

# Star Trek: Independence

## Cui Bono

By Dnoth

*"L. Cassius ille quem populus Romanus verissimum et sapientissimum iudicem putabat identidem in causis quaerere solebat 'cui bono' fuisset".*

*"The famous Lucius Cassius, whom the Roman people used to regard as a very honest and wise judge, was in the habit of asking, time and again, 'To whose benefit?'" -- Roman orator and statesman Marcus Tullius Cicero*

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### PROLOGUE

**Stardate: 54607.4 (10 Aug 2377)**  
**Kaleb Sector, near the Romulan Neutral Zone**  
**Unregistered Smallcraft**

"Come on, come on."

Clayton Easton desperately viewed his sensor display. He was traveling at warp 8.794, as fast as his limited vessel could go. The cramped cockpit was made humid by his sweat. The engines had been redlining for several minutes. His one saving grace was that he got a head start. The pursuer out matched his speed by far. If they got within weapon's range before he reached the *Steamrunner's* sensor range, it'd be over in a fraction of a second.

The light-skinned human made minute adjustments to his course, shaving a tenth of a second here, a eighth there. It would be close.

His opponent would not be detected by his savior. There were only a handful of sensors in the quadrant that could see the threat.

The enemy was gaining. At this rate, he'd be little more than carbon molecules floating in space.

As a last ditch effort, he broadcast on an emergency channel. "Starfleet vessel, Starfleet vessel: my warp core is about to go critical," which wasn't far from the truth. "Please rendezvous as soon as possible!"

The response came, after what seemed like an eternity. A confident, female voice informed him, *"This is the Federation starship Independence. We have received your mayday and are on an intercept course. Confirm."*

"Confirmed," Clayton quickly replied.

The icon that represented the Starfleet ship began moving toward him. Good, he thought. They must have gone to maximum warp.

His rival, shown on his display as a simple, red dot, continued. They wouldn't let him go easily, but were they willing to fight Starfleet over him? He didn't think so...he hoped not. If he was wrong, this whole race would be for nothing.

Easton's hands became clammy. The controls were slippery as a result.

Intense seconds became unbearable minutes. There was nothing left to do but to play this contest out.

The hostile would be in weapon range in seconds. He would, in those same seconds, be within the *Independence's* sphere of protection.

*'Surely, they wouldn't destroy a starship over me. I'm not worth the attention that gets. Right? God, let me be right.'*

He was now in weapons range. He was dead. Ironically, he had provided the perfect cover story for his own death to Starfleet.

*"This is the Independence. Prepare for emergency transport."*

All he could do was hold his breath. There was probably a phased torpedo heading his way, right now. He felt the tingle of the transporter.

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**Supplemental**  
**USS *Independence*, Main Bridge**  
**Kaleb Sector**

Captain Sintina Aurelia watched as the small vessel exploded into a fireball on the main viewer. Her eyes met her first officer's, Karim bin Nadal. She didn't hold out much hope.

It was Karim that asked the question, "Transporter room, did you get the pilot?"

There was a moment of stillness on the bridge.

*"Yes sir, we have him."*

Before they could break out into a smile, another voice interrupted the transporter operator, *"Captain, you must raise your shields! Call for a red alert!"*

Sintina scrunched up her jet black eye brows and almost had a look of amusement on her face. She began, "This is Captain Aurelia. Why..."

*"Please captain, now!"*

She looked to bin Nadal for his opinion. He gave a shrug of the shoulders. The Latina threw up her hands, "Hey, why not?" She said rather calmly, "Red Alert."

Immediately, the lighting changed and the ship came to a defensive stance.

She turned to the Andorian security chief, "Lieutenant, would you be so kind as to escort our visitor to my ready room."

Jonin Faltyne nodded and proceeded off the bridge.

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**Supplemental**  
**USS *Independence*, Captain's Ready Room**  
**Kaleb Sector**

The doors parted for Clayton. The captain was a petite, yet athletic looking woman. Her black hair was in a simple pony tail. She sat behind her desk, looking at him expectantly. Her first officer, a Persian, looked back from a chair as he entered.

Sintina dispensed with the pleasantries. She asked, in a remarkably polite tone, "Why did you have us go to red alert?"

The door closed behind Clayton and Jonin, whom had not been relieved of his charge, yet.

The man approached the desk and explained chaotically, "Because there's a ship out there. It blew up my vessel, not the warp core. I wonder if they're still out there? You weren't fired upon were you? No, of course not. We wouldn't be talking, if you had. If they know I made it to your ship, they'll tail us. They might attack still, but I doubt it...at least not directly."

Aurelia held up a hand to stop him, "Who is out there?"

It took a second for him to process the question. To him it was too obvious to ask, but then again, she didn't know. "The Directorate," he rejoined.

"Who?" repeated Karim.

Clayton stumbled, "There is no actual name for the Directorate. That's the whole point, they don't exist. Some people call them the Agency, some call them Section 31."

At the mention of Section 31, Sintina pointed an accusatory finger at the commander, "For the love of god, Karim, if you got me sucked in to another goddamn shadow play..."

He put his hands up, "I haven't talked to...our contact...for a month. This is news to me."

"Admiral Nechayev," said Easton.

Shocked, both the captain and the first officer said, "What?"

Clayton acted like it was old news, and it was to him. He was still breathing heavy, "Section 31 knows she's a figurehead in the resistance. They know you two have worked for her. That's why I came to you."

"What do you mean?" came for Karim.

Finally, he took a deep breath, "About a month ago, someone leaked Admiral Nechayev's name to a 31 agent. I was stationed at Starbase 39-sierra..."

"Because of me," interrupted bin Nadal. He was almost talking to himself.

Clayton paused, "What?"

