that Admiral Nechayev wants to correct." She smiled, "And here I thought I could get through the cracks." Her smirk evaporated. "The second reason would have been cause for celebration a few months ago, but now..." She sat up and opened her eyes. Sintina was annoyed at herself for having lowered her guard and allowing Windslow to become, well tolerable. "Computer, erase last sentence."

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Ethan Windslow's head went down in shame. His wife, Susan, noticed a minor scar that ran from just above his right ear into his very short hair. It left a trail as if a barber cut his hair too deep. She noticed it before but never thought to ask where it came from. She had always assumed he got from some wound he received in the war. Though, now she wondered why he hadn't had the scar removed. *How could such a trivial thought be going through my head, now? Now, that Ethan's going to be court-martialed?*

Ethan saw his legs and the tan carpet beneath his feet. He looked through the glass table his arms were resting on. He knew Susan asked him something. He knew the question and was grateful his children were at a field trip in astrometrics. Finally, he looked up at her shoulder length blonde hair, pale skin and hazel eyes. This secret could be kept no longer. He uttered the words he never wanted to tell her, "I'm accused of conduct unbecoming an officer, among other things."

In disbelief Susan nearly shouted, "What do they think you did?"

Ethan grimly stated, "My council will tell me the details once we reach the starbase."

Obviously not satisfied with the answer, Susan retorted, "But you can tell me what you know. Surely, you must have some idea..."

"I don't want to talk about it," Ethan lashed.

The Windslow family had been separated since the outbreak of the war and Ethan's promotion to captain. Susan took the two boys, Jeff and Paul, back to Earth. Prior to that, the family had never been apart for more than a week or two. Ethan always managed to stay close to them. He even considered declining his promotion to captain because he knew how much of a toll it would take on all of them. It wasn't that he couldn't handle the pressure of command, but his family was the priority; it always had been. ...At least it was.

The messages from Ethan came religiously every night. That lasted for quite awhile, then it became once every two weeks, then once a month. Susan had to hear the cries of Paul asking, "When is daddy going to call?" It was a dagger each time she heard it. Jeff, the older son, was nearly a teenager. He began to assume his father had abandoned them. Susan desperately tried to explain the situation to them both. Actions, however, speak louder than words; especially to children. Her faith in her husband was unshakable on the surface. But she rarely slept well.

After the Battle of Cardassia, she immediately booked passage to *Deep Space Nine*; where Ethan would be waiting for them. The instant she saw him at the airlock, she knew something had changed. The war had aged him; gray hairs and wrinkles now dominated his features. The joy in his eyes had died. He didn't even seem happy to see the boys.

Susan immediately blamed the war. Despite his new disposition, they had been *together* for twelve years. It wasn't the first time a bump was found in the road. They could fix it. She could take care of him again. Everything would be fine eventually.

At first, he was hostile. Ethan was a gentle man. A stranger had taken over her husband. He yelled at Paul once. He raised his voice before, but never like that. Afterwards, he spent all his time on the bridge or in his office. He saw Counselor Kimula a few times. It seemed to help a little, but he stopped

seeing her after only two visits. Part of him was recovered, but he was still a hollow shell of what he had been.

As the weeks past, she attempted to ask questions. He refused, however, to speak of the war. She had been so patient, so accepting, so hopeful. His deception finally sank in.

Susan stood up, "I can't believe you've kept me in the dark about this!" She paced a bit. After all her efforts to help him; he had been lying to her for months! She swooshed around, "We used to talk to each other! I know the war was tough on you." The time for gently nudging him was over. She besieged him, "What happened?"

Commander Windslow remained seated. He spoke with an amazingly civil tone, "It's better you not know."

She crossed her arms in defiance. "Oh I'll find out. I'm going to be there at your court-martial and there is nothing you can do about that."

Ethan rose from his chair. He bit his lip as he struggled with the emotions of fear, embarrassment, and anger.

For a split second, Susan entertained the idea that Ethan might strike her. He never had before; but that didn't stop her mind from thinking it. She even flinched. When she did, Susan saw a deep hurt in his face. Ethan backed away in response. Then he walked out the door. Susan couldn't be sure, but she thought his eyes were watering.

## CHAPTER 2

### **Supplemental USS Independence, Main Bridge Docked with Starbase 17**

Exchange officer, D'nas, hung over Chief Science Officer Tang Zian at his station in the aft section of the bridge. About a month ago, Zian invited the Tamarian to join him at Betazed's famed beaches while they were there. Tang was refreshed by the demeanor of the exchange officer. Starfleet officers, especially the lower ranks, are notorious for large egos. Not so with D'nas. He was there to enjoy himself, which didn't involve impressing or chest-thumping for the locals.

Since then, they've been spending more off-time together. More times than not, they played pool in the Game Room. The unused crew quarters on deck 4 was turned into a recreation center by some of the senior officers. Apparently, a tradition started on the *Midas* during the war. The relatively small room slowly became more and more congested as word spread of the existence of the place. There had been talk of moving the Game Room to the main lounge, but it hadn't happened yet.

To be honest, D'nas had become slightly annoying to Tang. The Tamarian was always nice and pleasant to be around. But he talked too much and D'nas' ignorance in some social matters got on Zian's nerves. Then again, Zian probably embarrassed too easily.

Now the young provisional ensign was trying to entice him into another excursion. This time on Althos IV. Zian was hesitant, Althos IV was no Betazed.

The Althos system was home to a Federation race called the Bzzit Khaht. He had only seen a handful of Bzzit Khaht. They were generally humanoid, small in stature, and larger than 'normal' eyes, ears, and mouth. Their eyes resembled cat's eyes.

The planet itself was ... well, Zian really didn't know what the planet was like. But the fact he hadn't heard anything about their planet made him suspect it wasn't worth the trip.

The Tamarian continued to plead. It was only when D'nas said he was going regardless if he was coming or not, did Zian relent. Tang developed a sense of



obligation to watch over the exchange officer. Reluctantly, the science officer agreed.

D'nas added, "I'd like Jinal to come with us this time."

Tang began to grumble, "I don't know, he seems to like his privacy."

"I work with him all the time," said D'nas, "He'd never admit it but, he needs a respite."

"D'nas, if he didn't want to spend time on Betazed, what makes you think he'd want to spend time on Althos IV?"

The Tamarian cocked his head and smirked, "We have a saying on Tamar, 'Na'thon at his quarry without a hammer.'"

A look of confusion washed over Tang. Instead of asking the obvious question, he just shook his head and said, "Oh ... well, since you put it that way."

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The door to the Game Room slid open with a hiss. The trio of Counselor/com officer Kimula sh'Somachanar, Tactical/Security Officer Karim Bin Nadal, and Captain Aurelia entered.

Aurelia immediately looked around. Amazingly, no one was there. "Good."

"Good, what?" asked Kimula.

Karim interjected, "I think Sintina preferred it when this place was our little secret."

Kimula blushed, turning her cheeks a darker shade of blue. "I only told a few people."

The captain rolled her eyes, "Uh-uh."

"Besides," continued the counselor, "The Game Room on the *Midas* was open to everyone."

Aurelia glared, "I know, but I'm annoyed today. I've been told it's not a good thing for the crew to see their captain annoyed."

"Oh look at me," mocked Kimula, "I'm mad because I have to go to a briefing."

Aurelia sat on one side of a miniature landscape. "It's not just that, smartass." She looked over the table, "Where is it?"

Bin Nadal sat opposite of Sintina, "You mean Windslow?"

"No, I mean my Ranger figure. I swear if one of the crew moved it on me..."

"He's being court-martialed, you must have some sympathy for the man," said the Andorian as she sat at the dungeon master chair.

Sintina looked under the table, "Ah, there it is." She picked up the small statue and put it near a miniature tree. She then, directed her eyes at Kimula, "Not if he's guilty."

"So are you finally going to share with us, what he did?" questioned bin Nadal.

"I suggest you go to the court-martial and find out for yourself," offered the captain.

"Fine be that way," said Karim, "So if it's not Windslow that's bothering you, what is?"

There was a dark sarcasm in Sintina's voice, "Well let's see, there is a full blown insurgency going on in the Crolsa system where two ships were lost last month, and the Romulan military governor on Cardassia Prime was assassinated just last week. What's to be bothered about?"

Kimula nodded, "So that's what this is really about."

"Damn right." Aurelia's voice grew louder, "There are shortages everywhere. The Founder will be on her way to Nimbus III soon. We could be escorting her; but no, where is the fleet's most powerful warship? ... At a starbase!"

Bin Nadal chimed in, "I still don't understand why we took the Founder to 375 last December."

Sintina waved it off, "Not everything needs to be on the news. See the media craze her movements are making now?"

Bin Nadal reached into a small pouch he had brought with him, revealing his own elf sorcerer figure. His organization skills earned him a scowl from Sintina.

Karim was tempted to continue the conversation about the Founder. He still hadn't informed his captain and friend about what she told him while he guarded her during that trip. He knew Sintina well enough to know she wouldn't believe it anyway. He took another route instead, "I heard about the Crolsa system. Did you know an old *Constitution* class actually won a battle with a *Galor*? The captain had to ram a derelict *Nova* class to do it, but..."

Aurelia interrupted, "Down goes another ship."

"It worked, didn't it?" countered the Persian tactical officer.

The captain ignored him, "We should be on the front lines; it was what this ship was built for. But yet again, some almighty admiral can't see past their own desk."

Karim finally decided to start nudging the conversation, "Speaking of such things, whatever came of those inquiries to Starfleet about who issued the orders for us to go to that prison camp in January?"

Aurelia looked up, obviously annoyed. "I got the run around. Obviously, Ross gave them to me but I haven't been able to find out who originally issued them."

"It must be Admiral Whatley," ventured Bin Nadal, "You said he acted strange when you told him we found the Klingon equipment on a Starfleet ship."

Kimula shook her head, "I still think the both of you are too inclined to believe that Garak person. I mean for all we know he could have made all that stuff up about you ticking someone off while we were at Cardassia Prime." She got the quest book out, "Besides that, I can't believe someone in Starfleet would send us on a rescue mission just to set you up. It seems awfully elaborate."

Captain Aurelia cracked a small smile, "You implying I'm not worth the effort?"

"Implying? Was I not direct enough?" joked the Andorian.

Sintina shrugged after she lost her smile, "I haven't been able to prove it either way." She sighed, "Maybe you're right. Maybe I've worked myself up over nothing."

Bin Nadal wasn't so dismissive, "I haven't heard anything new on any investigation as to how those items ended up the Starfleet ship, have you?"

"No," admitted Aurelia, "No, I haven't. I was told Admiral Boral of Starfleet Security was going to handle it."

The mention of the Andorian admiral brought back disturbing memories for Karim. It was three and a half months ago when the *Midas* took her last cruise to *Starbase 375*. While there, bin Nadal witnessed Boral supervising the torture of the Founder using a device that inhibited her shape shifting. Boral claimed it was only restraining her, but one only had to look at the Founder to know it was doing more than that.

Bin Nadal wanted to tell Sintina but he was afraid of losing credibility with her. If there was even a chance of it being true, she had to know. He worked up his courage, "Captain, I've been meaning to tell you something. But I didn't want to bring it up, since I don't have any real proof, and I didn't want to upset you any more than you..."

She rolled her head, "Just tell me, Karim."

The security chief had already confided in Kimula. She had been encouraging him to tell Sintina for weeks. He looked at her as if to ask approval for what he was about to say. The Andorian nodded, her antenna slightly waving.

Karim began explaining, "I've been corresponding with a Dr. Bashir from *Deep Space Nine*..."

Aurelia jumped in, "The one who cured the Founders?"

"The same."

"I don't know how much I'd trust him," said Aurelia, "But go on."

The attack right off the bat took some wind out of Karim's sails, but he pressed on. There was no going back now, "Well, he claims there is some sort

of clandestine group within the Federation and Starfleet. He calls them 'Section 31.'"

For several minutes, bin Nadal relayed everything he had learned in the last few months: to the Founder's claim of the Breen fleet being detected in the Sol system, to the encounter with Admiral Boral, to the attempted genocide of the changelings, everything. She had an odd expression on her face as he explained it all, but she didn't interrupt him. That, in itself, surprised him. Her reaction wasn't what he hoped for, but it was what he expected.

"I can believe a group of vindictive admirals are out there," began Aurelia, "But I refuse to believe there is some organized conspiracy spanning since before the Federation."

"I know it's a lot to take in," said Karim.

The captain continued, "The Federation wasn't responsible for the Founder's disease, it was the Tal'Shiar. I know you've read the classified findings too." Her voice rose slightly, "It's difficult for me to imagine that Starfleet officers were torturing anyone. Maybe they *were* just restraining her." Anger now ran through her tone, "And I refuse to believe the Federation had prior knowledge of the attack on Starfleet Academy and frankly, I'm annoyed and disappointed that you would buy into such a thing." She pointed an accusing finger, "Have you no faith in the Federation? If not, what the hell are you doing in that uniform? What are you defending?"

Karim initially withdrew at her onslaught. A tense moment of silence followed. Not even Kimula was comfortable to interrupt it. Bin Nadal finally found Aurelia's eyes. "There's a difference between the ideal of the Federation and the reality of it. Which is more important to be loyal to?"

Sintina tightly shifted her jaw. She glared at Karim.

Kimula remembered her role, "Let's just get this game started."

The room was still for another several long seconds. Aurelia broke the deadlock, "Where's the dice?"

## CHAPTER 3

### **Supplemental USS Independence, Chief Medical Officer's Quarters Docked at Starbase 17**

A bead of sweat ran down the temple of young Paul Windslow. He quickly wiped it away as his wide eyes were fixed on the looming reptilian in the room.

The humidity was thick when Susan entered. It hit her like a stepping into a spider's web. The living area of the Arkonians was filled with very foreign looking plants from deck to the overhead. Most were a deep purple or plum in color. There were even several insects flying about.

She noticed how terrified Paul, her youngest of only 6 years old, looked. Jeff, 12, remained quiet, which had been his default setting for the last year; at least around her.

Since Susan was the ship's teacher, all the other children had to find other things to do for the next few days. It was a last minute arrangement. She defiantly didn't want to bring her sons with her to the court-martial. Her first, second, and third choices were all going to be too busy tweaking the ship since it was docked. Zo'Kama, on the other hand, would be 'on-call only' for the duration of the stay at the starbase.

"I'm sorry for imposing on you, Doctor," began Susan.

"Nonsense," offered Zo'Kama, "We enjoy visitors." She noticed the perspiration on the humans. "Oh, it must be hot in here for you." She turned to address her daughter in the next room, "Are you warmed up yet, Zo'Kala?"

A smaller version of the doctor poked her head around the corner, saw the aliens in the room, sighed, and said, "I guess."

Zo'Kama looked up slightly, "Computer, lower temperature to 23 degrees." The computer chirped in response. She looked again at her trio of visitors, "Sorry, we raise the temperature sometimes."

Susan didn't mean to blurt it out quite so bluntly, "Do you have any experience with mammalian children?"

Without missing a beat, "I have treated several of them for various medical problems," said the doctor.

"Ah," came from Susan as she looked down at her two sons. Both were pleading her with their eyes.

The sand-colored Arkonian stepped forward, "I do have one question. Have they been weaned yet?"

It was then that Susan considered her fifth option. She could only stand there, a blank expression on her face.

Then a noise started coming from Zo'Kama. It was a series of hisses. There was a smile on her face.

Susan slowly realized the hisses were laughter, or the Arkonian version of it.

"You should have seen your face!" cackled Zo'Kama.

After several seconds of exchanging glances with her children, Susan managed a forced laugh.

Paul grabbed her wrist. Apparently he thought it a good time to voice his concerns, "They scare me, mom."

At that, the doctors' hissing stopped. She hunched down to come eye ball to eye ball with the boy. Susan resisted the urge pull Paul back.

Zo'Kama hissed, "Don't worry, we've already ate today. We shouldn't have to eat again for several days." She smiled wide when she was done talking, exposing her teeth. She got up quickly and laughed once again.

The boy looked up at his mother. She offered reassurance, not only to him but to herself as well, "You'll be fine, really. She's only joking."

Zo'Kama called out to her daughter, who was still hiding in her room. "Remember, don't let the human's drink any *ta'rat'ush* this time."

Susan recalled how Arkonians are not water based, but a thick brown liquid they call *ta'rat'ush*. Zo'Kala, the daughter, once gave it to Jeff to drink. The results were not pleasant.

The mother of the two boys repeated, "You'll be fine ...really."

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Ethan Windslow was in his office on deck two. Admiral Ross had given him a specific frequency to use when contacting him. The conversation would be their last covert communiqué.

"You said there would be no court-martial!" blasted Windslow.

"There wasn't going to be," began Ross, "But the situation is now out of my hands."

The harsh tone in Ethan's voice was now replaced by meekness, "But ... you said, you needed me for some type of assignment."

Ross wanted to end this association quickly. It had taken much of his time and spirit. He actually felt good that he wouldn't be covering for Windslow anymore. He looked up at the scared and confused man before him, only having a distant sympathy for him. "It doesn't matter anymore. All bets are off."

"What does that mean?" begged the commander.

The admiral's hand moved below the screen. "Good luck with your court martial."

The image of Ross blinked away.



## CHAPTER 4

### Supplemental

#### Althos IV

#### Homeworld of the Federation Race Bzzit Khaht

It seemed to be dusk. The stone streets were poorly maintained. The structures nearby didn't appear to be in any better shape. Most of the buildings were cylindrical in shape with domed roofs. Most had a thick layer of rust along the joints. A smattering of people trudged along to wherever they thought they needed to go.

Surprisingly, very few had the unmistakable characteristics of the Bzzit Khaht. The natives of this planet were, on average, little more than a meter in height. They were generally humanoid but with oversized eyes, ears, and lips. Their eyes had vertical pupils. Most of the residences here, however, were foreign aliens.

Three formations of light began to materialize in the street. Moments later, the luminous effect faded to reveal the *Indy's* chief engineer, Lieutenant Jinal; science officer, Tang; and helm officer, D'nas. D'nas wore his earth-toned, Tamarian military uniform, as he usually did. Jinal had refused to change his attire from his duty uniform. Only the junior lieutenant had civilian clothing on.

Tang Zian was the first to voice the group's concerns. "Are you sure we were transported to the right spot?"

Jinal, the Vulcan pretender, conjectured, "Perhaps the transporter operator on the Starbase misunderstood us."

"Stupid protocols," said Tang, referring to a policy that *Starbase 17* sent to the *Independence* requiring the starbase to handle all transports to the surface. "We should've just transported straight from the *Indy*."

Jinal offered, almost nervously, "Maybe we should contact the starbase and beam back."

D'nas opened his arms as he pleaded, "We should at least look around since we're here."

"I'm beginning to regret agreeing to this venture," said the engineer.

Zian nodded, "I'm with you Jinal." He turned to D'nas, "This place doesn't hold a candle to Betazed."

The Tamarian placed his hands on his hips. "I'm surprised. The Federation is known for its spirit of exploration and you two don't even explore your own worlds."

"I can barely see *to* explore," countered Tang.

"The Althos' asteroid belt is so dense," explained Jinal, "that little of the star's light reaches the planet."

D'nas attempted to perk the group up, "Which explains why the Bzzit Khaht have unusually large eyes. See, we have already discovered something!"

The science officer was not amused, "Great. I'd still rather be lying on the beach of the Opal Sea."

The exchange officer desperately searched the area for something to keep his shipmates' interest. He found it down the block. "That looks like an interesting place," D'nas offered as he pointed out a place of business. Odd music could be heard from the establishment.

"It appears to a lounge area," observed the Romulan, using his near constant Vulcan impersonation.

Zian looked. He rolled his head in submission and shrugged his shoulders.

The Tamarian began walking enthusiastically as he spoke, "Come on, a drink would be refreshing."

The remaining two looked at each other and fell into step with D'nas.

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The place resembled something out of Earth's 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, with wood floors and walls. It was an interesting contrast to the metal façade. Though, the interior looked as run down as the exterior.

The major distinction between this place and an old Irish tavern was the crowd: several Xyrillians, Trill, a few Chalnoth, even two Tzenketh.

Tang could hardly hear over the loud music and talking. He was relieved, however, as he looked over the people. There were about a dozen Starfleet officers in uniform scattered about; the vast majority of patrons, however, were obviously not Starfleet. Most were seated at several wooden tables. There was a dom-jot table ... one dom-jot table.

Despite a few comrades in the room, Tang was still hesitant. "I think we beamed into the slum part of the planet."

"I concur," simply stated, Jinal.

D'nas wasted no time ordering a Makara fizz. The bartender had just handed the clear, bubbling beverage to him. He observed his two crewmates. Neither one appeared to be enjoying themselves. The Tamarian reluctantly bobbed his head, "Fine, we can leave, but at least allow me to finish my drink."

There didn't appear to be a table with three empty chairs, so the trio loitered at the bar. D'nas drank on a stool. Zian began to tap his foot to the music as he leaned his elbows on the partition. Jinal, on the other hand, stood ridged; doing a fair impression of an uncomfortable Vulcan.

The peculiar looking group was silent for several seconds.

Two Chalthoth sat a few meters away. The *Indy* crewmembers didn't notice one of them pointing in their direction. The two hairy, leather-clad aliens talked amongst themselves for a moment. One spoke up, addressing D'nas, "Warrior."

The exchange officer and the Starfleet were oblivious to the call.

Louder, the Chalthoth yelled, "Warrior!"

Again the large alien received no satisfaction. He stood and bellowed, "Hey, you!"

This time, not only did he get D'nas' attention, but half the tavern's patrons.

The Tamarian made eye contact as the rest of the room returned to their own diversions. D'nas looked around, and then returned to the Chalthoth. "Are you requesting me?"

A healthy belly laugh came from both the aliens. One of them responded, "Yes, I wish to exchange tales with a fellow dagger wielder."

D'nas looked down to his uniform and touched his sheathed blade. All Tamarian military bore a blade on their torso, attached by two leather strips going from the belt over the left shoulder. He responded cordially, "Ah, very well." D'nas began to move to the Chalnoth's table.

Before the exchange officer could take two steps, Tang grabbed his upper arm. D'nas turned; a bewildered look on his face.

The science officer said, "I'll excuse your ignorance, but those are Chalnoth."

"And?" questioned the young ensign.

Zian rotated his head in a mix of astonishment and annoyance, "And they're the thugs of the galaxy."

Jinal chimed in, "Not to mention, they appear to be intoxicated."

"I am truly disappointed," began D'nas. He shook his head, "I see I have given you too much credit. Stereotypes are still quite common in the Federation." He removed Zian's hand, "I will socialize with whomever I choose."

The Tamarian defiantly walked up to the Chalnoth and sat in one of the open seats.

Tang slapped Jinal lightly in the back. "Why did you let him go like that?"

"I didn't," said Jinal. "I agreed with you."

"Yeah, but couldn't you have given him a Vulcan neck pinch or something?"

"Vulcan nerve pinch," corrected Jinal. He sighed, "And D'nas is right. Stereotypes are common. Not all Vulcans know the technique."

The Asian returned to his position of leaning on the bar, "Oh." He looked over at D'nas. "Well, should we join them?"

The engineer's fear got the better of him, "Perhaps merely observing would be sufficient."

Zian's courage apparently faltered as well, "Good idea, we can always jump in if we need to. Once a Starfleet officer gets involved all these other officers will help too."

## CHAPTER 5

### **Supplemental**

#### **Althos IV**

#### **Homeworld of the Federation race Bzzit Khaht**

One of the first details D'nas noticed were the four narrow fangs coming up from the lower jaw of the Chalnoth. A tooth on one of the individuals had forced its way into the upper lip, creating a hole that the fang slid in and out of when he talked.

The Chalnoth with the disfiguration held his arms out wide, "Welcome, warrior!"

The other alien asked the helmsman in gruff voice, "I've never seen your kind here before. What species are you?"

D'nas sat up tall and proud, "I'm a Child of Tama." The Chalnoth shared a baffled look. Another term seemed to be in order, "...Tamarian. My name is D'nas. I've been told you are Chalnoth."

"Whoever told you that was right," confirmed the first Chalnoth. "My name is Apash and this is my partner, Kavak."

"I'm not surprised you haven't seen my kind," offered D'nas. "My homeworld is nearly 300 light years away."

Kavak seemed to approve, "Ah, we are also travelers."

"Traders, really," interjected Apash.

The young Tamarian was overjoyed to engage the two in conversation. He took a brief glance at his crewmates and smiled to prove his point. Tang and Jinal still lingered at the bar. Both were wide-eyed. He turned back to his current company, "What do you trade?"

Apash and Kavak regarded each other in silent contemplation. Apash finally shrugged and said in a quieter tone, "Maraji crystals."

"Mar-aji crystals?" repeated D'nas.

Kavak fielded the question as he leaned in closer, "It's a something to help achieve a... spiritual plane."

The Tamarian evenly inquired, "Do you mean a hallucination?"

The two large masses of hair, fang, and leather began shift in their seats, not knowing how to act in response to the observation.