Karim sighed, "They know her name because of me." He attempted to defend himself, "A Chameloid tricked me..."

There was a short quiet. Then, Easton piped up, "Don't worry about it. It happens to the best of us."

The words didn't seem to comfort the first officer. Despite that, Clayton continued, "I was stationed at Starbase 39-sierra. I monitored sub-space traffic within the Romulan Empire for the Agency." He added, as if to redeem himself, "I'm only a low level operative. I've never killed anyone or destabilized any government...well, not directly." He wondered off for a second, then went on, "Anyway, I found out a long time ago the Directorate was overstepping its bounds. A lot of people didn't like it. So when I was approached a few years ago to help the resistance, I agreed. I mean, they only wanted me to pass on a message there, delete a transmission here." Again, he became distracted with his thoughts.

Sintina prompted him, "So let's go back to the point in the story when you decided to drag us into it."

"Well," he said, "When they found out about Nechayev, they tracked her back to me." He laughed humorlessly, "I guess I didn't cover my tracks good enough."

Karim chimed in, "Do they have her?"

"Nechayev?" Easton asked. "I don't know. I don't think so. Last I heard she was going to try to stay as visible as possible." He remarked, "Staying in the public eye is really the best defense against the Directorate."

"Will they try to assassinate her?"

"I don't know. They may just try to discredit her."

Aurelia leaned in and said deliberately, "So, why did you come here?"

He paused. "Well, you were the closest, friendly ship I knew of."

"That was your great plan to avoid Section 31?" Sintina said harshly, "Come to my ship and bring even more attention to us?"

Clayton bit his bottom lip and looked away.

"With respect," began bin Nadal, "Section 31 already knows we're part of the resistance. It's not like it can get much worse."

*'Part of the resistance,'* Sintina repeated in her head. *'Goddamn it.'* But there was no denying it now. She was waist deep in it, probably more.

## CHAPTER 1

### **Supplemental USS *Independence*, Main Conference Room Kaleb Sector**

Less than an hour later, the ship had reduced its state of readiness to yellow alert. The senior staff gathered around the glass table. The stars drifted lazily in the windows.

Captain Aurelia continued the conversation, "So, is he nuts?"

Kimula, the Andorian counselor, shifted her expression as if to say, 'Come on, Sintina. You know better than that.' She answered, "I only talked to him for a few minutes. That's not enough time to make a prognosis."

"Physically," began Zo'Kama, the Arkonian doctor, "he's healthy, though, obviously shaken up. His pulse was still above normal; as were his adrenaline levels."

"Frankly," said Commander bin Nadal, "I don't know which would be worse: if he's really who he says he is, or if he's another attempt to plant an agent on our ship." He looked around before elaborating, "Thirty-one is going to be on us either way."

Jonin had heard the rumors on this ship of this shadow war between secretive factions of Starfleet. For the most part, he had rejected the idea. He was annoyed at how often conspiracy theories were entertained at staff meetings. He felt more practical matters were at hand, "The fact remains we know nothing about this person. He should be confined to quarters, Captain."

The Latina nodded, "Agreed." She added, "Faltyne, find out what you can about him. Search every Starfleet and Federation database you can think of for 'Clayton Easton.'"

He confirmed with a tight, "Yes, ma'am."

Karim spoke up, "Are you suggesting he is guilty until proven innocent, Captain?"

She gave him a terse, "Don't start, Commander."

An awkward moment later, the Arkonian physician suggested, "I'll provide you with a DNA pattern to refine your search, Lieutenant."

"Thank you, Doctor."

Sintina moved the agenda forward with, "We're still due in the H'ka system in five days. We need to get back on schedule."

The helm officer took that to be his queue. Ensign Weston leaned in, "We've only lost a few hours, Captain. I recommend increasing speed to warp six point two."

"Alright. Well, since we're here," she continued, "we might as well have a mission brief." She gestured to Karim, "Start us off."

The Persian stood and activated the viewer on the bulkhead. He began, "Starfleet has ended our patrol duty along the neutral zone..."

A soft, unenthusiastic, "yea," sounded. The staff momentarily glanced at its source. It was Lieutenant Tang. He stiffened up a bit once the focus of the room went to him. "Sorry."

Muted chuckles could be heard.

Bin Nadal grinned and continued, "Our next mission is a first contact mission. The H'ka system is home to a species that call themselves Vuke." He brought up a picture of the species. It slowly rotated on the screen. "As you can see," he went on, "Physically, the Vuke resemble..." He took a moment to consider. "Maybe a Gorn mixed with a Kobold."

"No, no," protested Kimula, "More like a Gorn and an Owlbear. Look at the feathers and beak."

Karim conceded, "Yeah, I suppose."

The rest of the room glanced at each other. The conversation had totally escaped them; except for the captain, of course.

Sintina cleared her throat. "Can we skip the comparative anatomy lesson between alpha quadrant races and D&D monsters, please."



“Um, yes ma’am.” He returned to the screen and brought up a view of their star system. “The Federation has been covertly studying the Vuke for nearly two hundred years. At which time, they were already sending vessels into their planet’s orbit. Now, they have two colonies within their home system. They don’t have warp drive, but their weapons are...impressive, considering their level of advancement.”

“How impressive?” asked the tactical chief.

Karim took a moment to bring up additional information. “Their spatial torpedoes have a yield of about 6.5 isotons; ten percent of our standard photons.”

The counselor chimed in, “That doesn’t sound so bad. Our shields should protect us with no problem.”

“Tell her the size of their fleet, Karim,” offered the captain.

The first officer recalled images of the Vuke vessels. They were primitive looking, with unrefined hulls. The Vuke fleet operates in carrier groups. They have five groups total: one at each colony, two around their homeworld, and one in reserve.” He approached the table to emphasize his point. Each battle group consists of a carrier, three destroyers, and 36 fighters.”