D'nas read the nervousness in the two. To calm them, he explained, "Hallucinations are part of Tamarian culture. We often use them in our rituals."

The Chalnoth relaxed a bit. Apash's tooth slid as he asked, "Would you care for a sample?"

The exchange officer backed off a bit. He began to exercise some level of caution. "Is it a naturally occurring substance?"

"It is," responded Apash. He reached into a bag next to him. His hand emerged with a small greenish crystal. "Here," he said as he extended his hand to D'nas.

A hand with a distinguished elongated thumb, a characteristic of Tamarians, reached out. D'nas stopped short of touching it. "How is it ingested?"

Kavak answered, "It is most often dissolved in a beverage first. Make sure the liquid is fairly acidic."

Only then did D'nas make contact with the object. "I will. Thank you."

The two traders looked very proud of themselves...until the Tamarian began to put it in a small pouch on his belt.

"Try it now," prodded Apash.

D'nas shook his head fervently. "Oh I can't, any substance we use has to ritually purified." As he snapped shut the pouch, he added, "And, besides, I'm not sure if this Maraji is compatible with my physiology. I would be foolish to take it without analyzing it."

Apash and Kavak's expressions soured. "Very well," grumbled Apash as he nodded slightly at Kavak.

"That is a fine blade," prompted Kavak. "My I see it?"

D'nas grabbed the handle and unsheathed his blade, "Of course, this is a Betoken of Uzani."

The dark-green gripped dagger was smooth on one side; the other had two serrations; the blade itself was, ever so slightly, yellow in color. D'nas displayed it to the Chalnoth, but made no attempt to offer it to them.

Kavak examined the knife with genuine curiosity. He broke his gaze only long enough to ask, "Who is Uzani?"

The Tamarian began making some basic movements with his weapon in the air. "A great warrior in our history. He was the first to present his children with a blade at the time when the birds fly."

A type of grunt emanated from Apash.

"At age 10," elaborated D'nas, "Tamarian males are sent into the wilderness alone and armed only with the Betoken of Uzani."

Apash seemed to approve, "A rite of passage to adulthood."

"Exactly."

Kavak sat up straighter, "So how many enemies have you slain with the blade?"

The Child of Tama laughed at the very notion. "None, the dagger is more ceremonial than anything else. We usually only use it in a ritual where we fight a life-form, which generates a strong electromagnetic field..."

Apash's wooden chair slammed into the floor as he stood. He pointed at D'nas, "You are no warrior!"

Zian and Jinal jerked in reaction to the sudden movement. "Oh no, here we go," observed the science officer.

The exchange officer was taken aback but he had the presence of mind to remain seated, so not to appear confrontational, "No, I'm a linguist and a pilot."



Kavak joined in his partner's outrage, "We allowed you at our table!"

D'nas suddenly realized his Betoken of Uzani was still out. He quickly placed it back in its sheath. He then slowly got out of his chair with his hands open in a submissive manner. "If you wish me to leave, I will. Sorry for the misunderstanding."

Apash shouted, "No, draw your blade." He and Kavak took out their daggers to underscore the seriousness of the situation.

At that point, Lieutenant Jinal and Tang were now abreast of the helm officer.

"He's not from around here," offered Tang. "We'll just get him out of here." He placed his hand on D'nas' shoulder and began to move away. Not surprisingly, the Tamarian didn't resist the clutches of the Asian this time.

"No," demanded Kavak, "we've been deceived and we will have our revenge."

Jinal's persona deteriorated slightly, "We... we wouldn't be worth the trouble."

Apash grimaced, "It will be no trouble at all." He headed for Jinal with his blade raised. As a downward thrust began, D'nas plowed his entire body into the Chalnoth; both crashed to the floor.

Kavak moved in. He bent over to attack the Tamarian now on top of his compatriot. Tang, rather ungracefully, jumped on Kavak's back. The science officer could only hold on as the larger Chalnoth thrashed about to remove the human.

Jinal stood impotent. He wasn't sure how to react. He watched from light-years away as D'nas and Apash grappled on the floor. D'nas resorted to drawing his dagger to defend himself. The Chalnoth, however, was obviously more competent with a blade. Apash held D'nas' weapon hand and slashed out with his own. The Tamarian avoided the main blow but a gash was made on his left cheek; a thick, white paste extruding from it.

The engineer looked around long enough to see that most people in the bar now stood watching. All gave the combatants a wide berth. Not even the other Starfleet in the room neared them.

Instead of going for the kill shot, Apash slapped D'nas off him and got up. The Tamarian released his grip on his dagger and rolled several times until a chair occupied by a Grazerite stopped him. The Grazerite made it a point to move away from the brawl.

Jinal then observed Tang flying over a table and onto the floor as well. A feeling started to form in Jinal's gut. Years of careful training to hide his heritage eroded away as he saw his shipmates lying in agony. He remembered what it was like to be Romulan.

*Was the Chalnoth running at him or was he running at the Chalnoth?*

Jinal made a frenzy of an attack. Kavak saw the charge at the last moment. Instinctively, he extended his dagger.

Jinal was centimeters from Kavak's face, but he could get no closer. *'Why can't I keep going?'* He looked down to see a hand next to his stomach. Then, he returned his attention to Kavak. Kavak seemed as surprised as he was.

D'nas willed his aching body to move. Apash loomed over him. The Chalnoth deliberately licked a small amount of the white blood from his blade and grinned.

A flash of red-orange light briefly appeared behind the Chalnoth. Apash fell to his knees for a second before the rest of his body succumb to gravity.

D'nas had time to discover the source of the light, a ceiling-mounted phaser unit, before he saw the same beam of energy again.

## CHAPTER 6

**Stardate: 53244.1 (30 March 2376)**

**Starbase 17**

**Courtroom 3, United Federation of Planets v. Windslow**

It had been an awkward morning to say the least. Ethan got up, groomed, ate breakfast, and put on his dress uniform without even making eye contact with Susan. She left shortly after he did. Now, she stared at the back of his head in the courtroom. It took what seemed like an eternity for the three judges to enter. One admiral and two captains comprised the court. All stood as they sat. Finally, she would get some answers.

The admiral, a human woman with a hint of copper left in her hair, started things off as she tapped a bell. "These proceedings are now open. The accused has waived his right to a trial by jury." She regarded Windslow with no malice, "Captain Ethan Windslow, you are accused of: desertion, for leaving the scene of a battle; conduct unbecoming an officer, and impeding an investigation."

Susan gasped as she covered her mouth. Instinctively, Ethan looked back at her; his face full of embarrassment and shame.

"How do you plead, Captain Windslow?" The question was distant.

Time slowed for Windslow. *'Was this really happening? ...No, there must have been a miscommunication with Ross. What evidence could they have? ...I'm a Starfleet officer. I need to tell the truth! Maybe their case is a weak one? I could still get out of this and get a ship again. ...Is that what you really want? A ship? ...I'm so sorry, Susan...'*

The presiding admiral repeated the question. Only the nudge from his counsel, Lieutenant Commander Horlem, an un-joined Trill male, brought him back to focus.

His mouth had become too used to lying. It uttered, "Not guilty, sir," even as his mind debated.

"Very well," rejoined the admiral. "Captain, we will..."

The UFP prosecutor, a Zakdorn female, stood. "Admiral Miller, Ethan Windslow was provisionally demoted to the rank of commander on Stardate 52926. I request..."

"For the duration of the investigation," interrupted the admiral. "I know. That is a decision I do not agree with. That's a case of punishing an officer before the outcome is known. Besides, the terms of his demotion are no longer relevant. The investigation stage of this process is over. Therefore, I am correct in referring to the defendant as 'Captain Ethan Windslow.' Understood, Commander Morichi?"

The Zakdorn's displeasure at being overruled was evident. Her face contorted as she returned to her seat, "Yes sir."

Admiral Miller picked up a small mallet, "We'll reconvene tomorrow at zero-nine hundred." She rapped the bell, beginning the nearly twenty-four hour recess.

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Captain Aurelia examined the faces in the room to see if she recognized anyone. ...No one. She sighed as she slumped in her chair a bit. The room sat about a dozen green captains. They all faced a large, currently blank, viewscreen with a desk in front of it. The background noise of conversation annoyed Sintina since she was not a part of it. Luckily, the presenter started things off punctually.

A tall, skinny man perched himself on the desk in the front of the room. He had five pips on his collar; a fleet captain. Most captains are promoted straight to admiral. Some one in Command must have thought it would be a nice ploy to put the new shipmasters at ease. *'Nothin' but us capt'ns here,'* mused Sintina.

"I'm Fleet Captain Wilson. Welcome to day one of the Starfleet Captain's Course. Don't worry, there are no exams," a polite laugh from the crowd followed. Aurelia didn't join in. "It's really only a bunch of briefings." He moved to one side of the display, "Let's jump right in." The screen came to life, showing the Starfleet emblem. "Our first topic of discussion is resource assessment. You don't know what you can do until you know what you have..."

Aurelia slumped even lower into her seat. She unenthusiastically prepared herself for the disquisition to follow.

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The light was blinding. Where was he? His eyes slowly adjusted to the illumination. A face hovered over his. The blur became recognizable. It was Zian.

"Welcome back," smiled Tang.

D'nas clumsily sat up, his head throbbing. He wasn't sure if it was from the beating he took or the phaser blast. "Where are we?"

Tang offered the Tamarian an arm, "In a brig...Thanks for listening to our advice, by the way."

The ensign looked around, "Where's Jinal?"

"At a medical center, or so our hosts tell me," he gestured to the Starfleet guards at a desk beyond the invisible barrier.

Rubbing his temples, D'nas asked, "Does Captain Aurelia know what happened?"

Tang sat next to him on the bench/bed, "Not yet, bin Nadal's in charge of the ship. He said the captain and the XO are indisposed."

"What's the punishment for getting into an altercation like this?" queried D'nas.

Zian shook his head, "That's the least of your problems."

"What do you mean?"

"The guards told us they found a Maraji Crystal on you," said the science officer.

D'nas innocently confirmed, "Yes, one of the Chalnoth gave it to me."

Tang stood and flapped his arms wildly, "Ah, D'nas!"

“Why? Is that a problem?”

Zian stooped down, as if addressing a child, “Maraji Crystals are illegal.”

“Oh,” responded the Tamarian with a dull look on his face.

One of the security officers walked up, “I just received word. Your friend is stable in our medical center.”

“What’s going to happen to us?” asked D’nas.

The guard shrugged, “It’s up to your captain and local commanders. Until then, you stay here.”

The Asian science officer plopped down on the bench. He eased himself down and put his arm over his eyes. “I really liked Betazed better.”

## CHAPTER 7

### **Supplemental Starbase 17 Medical Center**

Counselor Kimula guided the children to several empty chairs in the waiting room as Zo’Kama walked up to the receptionist.

“Sit here,” instructed the Andorian. She didn’t wait to see the kids comply. Instead she joined the doctor.

The three children; Zo’Kala, Jeff, and Paul sat in silence for several seconds. Paul and Jeff hadn’t yet interacted much with the reptilians. They spent most of their time playing games by themselves. Doctor Zo’Kama attempted to lighten the mood, but decided to give the mammals their space until they were more comfortable. Zo’Kala, the adolescent Arkonian female remained isolated in her room. ...Until the call came from bin Nadal.

Zo’Kala broke the sullenness, “So where are your parents anyway?”

Jeff, the eldest boy, fielded the question, “In court. Mom said, someone thinks dad broke the law.”

“What law?” asked the bright green reptile. She shed her skin only a few weeks ago.

He twiddled with his thumbs, “I don’t know.”

“Do you think he murdered someone?” pressed Zo’Kala.

The rudeness of the inquiry didn’t seem to affect Jeff. “I don’t know.”

Paul, however, looked distressed and began to fidget.

Zo’Kala was unintentionally relentless, “Do you think he’ll go to prison?”

Paul’s eyes began to water. Jeff remained stoic as he replied, “I don’t care. I haven’t seen him much since I was little. And I don’t like him much since the war.”

“You don’t like your own life-giver?” questioned the Arkonian.

"Not really," answered the twelve year old.

Paul could contain himself no longer, "Stop saying that! Stop being mean to dad."

The older brother dismissed his demand, "You don't even know him."

"Yes I do!" loudly retorted the younger boy.

It was enough to gain Kimula's attention. Normally, she would have delved more deeply into the altercation, but not now. "Kids, shhh! We're looking in on a friend. We need you to be quite."

Jeff protested under his breath, "He's not my friend."

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A few minutes later, Kimula found herself next to a biobed bearing Jinal. Zo'Kama would join her shortly. The doctor seemed eager to track down the physician that treated the *Independence's* chief engineer.

Jinal was conscious, but groggy. Kimula immediately took his left hand in hers as she reached his bedside. She smiled, "I was worried about you. How are you feeling, pink skin?"

"I'm..." began Jinal. His mind gathered. He remembered, albeit vaguely, his actions before he was brought here. *'An infirmary... Did the doctors discover he was a Romulan? Did Tang or D'nas see him lose character? How much did they know?'* Finally, he reasoned there would be nothing lost if he continued the deception for now. "I'm incapable of feel..."

"I know Vulcans better than that, Jinal. Andorians used to make war with your kind, remember?" inserted the counselor.

She called him a Vulcan. His anxiety dimmed somewhat, but he wasn't out of the woods, yet. "I'm fatigued," offered Jinal. It was only then that he realized the contact she was making. Neither withdrew from the touch as Jinal nervously surveyed the three inter-mixed hands.

"I suppose this incident won't encourage you to socialize more," bantered Kimula.



He looked up from the embrace, "I would guess not."

"It occurs to me," recalled the Andorian, "we've been serving together for nearly two years and we know very little about each other."

*'What was she getting at?'* worried the mock Vulcan.

"I'm sure I couldn't offer much competition, but would you like to play kal-toh with me sometime?"

He was terrible at the game. Was she trying to test him? "Perhaps," was all he could manage.

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"Did you happen to run a cytological screening?" asked Zo'Kama. She regretted being so blunt, but subtlety had not yielded her the results she was looking for.

The physician, a relatively young human male, shot her a puzzled look, "For that wound? Why would I need to? The knife cut through the rectus abdominis and punctured both intestine; pretty simple surgery."

"So there was no need for an infusion?" prodded the Arkonian.

"No, the patient got treatment less than a minute after the trauma. The blood loss was minimal," explained the doctor. "In fact, he's taking up valuable bed space. I'm transferring him to Security as soon as I get a chance."

Zo'Kama smiled, exposing a mouth full of incisors. "Thank you for your time, doctor."

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Jinal inspected Zo'Kama for any hints of gloom as she walked up to the biobed. The reptilian must have seen the dread in his eyes, because she began to speak from several meters away.

"I have good news, Jinal. There were no complications during your treatment."

The Romulan immediately took her meaning as his burden was once again renewed.

“However,” continued the doctor, “the next time we visit, you’ll be in a holding cell.”

“From what Jinal’s told me,” said Kimula, “those Chalthoth are the ones who are going to have an extended stay in jail. You, D’nas, and Tang should be out once the captain is out of that briefing.” She grinned, “Then, I can whip you in kal-toh.”

Jinal upcast an eyebrow for several reasons.

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The newly minted captains flowed out of the classroom like water from a ruptured dam. Aurelia made her way out of the flood. The eight hours of briefs had been tedious: ship functions, personnel management, conflict resolution, first contact procedures, proper documentation...

She wanted nothing more than to go back to the *Indy*, take off her boots, and listen to music. Sintina only made it about twenty paces before her compin chirped. She rolled her head as she tapped it, “Aurelia here.”

“Captain,” reported bin Nadal, “*you might want to swing by the starbase’s brig before you come back.*”

“Hhhggg,” vocalized Sintina.

“Ma’am?”

Her tone telegraphed her mood, “Who?”

Bin Nadal came back with some hint of regret and sympathy in his voice, “*Jinal, Tang, and D’nas.*”

Her casual walk became movement with a purpose, “Understood, Aurelia out.”

## CHAPTER 8

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

For nearly an hour, Ethan attempted to hail Ross. His efforts were meant only with failure. The codes and frequencies had obviously been changed. He slammed his fists on the desk, "Bastard!"

Rage mutated into regret and self-loathing. His eyes began to water. He was about ready to lay his head down and sob when the door chime went off. Windslow recovered as best he could. It took at least three tolls. He gathered enough composure, "Enter."

He was not pleased when his wife, Susan, rushed in. She didn't seem mad or disappointed. As a matter a fact, she was energized.

"Don't worry, we'll fight this. I know you couldn't have done those things." She moved behind his chair and hugged him. "I understand why you didn't want us to know. But you said you didn't do it, and I believe you."

The show of trust was a kick in the gut for Ethan. He gently worked his way out of her embrace. "The trial isn't over."

The lack of affection disappointed her, but she continued, "No, but the judge seems fair. What do you think of your counsel?"

Ethan had to show no emotions. If he didn't bury them now, he would break down. "I love you, but I want to be alone right now."

Susan grudgingly made her way to the exit. She paused and turned, "You've chosen to be alone ever since we got on this ship. It doesn't seem to be helping." She didn't linger for a response. The hatch closed.

Ethan hung his head. He examined the face staring back at him in the black glass surface of this desk. A drop of water distorted the image.

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The trio of Jinal, D'nas, and Tang lay silent on three sides of the small holding cell. All that they wanted to say to each other had been said hours ago.

Luckily for Jinal, Tang and D'nas were too dazed to notice his ill-fated rush last night. There was only the minor hum of the forcefield now.

Footfalls...someone was coming. The three shared glances; knowing what was to come. Captain Aurelia came within centimeters of the barrier. The prisoners all stood.

After explaining their version of events, the captain asked, "What the hell where you three thinking?"

D'nas attempted to answer the question, "Captain..."

"Stow it!" snapped Sintina.

The order didn't quite make sense to D'nas, but he understood enough to comply.

"All I wanted," continued Sintina, "was to go back to my quarters after a long and boring briefing, and now I have to deal with this situation."

Tang offered a genuine, "We're sorry, captain."

Aurelia rejoined, "I don't really give a damn if you are or not. I'll tell you this, you will regret it." She turned to the chief of the facility, "Who do I have to talk to in order to get them out of here and back on my ship?"

"You'd have to talk to Admiral Nechayev, sir," reported the chief.

The captain turned back to the group, her tone was serious, "And that's going to cost you more...I hate talking to admirals."

The three had no immediate response, except to look pathetic.

She stepped closer making eye contact with Jinal and Tang, "Why did you let him sit with the Chalnoth, anyway?"

Zian exhaled as he examined the floor and Jinal blinked several times.

Sintina walked away without an answer. Just before she exited the brig, she could be heard mumbling, "...didn't even win."

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Fleet Admiral Alynna Nechayev stood next to a display set into the bulkhead. It appeared to be a map of the sector. She examined it as she took notes on a padd. The entrance indicator sounded. She checked the chronometer on her desk...17:27, "Right on schedule." The admiral lowered the padd and faced the door, "Enter."

Sintina stepped in, "Sir, I'm Captain Aurelia of the *Independence*, may I have a moment?"

"I was about ready to leave my office," stated the admiral, "you're lucky you caught me. What is it?"

The captain summoned her most humble voice, "Sir, I have a few officers in the brig and I was won...."

Nechayev cut in, "Oh yes, I read the criminal activity report: two lieutenants for disorderly conduct and an exchange officer from Tamar for the same and possession of a controlled substance."

"What the report doesn't include," added Sintina, "was the fight was instigated by the two Chalnoth involved. As far as D'nas and the drug, he was unaware it was illegal."

Nechayev put the padd on the table and stepped closer, "According to witnesses, this D'nas displayed his weapon before the Chalnoth did. The Chalnoth claim your officer demanded they give him Maraji Crystals. He then threatened them when they didn't have any. When they rose to defend themselves, the other two officers jumped them."

Without thinking, Aurelia burst, "And you believe them?"

"Watch your tone, captain," snapped Nechayev. She quickly returned to a more civil voice, "I have no reason not to believe them. None of the witnesses actually heard the conversation before the attack happened."

"So you're going to take their word over Starfleet officers?"

"Tang and Jinal admit they didn't hear the conversation either," countered the admiral. "And as for the Tamarian, we know so little about their culture. It's possible fighting and drug use is common."

Aurelia clasped her hands tightly behind her back; it was all she could do to maintain her professionalism. "I've seen no indication of that, sir."

"I have no desire to see this happen to your crew either, Captain," offered Nechayev. "But I have to follow procedure and the law. All the evidence I have says the Chalnoth are the victims here. I'll have to let them go and punish your officers under the Code of Starfleet Justice."

Under a clinched jaw, Sintina spoke, "Sir, this is ridiculous. Obviously, the Chalnoth are lying."

"I have to follow the rules, just like you," said the admiral. "I'm sympathetic, but there's nothing we can do. Dismissed."

The captain paused for a moment, but then smartly turned and walked out. Several steps into the corridor, she activated her combadge, "Aurelia to *Independence*."

*"Independence here."*

"Bin Nadal," ordered Sintina as she walked, "I need you to do some digging."

*"I'm already on it."*

Aurelia smiled. *'He might have some crazy ideas, but the man knows how to investigate.'*

## CHAPTER 9

**Stardate: 53246.9 (31 March 2376)**

**Starbase 17**

**Courtroom 3, United Federation of Planets v. Windslow**

Again, Ethan Windslow felt the glare of his wife's eyes upon the back of his head. He had been too prideful to confide in her during the last few months. Once Windslow knew an investigation had begun, his first impulse was to confess. He was ready to. Then, Admiral Ross called.

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**...Stardate: 52930.2 (6 Dec 2375)**

"What do you mean, 'don't cooperate with the investigation?'" a dumbfounded Ethan asked.

The long face of William Ross responded, "There is an opportunity for you here, Captain. I can make the evidence against you disappear, but I need to know you won't crack."

"I don't understand," said Windslow, "why would you want to do that?"

The admiral shifted in his seat, "There's a position opening up on a very important ship. I want to see you get the job."

Ethan knew the consequences of his actions if he were convicted. He couldn't believe what he had done so far. *'How had I become someone I hate?'*

Ross must have seen Ethan's contemplation. He cut in, "It would be like it never happened, Captain."

*'There was a time I respected myself,'* thought Windslow. *'Oh god, what if my family finds out? ...The things I've done...the terrible things I've done.'*

The admiral tempted, "All you have to do is stay quiet."

*'...They would never know....how could they? The ship is destroyed, they all died. ...they all died. ...They were already dead.'*

"I need an answer, Captain."

Ethan looked up at the dark-haired man, "Ok, sir."

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His mind now back in the courtroom, he still debated. *'Why am I still lying?'* The answer, he decided, was that he was a coward; a coward without the moral fortitude to come forward. He still clung to the lie as if it were a lover.

Prosecutor Morichi rose to lay out the case to the court. "According to Starfleet records, on stardate 52857, the USS *Bismarck* was ordered to detach from the Second Fleet to provide humanitarian relief to the recently liberated Cardassian colony of Pentath III.

Two days later, Captain Windslow and his ship arrived. Long range scans from a Romulan cruiser confirm that. After being there for only six hours, the *Bismarck* left orbit and rendezvoused with the rest of the fleet...minus 25 officers.

Captain Windslow reported that the 25 were KIA and the colony was not secure. The fleet commander accepted that.

Two weeks later, on stardate 52917, the *Bismarck* was destroyed in a skirmish along with two other ships by a Dominion patrol. It was only when the recovery team accessed the logs did they discover the now deceased first officer's report alleging the crimes of the captain."

The Zakdorn continued as she purposely wondered the room. "According to the late Commander Kalana, Captain Windslow abandoned his officers on the planet and deleted sensor records proving his guilt. Commander Kalana attempted to contact Starfleet, but outgoing communications were being blocked by the captain. The ship lacked a CMO because of the incident, so Captain Windslow couldn't have been deemed unfit for command. The first officer had little recourse but to make a log entry and bid her time."

Ethan focused on some unseen point on the table. A mix of annoyance and grief as his former XO reached him from beyond the grave. He dared not look back at Susan.

Admiral Miller, the presiding officer, turned to Lieutenant Commander Horlem. "Your response?"



Horlem, an un-joined Trill nodded as he left his chair. "The prosecutor left out some very important details. First, all outgoing communications were restricted throughout the entire fleet due to the realities of war. Second, she forgot to mention the details of the final battle that lead to the *Bismarck's* fate."

He gestured dramatically at his client, "Captain Windslow fought gallantly for a year as captain of the *Bismarck*. His first battle as captain was the raid against the shipyards at Torros III. Later, he commanded the *Bismarck* as part of Operation Return. The Second Fleet lost two-thirds of their ships before the recapture of Deep Space Nine. The *Bismarck* was also part of the fleet that liberated Betazed. In all that time, Ethan Windslow performed as captain well and with no complaints by his superiors.