A hush fell in the room.

The Andorian counselor stated humbly, “Oh.”

“I don’t understand,” came from Weston, “I thought it’s Federation policy not to make first contact until a culture develops faster-than-light travel.”

“In this case, it’s not that simple. You’ll understand in a second.” Bin Nadal returned to his chair, “The Federation has wanted to start formal relations for years, but decided not to, mostly due to their hostile nature.”

The captain took up the torch, “Vuke culture is centered around the idea that they are superior to all other forms of life. They have a type of galactic manifest destiny mentality.”

“I read,” added Karim, “That a Romulan scout ship was forced to land there for repairs during the Earth/Romulan War. The Vuke found them, attacked

them, and apparently ate them. Only two Romulans were left by the time they could take off again.”

Zo’Kama surmised, “So they are aware of other sentient lifeforms.”

“Yes, but they don’t really seem to care. It’s doubtful our first contact would alter their culture much. They would simply see us as another enemy to defeat.”

“How can you be sure of that, sir?” asked Weston.

“Because ensign,” interjected Aurelia, “when the Federation first observed their home planet, there were three sentient species living on it.”

A chill entered the room.

Finally, Faltyne asked, “So why make contact now? What’s changed?”

Aurelia rejoined, “They’ve come down with some sort of disease. Starfleet Medical is unimaginatively calling it ‘H’kan Plauge.’ Two percent of the entire Vuke population has died in the last year.” The captain rested her elbows on the table and elaborated with a sigh betraying her disagreement over Starfleet’s assessment. “Command believes now is the best chance we have of earning some good faith with the Vuke and making first contact at the same time.”

The Asian science officer commented, “They’re less likely to bit our hand if it has a cure for this plague in it.”

“That’s probably more of a literal statement than you think,” observed Weston.

Sintina looked up to the Arkonian, “Doctor, it’ll be your job to deliver that cure.”

“Starfleet Medical doesn’t already have it?” she asked, a bit surprised.

“No, they haven’t been able to get a sample of the disease to study, yet.” She added, “It is...assumed by Command that the Vuke might also be more receptive to another reptilian species assisting them. That’s part of the reason why *Independence* was chosen for this mission.”

The Arkonian huffed half-indignantly, "Let me get this right; all I have to do is make contact with a hostile species, get them to let me have a specimen, analyze the disease, create a cure – or at least a vaccine, all without provoking a conflict."

Sintina nodded straight-faced, "Yes, that about it."

Zo'Kama began rubbing her temples.

"That's the spirit, doctor!" joshed the captain.

The first officer changed the subject, "Captain, what about the hostile ship Mr. Easton mentioned?"

Ethan Windslow, the chief engineer, spoke slightly out of turn, "We do have evidence that Section 31 has interphasic cloaking technology. If there is a ship out there using it, there's no way we'll know it."

"Interphasic?" queried Jonin.

The chief engineer explained, "A normal cloak simply bends light around an object. An interphasic cloak pushes an object slightly out of our reality; rendering it invisible. It also means matter and energy from our universe has no effect on it."

"So," conjectured Faltyne, "a phaser beam would pass right through it?"

"That's right."

Aurelia had seen too many things to dismiss Easton's testimony. She said, "If there is a ship out there. I want to be able to detect it."

"But, Captain..." Windslow began to protest.

"Find a way, Commander. I don't want to be caught flat-footed by Section 31 again."

Ethan bit his lip, nodded slowly, and responded, "Aye ma'am."

## CHAPTER 2

### **Stardate: 54608.1 (11 Aug 2377) USS *Independence*, Visitor's Quarters En-route to the H'Kan System**

Counselor Kimula didn't mean to judge him, but by contemporary standards, Clayton Easton was a rather unimpressive specimen. He was fidgety as well.

"Counselor," he said by way of greeting.

The Andorian smiled warmly, "Mr. Easton. How are you doing?"

"Oh...oh, as good as to be expected I suppose." He sat down on a couch near a windowless bulkhead. "I...I um, was never cut out for this stuff. I was just a civilian comm. traffic router when the Directorate approached me." He laughed humorlessly, "I'm not even in Starfleet."

Kimula sat down gently on the other end of the couch.

Easton continued, "I guess I was just the right guy at the right time." He sat silently for a moment. "Maybe 31 thought I was too pathetic to worry about. I was...am...quiet, unassuming. I never had much of a life."

Kimula encouraged him to continue, "Tell me more about yourself."

He shrugged, "There's not much to tell. I grew up on Proxima Colony. ...had a very normal childhood. I got into subspace communications and I've been traveling around from job to job ever since."

Kimula sensed a loneliness about him, "Married?"

"No," he said, simply.

It was time to get off that subject, she decided. "What did 31 have you do?"

"Not much. I just monitored communications and sent them along to different relays."

"What type of communications?"

Clayton seemed a bit more comfortable with this conversation, “Mostly inter-Imperial comm. traffic within Romulan space.”

Kimula moved her body to a more informal position, “So, why did you accept Admiral Nechayev’s offer to work with her?”

“Well,” he sighed, “It started during the Dominion War. I became curious about the people I was working for, so...I started monitoring the Directorate’s communications as well.”

Being a communications officer as well as a counselor, Kimula immediately asked, “How did you get their security protocols?”

For the first time, Clayton grinned, “It took me a few years, but I broke their code.” His pride was unrestrained for a moment. Then, he continued, “Slowly, I learned more and more about their operations. They had an operation to discredit a Romulan Senator. They’ve been using cloaks for years. They even had an agent in the President’s cabinet.” He shook his head, “And I don’t know how many assassinations they executed during the war.” Clayton looked up, “I may not have the courage of a Starfleet war veteran, but I couldn’t help these people.”