Horlem looked directly at the court, "In the *Bismarck's* final battle, Captain Windslow put his ship between a disabled *Saber* class and the enemy; providing time for that crew to escape. Unfortunately, in that particular skirmish, the Dominion destroyed every escape pod they could. The only reason why Captain Windslow survived was because he was the last person to get off his ship. Something any good captain would do. His pod was so close to the explosion of the *Bismarck*, it was rendered powerless and the Dominion didn't find it in the debris."

Morichi spoke out of turn, "It is rather convenient how only he survived. But lets..."

The Trill ran to defend Windslow, "Are you implying that my client nearly froze and suffocated to death as part of a plot?"

"I'm just stating..." began the Zakdorn.

"That's enough," boldly stated Admiral Miller, "End the speculation; let's get down to the charges at hand."

Both Morichi and Horlem offered a, "Yes sir."

"Much of the data in the *Bismarck's* computer was irretrievable," began the prosecutor, "but there is a gap of sensor information on stardate 52863.4; the very time that Captain Windslow was at Pentath III."

Horlem dismissed the statement, "That proves nothing, sirs. Data is often lost after the destruction of a ship."

The Zakdorn's face lit up, barely containing her satisfaction, "The data block in question had no physical damage. The data was simply erased. After some extensive work, engineers were able to recover some information, though not the sensor data itself. The command for the erasure was logged as having Captain Windslow's authorization code."

Ethan's only outward reaction was a long blink. Susan was numb, her mouth ajar. Admiral Miller and the two captains shared some brief glances.

Miller's tone was professional, "Is there any other forensic evidence you wish to present today?"

Morichi gave a reluctant shrug, "It is difficult to retrieve any additional evidence from Pentath III, so unfortunately, no sir."

The Trill stood, "For the record, sirs, it is difficult to get evidence from Pentath III because Starfleet still considers the colony hostile."

The admiral nodded, as she reached for the bell, "So noted. We will recess until tomorrow, at which time, witnesses will be called."

All stood as the three court members left. The prosecutor moved out as well. A smattering of people whom had come to witness the trial began leaving too. To Ethan's relief, Susan also exited.

The second she left, a look of horror descended upon Windslow's face. In a near panic, he grabbed Horlem by the arm, "Witnesses! How can there be witnesses? They're not going to believe the word of a Cardassian, will they?"

The Trill looked down at his client, with a cold look in his eyes, he informed Ethan, "The witnesses aren't Cardassian."

## CHAPTER 10

### **Supplemental Starbase 17 Starfleet Captain's Briefing, Day Two**

Sintina sat down again with a group of people she didn't know. She attempted to socialize yesterday, but Fleet Captain Wilson didn't give any breaks. It was wall to wall lecture. She assumed her slumping position. Wilson didn't waste any time. *'At least he isn't mono-tone,'* she thought.

Aurelia wasn't feeling very social anyway. She fumed over the latest admiral she crossed horns with, Admiral Nechayev. The pompous hag couldn't see past her own desk. She was willing to let three Starfleet officers rot in the brig while letting two Chalthoth scot-free. Aurelia shook her head, unable to fathom the admiral's reasoning.

The captain knew enough about her security officer to know that once he found something, he'd inform her. So she allowed him his breathing room. Other than his conspiracy-prone mind, bin Nadal had never disappointed her.

Fleet Captain Wilson began; her seething would have to wait.

"Along with the rank of captain," Wilson opened, "you all now have a Level 10 Security Clearance; which brings us to the classified portion of this briefing."

Aurelia sat up slightly, her curiosity had been peaked. Perhaps she was saved from another day of doldrums.

The fleet captain continued, "What I am about to tell you, is not to reach the ears of anyone below the rank of captain. Understood?"

The crowd either gave a silent nod or an 'Aye sir.'

A thought occurred to Aurelia. *'Maybe this Section 31 is for eyes only of level 10 clearance? ...No, Karim is just gullible.'* As her thought formed, however, she knew that it wasn't true. Bin Nadal had never been one to be credulous.

Wilson walked up to the large screen, tapped it, and a large symbol appeared. It looked like an up-side-down "U", but not quite. He moved and spoke with purpose, more so than the day before. "If you are ever on a deep space

mission and all your displays look like this all of a sudden, you have a problem.”

At this point, all the students listened intently.

“In 2269, a team of Federation scientists were working on a top secret experiment entitled "Project Omega" at a classified research center in the Lantaru sector. The project's goal was to create an inexhaustible energy source...”

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“Just a few more,” said bin Nadal to himself.

He already found the criminal records for the Chalnoth traders. Apash was arrested for smuggling in the Relva System two years ago. It was odd, he was charged, but there was no conviction. There was no verdict at all. The case wasn’t dismissed... it just, wasn’t there. Kavak, on the other hand, had no record. It surprised Karim. The Chalnoth have no government. They live in a state of anarchy and they relish it. Most Chalnoth get into some type of trouble while traveling in the Federation, if for no other reason than societal differences.

Those two revelations led him to take more drastic measures. The Chalnoth’s ship was in orbit. He was currently hacking into their computer. Technically, it was illegal....no, there was no technicality to it...it was illegal. It was not the first time he had done it. In his two years in Starfleet Intelligence, he had broken into several computers. It was often more effective than a direct interrogation anyway.

He searched their records for several minutes. Their flight path, inter-ship communication, intra-ship messages, logs, and then he found something interesting.

According to Kavak’s log, just last week, when they were entering the sector, they were detained for smuggling. Again, they were released. He mentioned... *‘What an idiot! He identified her by name!’*

After his offence at the blatant breach of covert protocol wore off, the implication began to set in. “Nechayev...I bet she’s 31.”

A *da-da-da* sounded. Still shocked, he looked up, “Enter.”

His first impulse was to jump over the desk and tackle the newcomer. It took considerable discipline to play it cool. Nonetheless, his right hand slid under the table. He gathered all the composure he could and welcomed her, "Admiral Nechayev, how can I help you?"

She knew his mind, "If you're reaching for a phaser, it won't be necessary."

Karim froze as he weighed his options.

"It's a good thing I decided to beam just outside the door than directly in your office," offered the admiral. "As jumpy as you are, I'd be unconscious by now."

"Why are you here ... sir?" mustered the security chief.

Alynn Nechayev walked over to the various religious icons on a shelf that bin Nadal had collected over the years. She recognized a small replica of a Triannon Maker Sphere, a Terran Budai, a figurine of Ardra from Ventax II, a Kukulkan, among others.

Finally, she turned to Karim, "I won't insult your intelligence, Commander. I was monitoring your progress. Shame on you for accessing their records without a warrant." A very small smirk emerged, "Don't worry, I'm not holding that against you...Kavak and I, however, are going to have words."

She approached and sat opposite of bin Nadal. His hand still hovered below the phaser on the underside of the desk.

"I didn't anticipate you'd take that step, an oversight on my part. Once I saw you found those records; I knew the jig was up." She leaned back a little, "Which is fine, I needed to talk to you anyway. It just speeds up my agenda a little. I still need to assess your captain, however."

Adrenaline pumped through Karim's veins. How could he get out of this? He made the next step, "What agenda?"

The admiral crossed her legs and placed her hands on her knee, "I know you've been in contact with Julian Bashir of *Deep Space Nine*. I know he's told you some interesting stories....stories you've tried to confirm, but to no avail."

There was always a fine line in the art of espionage, thought Karim. Do you listen in hopes of getting more information or act to get yourself out of danger. The deliberation was heated in his mind.

Again, the admiral's response was intuitive, "If you'd feel better pointing that at me, go ahead. I just ask that you don't fire it until I'm done talking."

Despite himself, Karim eased off. Deciding that threatening an admiral with a phaser might be counterproductive to his career.

Nechayev simply shrugged after seeing no real response from the tactical officer. "Normally, I wouldn't let you and your captain in on this, but between your constant searching for information and her resent actions, I have little choice but to turn you both into assets. Otherwise, you'll either end up dead; or worse, you might inadvertently help them."

The admiral tapped on her compin.

Immediately, bin Nadal felt the pull of a containment beam around him. Quickly, he grabbed the phaser. Only to experience his hand pass right through it. The dematerialization process had already begun.

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Fleet Captain Wilson looked over the bewildered captains, "Are there any other questions before we dismiss?"

Today's briefing was much more interesting than yesterday's. Several questions were fielded. Sintina wasn't going to ask anything until a thought from this morning reentered her head. *'If Starfleet could cover up the disaster of the Omega particle, and with no one investigating the missing Klingon equipment from Cardassia Prime...what if?'* She couldn't let the opportunity pass; she had to ask the question. "What's Section 31?"

Wilson looked amused, "Section 31? ...Merchant section; take the main corridor to junction 4-G and take it all the way down." A few chuckles came from the pupils. Sintina took note of the faces. The instructor continued, "Anything else?" After there were no takers, he said, "Ok, that concludes the briefing. Godspeed, Captains."

As people filed out, Wilson gestured to her, "Captain Aurelia."

"Yes, sir?" she responded, as she came closer and the room emptied.

The fleet captain double checked that everyone else had vacated. A switch had been turned. His normally personable voice grew ominous, "Don't ask such foolish questions, Captain."

Sintina wasn't sure if she should be confused or angry.

"There are good captains out there, better than you," elaborated Wilson, "who are getting assigned hulks that should've been decommissioned 50 years ago, but not you." He stepped toward her, "Haven't you ever wondered why you, of all people, got the fleet's most powerful warship?"

Aurelia wasn't sure what was going on, but she rejoined with an honest, "Yes."

"Three reasons," he counted on his fingers, "You trusted in the judgment of your superiors, you followed orders, and you did what you were told!" He like most people was taller than Sintina. He stood close, "We're beginning to see a new pattern with you. Just because you have the *Indy* doesn't mean it can't be taken away. His tone lowered, "Just look at Windslow."

At that point, Captain Aurelia decided to be angry. She closed what little distance there was between them and looked up, "Are you threatening me, Captain?"

Wilson casually smiled in her face. "Don't get your panties in a bunch. You touch me and I'll see to it you'll never set foot on the *Independence* again. I'm more than you can handle." He looked down and methodically gazed over her body, "...in more ways than one."

The rabid dog inside her lunged, but she was able to leash it in time. Instead she slowly, sensually eased up and whispered in his ear, "If you ever see me again, walk the other way. My ship, my career, be damned."

Wilson didn't seem intimidated. Unsatisfied, Sintina strode to the exit without looking back.

## CHAPTER 11

### **Supplemental USS Independence Docked with Starbase 17, Executive Officer's Quarters**

Uncharacteristically, Ethan Windslow was with his family. Or rather, he was in the same cabin as they were. The exception being Jeff, of course; he was running about the ship with that reptilian girl. Paul was playing with figures in his room. Ethan sat on the couch, looking rather absent. Susan wanted to talk but wasn't quite sure how to initiate a conversation. She fondled a cup of tea at the dining table.

After several minutes of this, Susan offered, "I didn't know your escape pod lost power. You never told me that."

Ethan's response was barely audible, "...didn't want to worry you."

"It must be hard on you...being the only survivor." She then realized how the comment could be construed as accusatory and added, "You know, survivor's guilt." Susan examined the Japanese style cup. "I've heard that can be bad...survivor's guilt." She grimaced as she realized the self-evident nature of her comment.

Ethan appeared unmoved by the statement. He continued to peer at some undefined spot on the bulkhead.

She couldn't gather the courage to address the elephant in the room, *'Did you erase that data?'* Susan didn't fear her husband's reaction to the question itself. She feared he just might answer her honestly. It was a reality she was not yet prepared to accept.

She knew everyone on this ship thought Windslow was a cold person, or worse. But they didn't know him before the war. He was kind, gentle, a wonderful husband, and her best friend. Susan missed that man and wondered if she'd ever see him again.

She took a sip of the peppermint tea and they both pondered in silence.

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The fuse was short. Sintina moved at a quick pace. She entered the *Indy's* security office.

"Find out anything?" she asked Karim, as he sat behind his desk.

The security officer was quick to respond. He was obviously expecting her. "Yes sir. One of the Chalnoth was arrested for drug smuggling two years ago."

She was waiting for more. When it didn't come, Aurelia opened her arms, "That's it?"

"Yes, Captain," rejoined the lieutenant commander.

"It should be enough," sighed Aurelia. "Assuming Admiral Nechayev has half a brain, that is. I'll present her with what you've found tomorrow. Her adjutant says she's occupied for the rest of the evening."

Sintina moved to the door for a moment, but doubled back and rested her hands on Karim's desk. "So, I got threatened today."

The security chief gave a look of surprise, "Oh, by whom?"

"Fleet Captain Wilson, he's the officer giving the captain's brief. He got upset when I asked about Section 31."

"Do you believe in Section 31 now?" asked bin Nadal.

Aurelia rapped her fingers on the smooth surface; not wanting to backpedal, she conceded, "I don't know. Would you at least look him up?"

Bin Nadal nodded, "Of course, sir."

She allowed a smile. Sintina placed her hand on his shoulder, "Just because you know I'm pissed doesn't mean you have to start calling me, 'sir.'"

Karim returned the smile but said nothing.

Aurelia straightened up, and said, "I'm ready to get this day over," as she exited.

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*'Why did I agree to this?'* wondered Jinal.

He, Tang, and D'nas had now been in the starbase's security center for nearly 48 hours. They were considered low-risk and were allowed visitors. The security personnel had been hospitable, sometimes engaging the three in casual conversation. It wasn't that bad, other than they couldn't leave their cell.

It wasn't hard for Jinal to maintain his Vulcan persona. He had been on long missions before with no time to himself. This was no different. Well...it was a little different.

*Independence's* counselor and comm. officer, Kimula sh'Somachanar, insisted on visiting them for at least two hours each day. She would say it was part of her duty as ship's counselor, but Jinal now knew it was something more.

Jinal had very little experience with relationships. His Romulan nature was dubious regarding her interest at first. He heard Andorian females were direct once they made a decision about a perspective mate...they were right. Kimula had made her intentions clear with no shame or obscuration. After the initial fear and shock wore off, he agreed to 'see where it goes' and to play a game of kal-toh.

It was late. D'nas and Zian were already lying on their bunks. The guards were good enough to let the two finish the game.

Now, Jinal sat across a small table, in their already cramped cell, from Kimula. He knew the game was meant to find order out of chaos or ...something like that. The *t'an*, a small rod, was in his hand. The polyhedron of the game was about half formed when Jinal ventured a guess and placed the *t'an*. The shape disappeared for less than a second and reappeared as pile of sticks.

The Andorian smiled wide, "Better luck next time."

"Luck is irrelevant...practice, however, is," responded Jinal with the slightest of smirks.

Kimula stood, leaned over, and pecked the engineer on the forehead. "See you tomorrow."

The forcefield dropped and went back up. Only after she rounded the corner did Jinal dare a grin.



## CHAPTER 12

**Stardate: 53249.6 (1 Apr 2376)**

**Starbase 17**

**Courtroom 3, United Federation of Planets v. Windslow**

The Althos star was bright enough to activate the photo-gray in the transparent aluminum windows. Susan Windslow looked at the star. It was as if she was looking through someone else's eyes. Her mind wasn't ready to consider her actions after the outcome of the trial. Despite the evidence, and common sense, an inkling of hope lived. *'Maybe this was all some big misunderstanding.'*

The presiding officers entered and took their seats. Admiral Miller continued the court-martial, "Prosecutor Morichi, call your first witness."

The female Zakdorn gestured to a security officer.

Ethan's mind was racing. *'Who? Who could possible know anything? Would Admiral Ross testify against him? ...If it is, I could turn the tables on him! Will they take my word over an admiral's? ...I should tell them about him, anyway. ...Who is it?'*

The entrance slid open. The guard beckoned someone. The captain's blood turned cold. He knew the face. *'What was his name?'* It didn't matter. "Oh my god," he whispered. *'There were survivors.'* Bile filled Ethan's throat. He was barely able to force it back down. *'But they were dead.'* The room began to spin. His world grew even more surreal. *'They were all dead!'*

"I call Lieutenant Jason Wells," said Morichi, "formerly of the USS *Bismarck*."

The young security officer took the stand. He seemed focused. Ethan couldn't help but stare in disbelief. Jason looked back with distain.

"Lieutenant Wells," started the Zakdorn, "what was your position on the *Bismarck*?"

His tone betrayed agitation at seeing his former captain, "I was in the security division."

Morichi approached the witness slowly, "Were you part of the away team that went down to Pentath III?"

"Yes."

The prosecutor's voice was drenched in artificial sympathy, "Describe the events as best you remember them."

Jason nodded and began the account, "The away team was in a market area in the center of the town distributing rations and giving medical aid. Without warning, some type of explosive device was set off. It killed several people including the CMO." He sighed and began getting a distant look, "I ran for cover. Then, the disrupter blasts started; we found ourselves in an ambush situation. I saw Petty Officer Nola a few meters away. She was injured. So, I grabbed her and got her behind some cover as well. I started to fight back. The first officer called saying there was a damping field in effect and for the away team to make their way out of it. The problem was, we were all pinned down." Jason glared past Morichi, "Well, almost all of us. Captain Windslow ran from the battle."

The Zakdorn spun around, poorly acting as if this conversation hadn't been practiced. "You mean he ordered a retreat?"

"No sir," Jason corrected, "he ran. He gave no orders. The away team was in chaos. We had no chance."

Memories of the event flooded back into Ethan's mind: remnants of Helen Stuttgart, his chief medical officer, in the dirt...Lt. Caplin's one lifeless eye looking back at him...the smell of burnt flesh. He had never been so scared.

Morichi continued, "How were you and Nola able to survive?"

*'There were two. Oh, Jesus,'* dreaded Windslow.

"Some debris fell on us," explained Wells. "We lost consciousness. For whatever reason, the spoonhe..." He edited his words, "the Cardassians didn't kill us, but took us prisoner instead. When I woke, I found myself on a small freighter heading for Lazon II."

Admiral Miller sensed the prosecution was done. "Do you have any questions for this witness, Mr. Horlem?"

The Trill rose, "No questions, sir."

It was then, Susan realized, what Lieutenant Wells had said wouldn't...couldn't be contested. A dark, empty, hollow place formed in her gut. *'Did he really leave those people there to die?'* Her eyes could no longer produce tears.

Miller, to her credit, seemed indifferent, "Very well." Looking to Wells, she said, "You may step down."

Instead of exiting, Jason took a seat at the rear of the room. Susan avoided eye contact.

"Prosecutor," continued the admiral, "call your next witness."

Morichi knew she was on a roll and was obviously enjoying it. "I call Petty Officer Nola, the second survivor of Pentath III."

A petite Napean female, wearing a medical uniform, entered the room. Ethan noticed she walked with a slight limp. Her two vertical forehead ridges led to short jet black hair. She only made a passing glance at Windslow. Unlike Wells, her face showed no signs of hate; only pain.

Captain Windslow looked down at his fidgeting hands. What hell had this young lady been through? ...A hell he condemned her to.

Prosecutor Morichi unleashed another round of damning testimony. "Petty Officer Nola, I'll save us some time by asking: Does your perspective of events on Pentath III differ from Lieutenant Wells'?"

Nola was timid and not nearly as sure of herself as Wells. "I blacked out after the initial blast, but I can confirm that I also saw Captain Windslow fleeing."

The Zakdorn proceeded, "Did Captain Windslow make any effort to provide covering fire for the rest of the away team?"

"No."

Morichi continued with a more authoritative voice, "Did Captain Windslow give any order to retreat?"

Another gentle, "No," came from the crewmember.

"Did Captain Windslow even look back?" barked the JAG officer as she pointed at Ethan.

"No," meekly answered the petty officer.

After an appropriate pause, she asked in a compassionate tone, "You also went to the Lazon II prison camp didn't you?"

Again, Nola responded simply. "Yes."

Morichi clasped her hand together near her abdomen and tilted her head, "How were you treated there?"

Vocalizing the events obviously unsettled the Napean, "I...I developed an infection in my leg. It was amputated." Her eyes began to water, "and I was raped repeatedly."

Windslow wanted to cry for her. He was responsible for everything that happened to her and Lieutenant Wells. Not to mention the ones that didn't get this far...Caplin, Stuttgart, and over twenty others. He was the captain; he should've died with them, at least.

An odd sensation came over the captain. He felt disgust at himself, and he was proud of it. For an instant, he remembered what it was like to be an honorable man.

Ethan barely heard Horlem say, "Objection, this has no bearing on the charges."

Her goal already accomplished, the Zakdorn capitulated, "I withdraw the question, sirs."

Admiral Miller dismissed the witness. Nola made a beeline for Jason and hugged him. Her tears were unrestrained. Lieutenant Wells escorted her out of the courtroom. He shot daggers at Windslow before the doors closed behind them.

"Do you have any more witness?" asked Miller.

"No sir." Morichi approached the bench slightly, "However, Lieutenant Wells and Petty Officer Nola have attested to the charges of desertion and conduct unbecoming, but only one person knows what happened once Captain

Windslow made it back to the Bismarck." She turned to observe the defense table, "I request that Captain Windslow take the stand."

Horlem immediately reached for Ethan's arm, "I highly recommend you don't do that. She's baiting you."

Whether it was a sense of duty, a desire for punishment, or just wariness from holding in this lie; Ethan couldn't be sure. Whatever the motivation, he found himself saying, "I'll take the stand."



## CHAPTER 13

### **Supplemental**

### **Starbase 17**

### **Courtroom 3, United Federation of Planets v. Windslow**

The hardest part of being a witness, to Windslow, was the fact he now faced his wife.

Morichi asked, "So, Captain Windslow, what actions did you take once you returned to the ship from Pentath III?"

He relived the events in his mind's eye...

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**Stardate: 52863.5**

**USS Bismarck**

**In orbit of Pentath III**

Windslow's uniform was soiled by dirt, blood, and various organic material.

His legs propelled him. To where, he didn't know. Ethan ran passed the last structure of the settlement a few minutes ago. Now, he was surrounded by an arid steppe. He tripped over a small shrub. Without hesitation, he rolled, returned to his feet, and continued his dash. The disruptor fire could barely be heard...but it could still be heard. He continued to run. There was no conscious thought involved; only an instinct to flee and to survive.

A familiar tingle engulfed him. For a moment, he saw only a white light; then, darkness. Neither his legs or eyes could adjust in time; he stumbled. This time, he didn't recover.

Ethan saw his executive officer, Commander Kalana, knelling at his side. She was saying something. Finally, he realized he was back on the bridge. The consoles and alert lighting were the only illumination. His mind slowed down just enough to process the words from the Denobulan woman.

"Captain, what happened?" she yelled for a second time.

"They're dead!" said Windslow in a delirium. "They're all dead!"

Kalana did not share her captain's panic. She stood, leaving Windslow on the deck next to the center seat. "Is there anyway to confirm that, Otlem?" she asked the Algolian science officer.

The hairless officer had a single large ridge running from his forehead to the back of his neck and several smaller ridges branching off it. Calmly, he rejoined, "No sir. The same field that's preventing transport is also blocking any life readings."

Ethan grabbed at Kalana's arm, terror in his eyes, "I was there! They're all dead!"

The first officer looked down. This was not a behavior she had ever seen in him before, "Try to calm down, sir." It was more of an order than a suggestion.

"Nadion particles," offered Otlem.

"What?" asked Kalana.

The Algolian didn't respond immediately. Instead, he quickly began to isolate the readings. "Nadian particles...phaser fire." He swiveled his seat, "I'm still detecting phaser fire."

The Denobulan addressed the frantic captain, "Sir, we have to beam down reinforcements."

"No!" lashed Windslow. "They're already dead!" He got up and practically pushed the young helmsman out of his seat. Ethan laid in a course. "It's no use!" Windslow continued, "This planet isn't secure!"

His XO persisted. She knew she should have steered the captain into his ready room, but time didn't allow it. "They're still fighting. We have to get them out of there!"

A small sense of logic flowed out of Ethan's chaotic mind, "No! I won't send more people to die!"

"Captain..." began Kalana.

Windslow cut her off, "No! I'm the captain! They're already dead!" With a pound on the consol he declared, "We leave now!"

Most of the bridge officers were either looking at her or Windslow. Kalana looked as if she intended to say more, but didn't.

Ethan, realizing that Kalana was backing down, engaged the warp drive.

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"Captain," repeated Morichi, as she leaned into his field of view, "what actions did you take?"

He saw Susan behind the Zakdorn. *'What will she think of me?'* he wondered. He decided to answer, but without all the details. "I set a course back to the main fleet."

The prosecutor took on a passive tone, "Captain Windslow, the evidence against you is mounting. A parity trace scan failed to reveal the content of the data erased, but it did recover your authorization code. Lieutenant Wells and Petty Officer Nola have testified that you deserted them."

Ethan avoided looking at her; as if it would make her go away. He wanted it all to go away. *'If it wasn't for Susan and the boys...'*

Morichi moved in like a predator, "Tell me this, Captain: what is the first priority of any starship commander?"

*'I should've sent a rescue team.'* thought Windslow several months too late. He felt his eyes water. His head moved to address her, "To the crew."

Satisfied, she stepped back, "To the crew. And what would you think of a captain that abandons their own crew to be slaughtered and tortured?"

The Trill JAG shot up, "Sir!"