“So,” concluded Kimula, “When Admiral Nechayev approached you, you accepted.”

“I didn’t know Admiral Nechayev was behind it at first, but yes.”

Kimula forced a smile, “It sounds like you could teach me a lot about subspace communications.”

Clayton returned the gesture, “If we get out of this alive, I’ll teach you all you want to know.”

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### **Supplemental USS *Independence*, Main Engineering En-route to the H’Kan System**

The matter/anti-matter reactor pulsed outside of Commander Windslow’s office in Main Engineering. Lieutenant Jonin Faltyne, science officer Tang Zian, and he were brainstorming.

Jonin stood, cross-armed against the bulkhead, "I don't suppose tracking their plasma exhaust is an option."

Tang sat across from the chief engineer. "Both the Romulans and Klingons have been capturing their exhaust while under cloak for decades. I doubt 31 would make that mistake." He thought for a second, "What about a tachyon scanner?"

"No," rejoined Windslow, "A phased vessel would have no effect on tachyons."

"How about sending out an anti-proton beam?" inquired the security chief.

"No," Ethan Windslow stood and began to pace. "An anti-proton beam can be neutralized by adjusting the resonance frequency of the cloaking device. Starfleet Intelligence knows that, and if they know that, so does 31." His frustration rose, "Besides, we're not talking about a conventional cloak. We are talking about a fundamental change in the matter and energy of a ship at the quantum level. Normal tricks aren't going to work!"

The room feel silent.

"Have you talked to this Easton character?" asked Jonin. "He said his sensors could detect the enemy ship."

Windslow nodded with a smirk. "He claims he stole one of 31's specially outfitted shuttles. He says he doesn't know how the detector works."

"So he says," commented Tang.

The security chief had been aboard ship a few months now. In that time, he had heard several people talk about Chief Engineer Ethan Windslow. Most of the talk revolved around his actions and inactions during the war. Windslow once held the rank of captain. He was convicted of abandoning his troops and covering up his actions. In truth, Jonin shared the misgivings of others. Faltyne was himself a prisoner of a Cardassian insurgent group known as the Crimson Shadow. Luckily, people never gave up on him and he was rescued. Windslow's subordinates weren't so lucky. The Andorian pushed aside his personal opinions for two reasons: despite whatever he had done, Windslow was still a superior officer; and Jonin prided himself as being a professional. However, in all the complaints he had heard about the man, he never heard a criticism of the commander's engineering expertise. So, he felt like he was

asking the obvious when he said, “Did you find anything useful in the wreckage?”

“No, most of the ship was vaporized in the blast.” Windslow sat back down. “I don’t know. Maybe if we research more about the *Pegasus* Incident, we’ll get some insights.”

The Andorian’s antennae curved inward, “The *Pegasus* Incident?”

“It’s something Karim once told me about. An admiral, named Pressman, developed the phasing cloak almost 20 years ago on his ship, the *Pegasus*. It was presumed lost when the ship exploded, until the *Big E* found the ship seven years ago. At which time, Captain Picard attempted to expose the plot; only to have Starfleet Intelligence cover it up ... as best they could, anyway.”

Tang asked, “What happened to Pressman?”

“According to bin Nadal, he was forced into early retirement.”

“That’s it?” came from Jonin.

“As far as I know,” confirmed the commander.

The Chinese officer shook his head, “Not much of a punishment for violating the Treaty of Algeron.”

Faltyne stood up straight, “You should contact the *Enterprise*. Maybe their chief engineer took scans of the device.” Not only was the suggestion practical, he decided, but it would also give some type of confirmation of all this talk of Section 31.

Windslow’s face perked up.

The Andorian added, “Well, wouldn’t you?”

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**Supplemental**  
**USS *Independence*, Chief Medical Officer’s Office**  
**En-route to the H’Kan System**

The head nurse, Ensign Juan Guerrero Macías, popped his head in the open doorway, "Doctor, do you recommend I give Crewman R'grek axonol or merfadon pre-op?"

Zo'Kama didn't look up from the padd she was reading immediately. She seemed uncharacteristically distracted and anxious. Her tan scales were a shade darker today. Finally, she acknowledged the nurse, "Huh?"

Juan repeated, "Axonol or merfadon for R'grek?"

"Oh, merfadon works better on Tellarites." Then, she returned to her reading.

He took another step in, "What are you reading?"

The Arkonian exhaled deeply, "It's all the information the Federation has gathered on the Vuke." She added, tongue in cheek, "I thought it'd be a good idea to study up on them since I'm going to be making first contact with them."

"And?"

She plopped the padd down, "And they are a vicious race; as blood thirsty as the Klingons, and as intelligent as the Vulcans."

"A dangerous mixture," he commented.

She began a rant, "And of course, Command believes that just because my race and this race are both exothermic, we stand a better chance of surviving the encounter."

"Well, since you're both reptilian..."

She cut him off testily, "What? Because we're both reptilian, we'll get along? That logic doesn't work too well with you mammalian species." She rounded her desk, "Even among humans there was conflict and war."

The Brazilian nodded.

"I fear there is still much misunderstanding between reptilian species and mammalian species."

Juan frowned. He knew there was a pinch of truth in what she said.



She continued, "I can't count how many mammals have pulled back when I approach them, even to help them. There are humans on this ship – supposedly an advanced species – that refuse to be treated by me."

The only thing the ensign could offer was, "It's not right, Doctor."

She made a low, grumbling sound. Then, sighed. "I'm sorry, I'm...I'm just a bit overwhelmed lately."

"That's understandable," he rejoined, "The captain has put you under a lot of pressure on this mission."