It took all of Ethan's strength simply to maintain his composure. He was still doing a poor job of it.

Miller acknowledged the objection, "Prosecutor, you will refrain yourself."

For a moment, Morichi considered pressing her luck, but thought against it. She curtsied, "I have no further questions." The Zakdorn returned to her table.

Admiral Miller continued to show her dispassionate professionalism, "Defense?"

Horlem energetically closed the gap to Windslow. "Captain Windslow, how many combat engagements have you been in?"

A single tear escaped Ethan's left eye. He shrugged, uninterested in the question, "I don't know."

"In fact," offered the Trill to the court, "Captain Windslow has been in 81 separate combat engagements during his 25 year service." Returning his attention to his client, "In that time, how many times have you been reprimanded for dereliction of duty?"

A small wet trail showed on his face, "None."

"I have nothing more, sir," concluded Horlem.

Immediately Morichi raised a hand, half out of her seat already, ""Sirs?"

"Go ahead," authorized Miller.

She shot back to the defendant, "With the exception of Pentath III, of those 81 combat situations, how many were direct, close quarters combat on a person to person level?"

The captain thought for a moment; giving an honest guess, "Not many; about five."

The Zakdorn nodded in agreement. Fate had presented her with another opportunity. She decided to attempt to reap what she had sown; reconsidering her previous decision. She walked methodically closer. "I have one last question." She rested her hands on the witness box, "I don't really think you had anything to do with the destruction of the *Bismark*, Captain. But you did erase the sensor data, didn't you?"

Again, Horlem shot up like a rocket, "Objection! My client has the right to not self incriminate!"

"Sustained," ruled Miller.

The exchange became white noise to Windslow. Susan's eyes were red. They had been for the last couple of days. Could he live as a coward? Would she stay with a liar? He was both. Fear had been his way of life for so long. It was scary to abandon it.

Prosecutor Morichi began to walk away, accepting that she wouldn't get it out of him, "That's all I have, sir."

He could never go back to the way he was, thought Ethan. No one could ever trust him again. He couldn't trust himself. Vague memories of a noble man entered his consciousness, a proud and honest man, and a man who taught his children not to lie. He could no longer hold back the flood gates. He sobbed and he admitted, "Yes, I did it."

Genuinely surprised, Morichi spun around, "What?"

The Trill simply put his hand over mouth and shook his head.

Ethan could hardly see through his tears, "I did it all. I ran." He wiped at his cheeks. "I ran and I tried to cover it up." Susan had her hands templed over her nose and mouth. Her bloodshot eyes fixed upon her husband. Ethan, not quite ready to take all the responsibility, offered, "Admiral Ross...he said, I just had to stay quiet."

Admiral Miller showed emotion for the first time, as she addressed Windslow, "Admiral William Ross? I find that hard to believe. Do you have any proof of this?"

The cold, hard totality of situation impressed itself upon Ethan, "No, sir. Not a shred."

The Zakdorn changed the subject, "Sir, I request this trial move into the sentencing phase."

Admiral Miller nodded, not quite wanting to let the topic go. "Very well, the accused has confessed to the charges. Our decision will be announced at tomorrow's session."

## CHAPTER 14

### **Supplemental Starbase 17, Admiral Nechayev's Office In Orbit of Althos IV**

"Tomorrow, either way, commander...I promise," reassured Admiral Alynna Nechayev to whom ever was on the other end of the comlink. The guest chime sounded. "She's here. Talk to you soon." She tapped off the computer. Addressing the door, she said, "Enter."

Captain Aurelia moved in confidently, "I've found evidence that one of the Chalnoth was convicted two years ago of maraji crystal smuggling."

Slightly annoyed at the lack of a 'sir,' the admiral played her role, "And?"

Sintina folded her arms and shifted her hips, "And, you're still not going to let my officers go, are you?"

*'Still no 'sir.'*" The admiral shrugged, "There is no evidence as to why I should."

Aurelia's patients had finally been spent. Her lack of courtesy became outright hostility, "There's no evidence at all! This is just a case of 'he said; she said' and you're siding with some Chalnoth thugs!"

The admiral had got what she needed. Appearances, however, still had to be maintained...at least for the moment. She stood and ordered, "As you were, captain."

Unfortunately, the captain didn't yield. "No, this is bullshit! All the charges should be dropped. Any idiot can see they were defending themselves and the drugs were a misunderstanding!"

Nechayev dropped the pretence, "That's enough!"

Sintina reluctantly assumed the position of 'at ease.' *'Put Nechayev in the 'admirals that I've pissed off' column,'* she darkly mused.

Alynna took a moment to center herself. There was a purpose here. She continued in a more civil tone, "I'll discuss this with you in the morning. Until then, I suggest you brush up on the protocols for addressing a senior officer. Dismissed."

As Aurelia walked out she kicked her self again. She wanted to bring up Fleet Captain Wilson to Nechayev. Because of her outburst, it would now have to wait. She rubbed the back of her neck as she marched. *'I wonder if the EMH would give me a massage?'*

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**Stardate: 53252.3 (2 April 2376)**

**Starbase 17**

**Courtroom 3, United Federation of Planets v. Windslow**

Because of his admission, Ethan Windslow spent the night in the Security Center. He walked past three *Independence* crewmembers sharing a cell. Ethan was sure they all saw him. It wouldn't be long before they knew why he was there. Luckily, he didn't share the cell with them. Only once did the science officer attempt to engage him in conversation. Windslow ignored him. He simply laid down on the cot, faced the wall, and wept in silence. A few hours later, Kimula tried to talk to him. She had just as much success as Tang. The night pasted slowly. He welcomed the final day of his court-martial; for no other reason than to get it over with.

Eventually, the time came. His fate would now be decided.

Admiral Miller sat, two captains flanking her. "Defendant, please stand."

Ethan, along with his counsel stood.

"Captain Ethan Windslow," began Miller. "You have admitted your guilt on the charges of conduct unbecoming an officer, impeding an investigation, and desertion."

Ethan's legs were weak and his stomach was in knots. But for the first time in a long time, his mind was free of guilt...not regret, but guilt.

The admiral continued, "You've had a distinguished career. Receiving the Grankite Order of Tactics, the Campbell Award, and the Starfleet Star Cross. We have taken that into account as we issued your sentence. Frankly, that record saved you from being dishonorably discharged from the fleet.

You panicked, Mr. Windslow; we do not fault you personally for that. Whether we like to admit it or not, all of us have panicked at one time or

another. Starfleet captains, however, do not have that luxury. As your charge of captain, panicking the way you did was dangerous, deadly, and totally unacceptable.

But it didn't stop there. After the adrenaline was gone and your mind was clear, you chose to delete data proving what you did. That fact is what truly upsets me."

Miller interlocked her hands, "At any time, once you calmed down, you could have attempted to correct your error. You could have turned back and sent a rescue team. You could have turned yourself in to your fleet commander. You could have not blocked your first officer's efforts to deem you unfit. You could have cooperated with investigators. You have said that Admiral Ross instructed you to stay quiet. *If* that's so, then you had a duty not follow an illegal order. But you didn't do any of that. It took a court-martial with all the evidence of your guilt before you to finally come clean."

She leaned forward, focusing in on Windslow, "That is not so much a confession of an honorable man, than an admission of a man who knew he could no longer lie.

Mister, your actions are inexcusable for a starship captain. So, I'm going to make sure you never have the chance to make that mistake again. In addition to a reduction in rank to Lieutenant Commander, a formal reprimand, and four months at the Jaros stockade, I am placing an elucidation in your permanent record. It forbids your promotion to the rank of captain for the entirety of your Starfleet career. You will never work without a net, again."

Windslow dipped his head. Not quite sure how to react. The admiral must have sensed his thoughts were wondering.

Miller's voice changed. It almost resembled a concerned mother, "Upon your release, you could resign. Most people would. You could move to some colony where no one would know you and no one would know what you did.

Information flows quickly throughout the fleet, however. If you were to stay in, where ever you go, no matter what ship or station, people will know what you did at Pentath III. It won't be easy for you. But, if there is some sense of integrity left in you, I ask you to consider this: atone for your actions by continuing to serve in Starfleet."



Windslow was dubious. Her request probably had less to do with her personal feelings than the practicality of Starfleet's current situation. He knew Starfleet had gotten more lax about kicking people out. They needed officers in a bad way. He was not the first person to avoid being cashiered out of the fleet because of wartime losses.

Admiral Miller concluded, "Unless you resign, you'll remain assigned to the *Independence* as first officer for the time being. You served well on the *Mendez* in that role, so I believe you are capable of it.

This court-martial is adjourned."

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The heavy doors of the Security Center opened to allow Captain Aurelia. With the majority of her bridge crew here, it seemed an appropriate place to visit. She only glanced at the cell containing her first officer. A small feeling of satisfaction came over her. She was informed of the ruling less than an hour ago. He was lying down with his head facing the bulkhead. Sintina entertained the idea of talking to him, but decided it could wait.

She took position just outside the cell holding her officers. They all stood at attention once they realized who it was.

"At ease, gentlemen," ordered Aurelia. "I've done all I can, short of breaking you three out of here."

Jinal cracked what would pass as a Vulcan joke, "Captain..."

She held up a hand, assuming what he would say, "Don't worry, I'm not planning on it."

Tang Zian laughed for just a moment before snapping back to 'at ease.'

D'nas just looked confused.

"There's still some hope," said the captain. "The admiral wants to see me. With any luck, she's reconsidered." Then, she tilted her head, "Or she's going to give me a formal reprimand; one of the two."

The Tamarian stepped forward, "Ma'am, I am so very sorry for the trouble I've caused."

At first she was going to scold him. But Sintina couldn't help but feel sympathy for D'nas. He was a good kid, she concluded. She responded loud enough for Windslow to hear her, "We all get in trouble sometimes, D'nas; it's how we get out of it that counts."

## CHAPTER 15

### **Supplemental Starbase 17, Admiral Nechayev's Office In Orbit of Althos IV**

The door hissed open. Aurelia was taken aback by the sight of her security chief already there and chatting it up with the admiral.

She entered cautiously. Her confusion no doubt amused Karim. Sintina, on the other hand, was not entertained. "Bin Nadal, what are you doing here?"

Nechayev regarded her with moderate offence. "Half a brain?" she quoted back to the captain.

Aurelia accused bin Nadal, "You told her?"

Before Karim could defend himself, the admiral chimed in. "No, he didn't. The person you talked to was a hologram."

Confused, Aurelia could only point out, "But that was the day before yesterday."

The admiral nodded, "That's right." She made her way around to the front of her desk and leaned on it. "I abducted your security officer and replaced him with a hologram. I've installed a new security protocol in your ship's computer to prevent others from doing the same thing." As an afterthought, she added, "No need to thank me."

Sintina stood, unresponsive. After a few seconds, she asked in a perplexed voice, "What the hell is going on?"

The admiral gestured to bin Nadal, "Would you care to explain, Commander?"

The tactical officer stepped up. He was excited to finally share this with Sintina, "Admiral Nechayev arranged for those two Chalthoth to plant that crystal and start a fight with D'nas. I found out the Chalthoth had a connection to her and she ..." He broke off for a moment to find the right wording, "Well, she's been briefing me ever since."

"Why did you do that?" blurted Aurelia to Nechayev. She immediately followed up with, "Briefing on what?"

"Would you please use the word 'sir' occasionally when you're talking to me," responded the admiral. She continued, "I'll address your first question before the second. The two Chalnoth are some of my double agents. We caught them smuggling drugs for our adversaries." She got off on a minor tangent. Obviously she and Karim had been discussing it before, since she glanced at him, "What better way to get a monopoly on something than to make it illegal." She came back to the matter at hand, "We could've sent them to prison, but they are more useful to us in other matters."

Sintina simply stood, dumbfounded.

Alynna casually began to pace, "As to the 'why,' we wanted to assess your character. And the characters of your bridge crew, for that matter."

"For what?"

"That leads to the second question," said Nechayev, "I'll answer that in a moment.

You demonstrated that you would stand up to an injustice. And you were willing to protect an innocent, even if the rules and your superiors say otherwise."

Bin Nadal interjected, "I could've told you that, sir."

She looked back at him, "You did." The admiral turned back to Aurelia, "Your report claiming your friend, Ro Laren, was involved in a revolt; for instance, was something else that told me you had integrity."

A sick, twisted feeling emerged in Sintina's gut at the mention of the incident. She didn't correct the admiral.

"Now to address your second question," started Nechayev. "I belong to a small group of officers that resist the efforts of a covert group known as Section 31."

The captain's jaw dropped. Her response was an extended, "No..."

Karim offered, "Don't you hate it when I prove you wrong?"

"What about the rest of the stuff he told me?" asked Sintina.

Alynnna crossed her arms, "You've already helped Section 31 without even knowing it. Your transport of the Founder on the *Midas* to *Starbase 375* was a 31 operation. As far as the public is concerned, she never left the Bajoran System."

"Was she telling the truth about prior knowledge of the academy attack?" pressed the captain.

The admiral shrugged, "We honestly don't know for sure. Jupiter Station has the most advanced sensors in the sector and its records didn't show anything...which itself is odd."

Aurelia shook her head vehemently, "No, this is some type of trick. Or a test that's part of the Captain's Course."

"I'm afraid not, Captain," rejoined Nechayev as she sat down on a nearby couch. She reasoned she would have to give a history lesson, "Ever since the twentieth century, agencies like this have operated on behalf of Earth nation-states. Back then, it was common knowledge that these organizations existed. Despite all the rhetoric you heard in school, the same type of group existed when Earth was united. By the time the Federation was founded, they had perfected their techniques. Instead of operating in the open, this new group wouldn't even officially exist. We only call them 'Section 31' because of some obscure reference in United Earth's original Starfleet Charter. Article 14, Section 31 says, certain rules of conduct could be "bent" during times of extraordinary threat."

Aurelia wasn't ready to dismiss everything she had been taught as easily as Karim had. Her face said as much, so the admiral continued.

"For a while, it served its purpose. It protected the Federation. Sure it's tactics were less than honorable, but it worked.

Power corrupts, however, especially when you don't have to answer to anyone. Soon this group began seeing themselves not as sentinels of the Federation, but as the Federation itself. They've slowly been working their way into the halls of power and undermining the democratic process.

Over one hundred years ago, a group of Starfleet officers discovered the existence of Section 31. We've been fighting them anywhere we can; placing people in key positions. They have been doing the same."

"I don't believe it," Aurelia said with resolve.

Nechayev grew wary of convincing her, "There's a difference between being a skeptic and being close-minded, captain."

Sintina came back with, "And why should I trust you? If what you say is true, you're just as bad as they are. You falsely imprisoned my officers. Hell, one of them was stabbed thanks to you!"

"I regret the injury," said Nechayev with sincerity, "Kavak and Apash were told not to severely hurt them."

Aurelia cocked her head mockingly, "Oh, how considerate."

"Sintina..." began Karim.

The admiral waved him off. She asked Aurelia, "I assume you're aware of the Federation-Cardassian Treaty of 2370."

"One of the most hated treaties in recent memory, yes."

Nechayev stood up again, "Soon after it was implemented, I was ordered to remove the colonists at Dorvan V." She smirked slightly, "I remember arguing with Picard over it." The smile faded, "I was just as infuriated with it as he was. I went all the way to the Federation Council to try to stop it...I couldn't."

The captain didn't want to listen to her story, "What does that have to do with anything?"

"You see," elaborated Alynna, "most of us have unwittingly advanced Section 31's agenda. That incident, and those like it, created the Brigade and later the Maquis. All those people responded exactly the way 31 wanted them to. They...we...were tools for Section 31 to ferment a war and create fear. I did my best to rein in those elements, but then the Dominion gave them all the pretext they needed to break down the liberty in the Federation; to 'protect' us from the outside threat."

"You still haven't given me a reason to trust you, sir," challenged Sintina.

The admiral grinned, "Now was that so hard?" Then, she addressed the question, "I deceived you to gauge if I could trust you. A bit counter-intuitive,

granted. But I will not lie to you again. Nor will I threaten you like Fleet Captain Wilson did.”

Aurelia threw up her arms, “Is everyone watching me!”

Bin Nadal broke in, “We were actually watching him. We suspected he was pro-31.”

“We?” protested Aurelia.

“Do you remember what *Independence’s* motto is?” asked the admiral.

Sintina didn’t want to suffer anymore questions, “Something about being apathetic.”

Nechayev looked disappointed, “It says, ‘*The Only Thing Necessary for the Triumph of Evil is for Good Men to do Nothing.*’ Edmund Burke said it. He was an eighteenth century statesman.”

“Ok,” said Sintina, too riled up to understand.

“I know it because I chose it.” explained Alynna. “For a time, I was in charge of overseeing the *Interceptor* class project. Through an ingenious play of political maneuvering, I was removed from the project, but not before I could place the dedication plaque. It was a small act of resistance.”

Aurelia said nothing, the significance eluding her.

Bin Nadal made it more clear for her, “You see, captain, there’s an evil out there, but there are good people doing something about it.”

Nechayev added, “I believe you to be a good person as well. The only decision you have to make, Captain, is whether you choose to do nothing.”

## CHAPTER 16

### **Supplemental USS Independence, Executive Officer's Quarters Docked with Starbase 17**

Ethan had been released for two hours to say his good-byes and pack his things. A reminder of the verdict was the tracking anklet he bore.

There was no point in hiding anything anymore. He told Susan everything that wasn't revealed during the trial. She listened between his sobs.

The lieutenant commander concluded with, "There's less stigma attached to being a mass murder like Captain Glover than a coward like me." He blurted after a moment, "I'll go ahead and file for divorce if you want. You and the kids would be better on Earth without me, anyway."

Her reaction was quick, "There you go running again." The comment hit with more punch than she had intended. Susan continued somewhat apologetically, "You never wanted command anyway. You're not a man of war; you're a man of peace. You were put in a situation you weren't made for. I don't think less of you because you didn't handle it well."

"But then I lied," pro-offered Ethan.

She repeated, "But then you lied."

"How can you or anyone else ever trust me again?" asked Windslow.

"I don't know," responded Susan. "But I'm not quite ready to give up on you."

Ethan wanted to smile at the revelation, but then his thoughts went back to where they always go, "I'm responsible for 25 deaths."

Susan knew he was fishing for sympathy, but gave none, "Yes, you are."

He shot her a look of disbelief. He expected her to rush to his defense. Disappointed, he wondered, "How can I look my children in the eye?"

She spoke with a determination he had not seen in several years, "By learning to look at yourself in the eye, first." She placed a hand on his shoulder, "As long as you don't give up on yourself, neither will I."



A glimmer of hope sparked deep in Windslow's soul as he covered her hand with his.

Then Susan asked with steely eyes, "Tell me more about this Admiral Ross."

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Karim had just got back on board. He was heading for his quarters as he thought. Sintina was still not totally convinced, but she wasn't dismissive either. He had hoped for a better outcome, but wasn't terribly surprised.

After the meeting with Nechayev and Aurelia was over, he went over to the starbase security office and released Tang, Jinal, and D'nas. Windslow was already gone to gather his things when he got there.

A sharp jolt abruptly ended his contemplation. He ran into something, someone. He looked to see Commander Windslow holding his forehead.

"Sorry commander," offered Windslow. "I wasn't paying attention."

Instinctively, bin Nadal rejoined, "Don't worry about it, sir."

Ethan restarted his gate before Karim inquired, "Did you really do it, Commander?"

Windslow stopped, hung his shoulders, and turned back. *'And so it begins,'* he thought. With a long deep sigh, he answered honestly, "Yes."

Karim immediately felt betrayed; if not for himself, then for all officers and crew in the fleet. He had been on away teams with this man before. It could have just as easily been him that Windslow abandoned. "If that's the case," said bin Nadal, "You got off easy. People like you don't belong in the uniform."

Ethan walked away without response. He couldn't help but wonder if there was any truth in his words.

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Now in the captain's ready room, bin Nadal discussed Admiral Nechayev's claims with his captain.

"So what was her explanation for what Admiral Whatley and General Wo'toth were doing on Cardassia Prime?" asked Sintina.

"They were probably unwitting pawns like most everybody else," offered the security officer. "The only thing Admiral Nechayev and me could think of was something an agent once said to Dr. Bahsir,...'after the war, the Romulans would be the greatest threat to the Federation.'"

"This is just too much..." began the captain. She halted once the door chime activated. "Enter."

Windslow walked in. He glanced at Karim, but said nothing to him. He handed Aurelia a padd. "Last minute transfers, ma'am."

"Your last duty before going to the stockade?" inquired Sintina; surprisingly, the comment didn't seem to be intended as an insult.

The first officer put his hands behind his back and confirmed, "Yes...yes it is."

"Who are we getting?" questioned the captain; again, in a casual tone.

Ethan wasn't sure what to make of her disposition. Were they so uninterested? Had they already written him off? Did they expect for him to turn in his commission? He could only answer, "Two new crewmen and an ops officer."

Aurelia read the padd, "Lieutenant Nicole Chase, huh? Ok." She put the padd down and looked over, "Karim, would you take care of them for me?"

"Aye, ma'am," he curtsied and exited.

After the hatch slid shut, she addressed the commander, "We need to talk."

"Yes, ma'am."

Aurelia said matter-of-factly, "I don't want you, and no one else will have you. It appears we're stuck with each other."

"Yes, ma'am," responded Windslow, simply.

The captain got up from her chair, "Well, now that you're not hiding anything any more, I need you to get out of this funk. Understood? I can't have a clinically depressed first officer anymore."

"Believe it or not," Windslow said, "I do feel better now that it's over."

A dark sarcasm entered her voice, "*You* feel better. Well that's great." She ordered a root beer from the replicator before she continued, "Have you decided if you're going to get out?"

Windslow considered as if it was the first time he had thought about it, "I don't think so. Starfleet is all I've known for my adult life. ...And I want to make it right."

The sarcasm moved into the realm of belligerence, "You want to make it right? I wonder what the families of those officers would tell you to do with yourself to make it right."

Ethan licked his lips and looked at the carpet.

"Fine," concluded the captain, "I hope four months is enough time for you to get your head out of your ass. Dismissed."

He considered getting off some snide remark, but his position was far too weak for it. He left with what little pride he could muster.

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A cylinder of energy coalesced on the transporter padd. A human woman officer, in her mid-twenties, with shoulder length blonde hair, appeared.

"Welcome on board the *Indy*!" greeted Karim kindly.

The young woman stepped down and offered a hand, "Thank you, Commander ..."

"Karim bin Nadal."

"Karim," smiled the new officer, "I like that name."

He returned the grin, her hand shake now lingered, "Thanks, now it's your turn."

The female seemed lost in the Persian's eyes, "Oh, Nicole...you can call me Nicole."

Amused, he said, "Ok, I will. But on the bridge I might have to call you lieutenant something."

"Oh, sorry." stammered the young lady, "Lieutenant Chase."

Karim finally broke contact, "I think you'll like this ship and her crew."

"Good...I'm always a little nervous when I transfer to a new ship."

Bin Nadal ventured, "Tell you what, I'll give you some time to settle in, but then you could meet me in the game room."

"Where's that?"

He thought about explaining it to her, but came up with a better idea, "I'll pick you up and show you...say in an hour?"

Chase smiled widely, "I'd like that."

\*\*\*\*\*

It had taken hours for her to locate that tailor, but Aurelia was determined to get some answers from that man. A Cardassian's image now filled her small computer's screen.

It didn't take long for the captain to come to the point, "So was there ever a conspiracy against me or not?"

Garak smiled wickedly and shrugged, "Who's to say, Captain. It certainly *appeared* that way didn't it?"

A look of enmity shrouded Sintina's face.

The Cardassian continued, "I do know one thing, if Admiral Nechayev had discovered that you covered up for that Bajoran friend of yours, she would have never considered letting you in."

"So what you're saying is," countered Sintina, slightly missing the meaning of his statement, "you're not going to tell me if you were telling the truth or not."

Garak showed his teeth, "My dear captain, truth, like most things in the universe, is a matter of perspective."

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An elderly voice asked, "How did the encounter go?"

"About as expected," reported Nechayev, "Mister bin Nadal is in, but Aurelia is skeptical. It may have been a mistake to introduce ourselves to her."

The form of the old woman walked about the admiral's office. Alynna knew, however, it was merely a hologram. The former admiral always preferred using holograms for communication. She was one of the first people in the Federation to have access to holographic technology. During her stint as Head of Starfleet Intelligence, the elderly woman had used it quite often.

The dark-skinned, white-haired hologram said, "She's headstrong, defiant, and she thinks she's fighting the good fight. In fact, she reminds me of another captain I used to know. ...Don't worry, she'll find out sooner or later what's at stake and she'll make the right choice."

"If you say so, sir," said Nechayev, obviously not convinced.

"I haven't officially been in Starfleet for a long time...which explains a few things, if you ask me. Anyway, how many times do I have to ask you to call me Nyota?"

The admiral counter-offered, "How about Miss Uhura?"

The old woman smiled with a wrinkled face, "It's a start."

**END**