She placed a welcoming hand on Juan's shoulder and smiled. Then, she returned to her chair, "I've been under pressure before. I've done triage under fire. To tell you the truth, I'd rather be doing that than dealing with inter-galactic politics." The Arkonian took a moment to center herself. "I will be able to adapt."

Juan recognized, the last comment was more to convince herself than anything. "I'm sure you will, Doctor."

## CHAPTER 3

### **Stardate: 54613.5 (13 Aug 2377) USS *Independence*, Main Engineering En Route to the H'Kan System**

It was the first time Windslow had seen Lieutenant Commander La Forge with his ocular implants. Ethan didn't know the man personally. In fact, he had only met the *Enterprise* engineer once before at a conference.

Geordi's unnatural eyes dimly glowed a soft light blue from across subspace. "Commander," he continued, "Do you realize the files you're requesting are classified?"

Ethan placed his hand over his terra cotta goatee for a moment before rejoining, "Yes, I do."

The African leaned back and sighed slightly. He looked off screen, presumably to see if anyone was in earshot. Then, he leaned back in, "Look, shortly after that mission, Starfleet Intelligence ordered Captain Picard to turn over all the data we had on the interphasic cloak."

Dejected, Windslow glanced down and began, "I understand."

"Why do you want the information, anyway?" Geordi fished.

Suddenly realizing how it would look if he didn't tell the truth, he admitted, "We believe we are being pursued by a vessel utilizing such a device. I'm trying to find a way to beat it."

"The *Independence* is well within Federation space, who do you think is after you?" La Forge challenged.

Windslow grimaced. He had told La Forge this much. The only hope of eliciting his trust was to tell him everything.

### **Supplemental USS *Independence*, Captain's Ready Room En Route to the H'Kan System**

The trio of Aurelia, bin Nadal, and Faltayne entered the office adjacent the bridge. The captain settled at her desk, the other two in chairs next to it.

Sintina started the meeting off, "Ok lieutenant, what have you found out about our guest?"

The Andorian handed each of them a padd, "Most of his back story checks out, at least up until about five years ago."

"What happened then?" came for Karim.

Jonin continued, "According to Mr. Easton, he was officially employed by the government of Caldos I in 2372. However, I found out he was listed as steward of a residence on Archanis IV at the same time."

"That system was annexed by the Klingons that year," observed Aurelia.

The security chief confirmed her memory with a nod.

"That doesn't necessarily mean anything," offered bin Nadal. "Just because he had property there..."

Jonin jumped in, "Mr. Easton also said he had never been married."

"But," prompted Sintina.

"A Clara and Mira Easton, mother and daughter, were listed as civilian casualties when the Klingons invaded the planet. Genetic records confirm Mira was Clayton's offspring."

A solemn toned Sintina supposed, "So we can't trust him."

Karim again defended Clayton, "Even if..."

Aurelia cut him off, "He lied, Karim! That's enough for me."

"I still haven't determined what his true agenda is," reported Jonin.

Although the wind had been taken out of his sails, bin Nadal added, "It's possible he's still telling the truth about 31."

Sintina rested her elbows on the desk, "I'm not going to assume that. Have Kimula keep working on him. Maybe she can get something out of him."

"And if she can't?" asked the Andorian.

The captain's face hardened. She had had enough of these mind games. She would make sure the truth would come out one way or another. She surprised herself a bit when she found herself saying, "Then Lieutenant...it will be up to you to get him to talk. Use whatever means are necessary."

Both officers were taken aback. After glancing at his first officer, Faltynne stated firmly, "I'll use any *legal* means at my disposal, ma'am."

The Latina's face was a void. "Of course," she responded flatly. "Dismissed."

### **Supplemental** **USS *Independence*, Holodeck Two** **En Route to the H'Kan System**

Upon entering the holodeck, Doctor Zo'Kama was surprised to have the sun in her eyes. The scene was an M-class planet. A field of trimmed, green grass was before her, a blue sky overhead. Nearby, her daughter and some others were engaged in some type of sport. They were kicking a white and black sphere along the ground. Large nets were at opposite ends of the field.

There were only six children aboard ship. It seemed all of them were here, along with Susan Windslow, Ethan's mate, and a few other off-duty personnel.

The Arkonian stood at the edge of the playing field and stood observing for some time before Zo'Kala noticed.

The young reptilian ran to her. "*Go'chama*," she said, breathing through her mouth, "We are playing a Terran game. Mrs. Windslow taught us." Lacking sweat glands, she held her mouth wide open.

In Arkonian society, the biological parents of children have no obligation to raise them. *Go'chama* means something more akin to 'female life-giver' than 'mother.' Despite tradition, Zo'kama choose to keep her daughter and raise her. Though, within a year or two, it would be time for Zo'Kala to strike out on her own.

"I've brought you some *ta'rat'ush*," said the doctor as she handed her offspring a bottle of brown liquid.

Arkonians had a fairly unique physiology. Not only were they reptilian, but life on their planet was not based on water. Instead, life was based on a brownish liquid known as *ta'rat'ush*. In addition to that, their species' saliva had a dermal healing property.

The child chugged it down, "Thank you, *Go'chama*."

"Do not over exert yourself," Zo'Kama reminded her, "Humans are capable of higher endurance than our species."

"I won't," she said and she ran back to the game.

The doctor decided it would be best to have a cool bath ready for Zo'Kala when she got home.

**Supplemental**  
**USS *Enterprise*, First Officer's Office**  
**Sector 18945**

"Enter," called Commander William Riker after the door chime sounded. He was working on crew evaluations. It seemed an unending cycle to him. The administrative part of command was never something he enjoyed. He welcomed the distraction.

Geordi walked in with a sense of urgency. "Commander," he began, "I just got an interesting call from the *Independence*."

"Sintina Aurelia's ship? She's always interesting," he jibed, but the look on La Forge's face prompted Will to forgo the wit.

"Her chief engineer, a man by the name of Ethan Windslow, just asked me for data about the interphasing cloak from the *Pegasus*."

Riker stood up, concern in his eyes. He was all too familiar with the *Pegasus* Incident.

**Supplemental**  
**USS *Independence*, Captain's Quarters**  
**En Route to the H'Kan System**

"Mango juice," Sintina ordered from her replicator. It materialized and she took a long sip. She set it down on a nearby table. As she walked to the

couch, she unzipped her black uniform jacket and removed it. After that, she took off her red shirt, revealing a gray undershirt. The captain nearly fell into the couch. It had been a long day. She got nearly five seconds of relaxation when the comm. activated.

*"Bridge to Captain Aurelia."*

Sintina didn't move. The voice was Petty Officer Dorian. She'd left the conn to him a few minutes earlier. "Did you break my ship already, Dorian?" she joked.

*"Not this time, ma'am. You have an incoming message."*

She reluctantly sat up, "Fine. Route it down here."

*"Aye."*

A monitor mounted on the bulkhead snapped to life. A face from her past looked back at her. "Will? What do you want?" She truly didn't intend to be rude. She was more confused than anything else.

*"Well, nice to see you too."*

"You have to admit," she retorted, "The last time we met wasn't under the best of circumstances."

The last time they talked was nearly a year ago. The *Enterprise* and the *Independence* fought off a squadron of Alshian warships together. Just prior to the battle, Picard overrode the *Independence's* command functions. He thought Sintina was too impulsive and would provoke a fight, while he was trying to avoid it. She had never really gotten over that. Nothing got under her skin like someone thinking she was incompetent to command...perhaps because she secretly feared the same thing.

Will, on the other hand... Will had spent his last night on the *Hood* with her. At the time, she was the helm officer. For a while, she entertained the idea of continuing a relationship with him. It soon became obvious, however; he had no intention of keeping in contact with her. She had long since come to peace with that. It was, what it was: a night of fun, that's all.

As much as Riker didn't want to start off on the wrong foot, he found himself defending his CO, *"Captain Picard did what he thought was best."*

"And I'm sure you tried to talk him out of it, too," she said sardonically.

Riker stated, *"Look, I didn't call to rehash the past."*

"So why did you?"

Will sat up straight, *"Do you know you're chief engineer has been asking for classified information?"*

She rejoined half-mockingly, "Well, it wouldn't be the worst thing he's ever done."

Obviously not amused, he continued, *"He claims you might be being tailed by a Starfleet ship using an interphasic cloak. Is that true?"*

"It's true that we think it might be true."

He leaned in, *"Do you have any evidence?"*

She sighed, "Not exactly."

Riker leaned back.

"Have you told Picard about this?" she questioned.

*"Not yet. I wanted to talk to you, first."* Then, he suggested, *"But maybe I should."*

"What? Why?"

*"Trust me. If there is a Starfleet ship using one of those cloaks, Captain Picard will want to know."*

She puffed, "How? By asking Command? Good luck with that."

*"I wouldn't underestimate the man if I were you, Sintina,"* he declared.

The captain crossed her arms. She light-heartedly cautioned, "You might cause more trouble than I'm worth."

Will smiled, *"Let us deal with that."*

A grin escaped from Aurelia as well.

*"One more thing, Sintina." He offered, "The Enterprise has come across phasing technology on a few different occasions. I'll send you what we have." The conversation lagged for a moment. He concluded with, "I'm waiting for a 'thank you.'"*

Sintina rolled her eyes. "Thank you."

The commander tilted his head, *"You're welcome. Riker out."*



## CHAPTER 4

### **Supplemental Vuke Carrier Three In Orbit of H'Kan VB (Va'rak)**

Alpha Kudal walked briskly down the dull, brown corridor. The humidity was so thick, it could be seen. It was normal for Vuke spacecraft.

Kudal walked passed some males working. As with most Vuke males, they had green scales with black or brown feathers on their head. They didn't acknowledge her in anyway. Other than to mate, males and females rarely interacted. One sex wasn't necessarily superior to the other, it's just over the millennia it has been found that males had an aptitude for physical labor and defense, while females were better suited for administration and leadership.

Generally, females had tan scales and bright, multi-colored feathers. Kudal's feathers, for example, were a rainbow of blues, purples, yellows, and reds.

The Vuke were technically reptilian, however, they obviously had Avian characteristics. Their eyes had vertical pupils. The species had a beak-like mouth – though they had impressive canine teeth, - and their knee articulation was “backwards” compared to humans.

The traditional attire for her species consisted of thick leather from a large mammalian predator from the homeworld. Clothing was less for comfort or modesty, than status. It was a right of passage to kill the beast and handcraft one's own clothing from the hide. Designs varied depending on region. There was no formal Vuke uniform, simply because there was no formal Vuke military. It was simply how they lived.

Kudal reached the projection room. She sat on the floor in a bird-like way. The projector was activated. In the center of the room, an image appeared. It was a Vuke, but a very rare type of Vuke. She had golden scales and white feathers, the mark of royal blood.

Alpha Kudal bobbed her head down slowly, “Prima Alpha Johem,” she said by way of greeting to the projection.

The matriarch had direct control over every aspect of society. Her line had ruled for nearly one-thousand years. Johem had only one thing on her mind, “Have you made any progress lead healer?”

Kudal looked up, "I regret to report, no, Prima Alpha."

"Do you need more test subjects?"

Carrier Three had become a huge lab, though not by intent. The healer had been 'given' three-thousand corpses to study and over 500 healthy Vuke to do with as she pleased in efforts to cure the plague. Despite all the resources her kind could offer, she was still no closer to solving this puzzle. Johem would have probably already executed her for failure, but being isolated on the ship was death sentence enough.

The golden scaled reptile sighed, "Unfortunate." She added, unemotionally, "Do not attempt to land or dock with any other vessel. If you do so, you will be destroyed." The image faded away quickly.

### **Supplemental** **USS *Independence*, Main Engineering** **En Route to the H'Kan System**

Windslow was excited by the new information the captain had given him. He was finishing up the story. "So when they flooded the compartment with anyons, La Forge and Ro reappeared."

"Great," exclaimed Tang. "So all we have to do is scan for chroniton fields and that will give away the ship's position."

Ethan tempered his own excitement, "Not exactly. La Forge and Ro only created chroniton fields when they passed through normal matter. There's so little matter in space, we won't be able to detect them. Even if we could," he added, "It would take a massive amount of anyons to force something as large as a ship back into our quantum state."

"So what are you so wound up about?" asked the science officer.

With a wide grin, Ethan grabbed an armband from a console, "Once, La Forge was able to encompass personnel in a subspace isolation field that enabled them to observe things in a different quantum reality."

"How'd he adjust the field?"

Ethan pointed at the armband, "Using a type-7 phase discriminator, just like the ones in Starfleet emergency transporter armbands."

Zian caught on, "So if we could determine the quantum displacement of the enemy ship..."

"We could see them," finished Windslow.

The science officer wanted to wrap his head around this more. "So wait...the only people that could see the ship would be people in the subspace field."

"That's right."

Tang thought some more, "And how do we find out the specific quantum displacement the ship is using?"

Windslow stared off for a moment, "I have no idea."

### **Supplemental** **USS *Enterprise*, Captain's Ready Room** **Sector 18945**

Captain Picard gazed at his reflection in the window; beyond it was the great blackness.

Riker spoke up from behind him. He had just finished briefing Jean-Luc on the situation. "If a faction of Starfleet Intelligence is still using that cloak..."

Picard turned and finished his thought, "Then, they are violating the Treaty of Algeron and possibly risking war with the Romulans." The captain paced a bit and ran his fingers through hair that had long since been gone. "I have heard rumors...whispers...over the years of an above-top-secret echelon within Starfleet, but these are just rumors."

Will stroked his beard, "Admiral Pressman did say he had powerful friends."

Picard snapped, "No one should be above the law, Will. Not in the Federation."

Riker rejoined, "I whole-heartedly agree, but the question remains: what can we do about it?"

The Frenchman returned to the portal, “Pressman isn’t the only one with friends.”

## CHAPTER 5

### **Supplemental USS *Enterprise*, Captain's Ready Room Sector 18945**

Admiral Hendricks had a full head of grey hair. Most times, he had a friendly face. Now, however, Picard's question had stricken the joy from it.

Captain Picard waited patiently as the admiral avoided his glare.

"Jean-Luc," he began almost apologetically, "The Treaty of Algeron isn't what it once was."

The captain responded with driven satire, "Oh? I'm not aware of it being nullified, Admiral."

"We have certain assurances from within the Empire," Hendricks added.

Picard puffed indignantly and sat back in his chair.

The admiral went on honestly, "The truth of the matter is the *Defiant* isn't the only Starfleet ship with a cloak. It hasn't been for years."

The *Enterprise* captain shot up and smacked his hands on the desk, "Starfleet was based on the idea of peaceful exploration! Explorers don't go sneaking about." He fumed for a moment before continuing, "So we no longer 'boldly go,' do we admiral? Now we creep around like vermin!"

"That's enough," stated Hendricks with authority.

Picard muzzled himself, but he was obviously still enraged.

The admiral continued in a more congenial tone, "Look, I'm your friend Jean-Luc. And as your friend, I advise you to drop this. No one will benefit if it's made public. It will only hurt Starfleet's reputation. And I don't need to tell you we have a PR problem as it is since the war."

"Then, perhaps we should operate with a sense of morality and ethics."

Hendricks sighed, "I could order you not to pursue this, but I doubt you'd listen." He leaned in, "All I can say is: if you bring this to the council, you'll be upsetting some very influential people."

Picard began solemnly, "I do not like what we have become, James. Starfleet is slowly changing into something I can not respect." He resolved himself with a deep breath, "I will not allow something that I have cared for – that I have fought for – my entire life to be hijacked by dishonorable men who hide in shadows." He shot daggers at Hendricks, "And I am ashamed that you don't feel the same way."

The admiral glanced down.

Picard closed the channel.

### **Supplemental USS *Independence*, Conference Room En Route to the H'Kan System**

Science officer Tang and Windsow stood near a large screen set into the bulkhead. Captain Aurelia had just joined bin Nadal and Lieutenant Faltyne at one end of the elongated table. The stars streaked passed in the large windows.

"So what have you come up with?" began Sintina.

Windsow had an almost obsessive edge to his voice. Obviously, he was committed to solving this problem. "Ok, as far as I can tell, there is a way around this interphasic cloak." He activated the display. "When phased matter passes through normal matter, a chroniton field is produced. Now, we can use a subspace differential pulse to identify the exact phase variance of that field if we scan it within five seconds of its creation." He took a breath, "Then, we can create a static warp shell around the *Independence* with the exact same phase discrimination of the cloaked ship." He halted his explanation. Apparently, the others didn't understand the significance.

Zian jumped in, "The static warp shell would basically be our own interphasic cloak. Since we would share the same phase discrimination of the cloaked ship, we could see them."

"Could we attack them," came from Aurelia.

The chief engineer stepped up, "No. If we fired a phaser or launched a torpedo, it would revert to its normal state, once it left the static warp shell."

The Andorian security chief asked, "Couldn't we alter the state of a torpedo or two, independent of our shell?"

Windslow tilted his head a bit, "Possibly. Yes, with a warp capable torpedo."

Aurelia issued the order without delay, "I want at least a dozen torpedoes altered as soon as you can have them."

"We would still have to know the proper phase variance to set them to, Captain," reminded Tang.

Bin Nadal chimed in, "And that is dependant on the cloaked ship passing through normal matter. There isn't much of that in space."

"True," admitted Ethan, "but if they follow us into the star system, our chances increase."

"Not by much," observed Faltyne.

"Granted," said Windslow. He examined the deck for a second, then looked to Sintina, "A lot has to go right for this to work, Captain. But it's our best shot."

Sintina rapped her fingers on the table. "I've never been one to rely on luck. You can't trust luck." She sighed, "But if it's the best we can do, then it's the best we can do."

### **Supplemental Vuke Carrier Three In Orbit of H'Kan VB (Va'rak)**

"Healer," said a male Vuke as he approached her, "Alpha Getha has reached the final stage."

Alpha Kudal, the lead healer of the fleet, slowly placed the scalpel on the metal autopsy table. A male corpse adorned it; his chest flung open. The internal organs had large, puss-filled boils all over them. She had seen it several times before. Each time Kudal performed a new autopsy, she hoped to find something new.... Something different... A hint... Anything. But this one was just like the countless others.

Now, she'd watch another die; this time, the Alpha of the fleet.

Alpha Getha's room was filled with plants native to the homeworld. The commander herself, lay restless on her cot.

Kudal sat next to her. Some of Getha's colorful feathers had fallen out and she made a muted gurgling noise. It was her last few attempts to breathe. There was little the healer could do.

Alpha Kudal had been effectively useless for over a year now. The plague first struck a small village on Va'rak, the outermost colony. From there it spread to the rest of the planet. For several wasted months, the matriarch denied the very existence of the illness. Once the disease reached the homeworld, there was no way to avoid the reality of the situation. Not that it mattered at that point.

The Vuke had a firm understanding of genetics. It was even rumored that the royal family covertly used genetics to ensure no other Vuke would develop golden scales and white feathers. Even with this technology, the cure for the illness evaded them.

"Kudal," Getha wheezed. "Once I end, you will assume command." She coughed violently, nearly vomiting. "Can not...allow spreading disease. Take ship to outer system, away from colony. Once all dead....ship can be sanitized and used again."

"I understand," confirmed Kudal.

Another fierce round of coughing and gagging followed. This time, dark liquid and tissue ejected from Getha's mouth. It was painful. Mercifully, the Alpha lost consciousness. She would die within minutes.



## CHAPTER 6

### **Supplemental** **USS *Independence*, Guest Quarters** **En Route to the H'Kan System**

Despite Kimula's best efforts to remain anti-confrontational and non-judgmental, in both tone and thought; Clayton was becoming almost frantic.

"They're lying!" he persisted.

The Andorian remained seated and calm. "Are you suggesting that Section 31 created false documentation?"

"Yes!"

She examined a padd for a moment. "These documents seem authentic, Clayton."

Throwing up his arms, he rejoined, "They wouldn't be much good if they didn't!" He paced like a caged beast.

Kimula didn't know who or what to believe. If Easton was a plant, he was certainly putting on a good show. Then again, she couldn't see how anyone could fake these documents from such diverse locations so quickly. She sighed. His agitation was filling the room like a flood. It was difficult not to get sucked into it. "Alright," she offered finally, "Let's say they are fake. Do you have anything to prove them wrong?"

He mockingly checked his pockets, "Gee, I'm sorry. I must have left it in my other pants."

The counselor tilted her head. She didn't appreciate the sarcasm. Though, she was often quick to dish it out herself. "Couldn't we contact Starbase 39-sierra?"

His response was quick, "They won't have any records of me there. Section 31 didn't *want* any record of me there!"

At an impasse, Kimula sat back. It was time to take this a step further. "How do you feel about Klingons?"

Easton seemed genuinely confused, "Klingons? Why?"

"Just answer the question, please."

He snapped, "That has nothing to do with anything!"

She took a slightly different track, "Some of the records we obtained indicate you had a wife and a daughter on Archanis IV."

Clayton nearly yelled, "I told you, I've never been married!"

Kimula's counseling technique had always centered on cutting to the quick. She pressed hard, "Their names were Clara and Mira..."

He turned away and violently pounded on the bulkhead, screaming, "I don't know them! They never existed! Don't you see that?" His face was beet red and he was on the verge of sobbing.

**Supplemental**  
**USS *Enterprise*, Conference Room**  
**Sector 18945**

The *Enterprise* senior staff was assembled.

Picard strode around the long table, "The admirals I talked to all but confirmed Captain Aurelia's accusations." He found his chair and rested his arms on the back of it, "Elements within Starfleet and the Federation are currently using cloaking technology, including Admiral Pressman's interphasic cloaking device." He added with distain, "One almost bragged about it."

Counselor Troi was the first to protest, "How can they get away with that?"

"The answer to that, Counselor," rejoined the captain, "is something that keeps me up at night."

"It's amazing how easily they admitted their knowledge of the Federation breaking galactic treaties," noted the first officer.

"They truly see nothing wrong with it." Picard added, "And they believe they are untouchable. At least, that's the impression I got."

Doctor Crusher hoped, "With any luck, their overconfidence will bring them down."

"I doubt a few loose-lipped admirals are an accurate representation of what these people are capable of," responded the captain.

Riker darkly mused, "If we were only so lucky."

The conversation stalled. Each officer took a moment to digest the information.

Geordi leaned in, "I've talked with Commander Windslow. He has a plan to get around the cloak, but it's a long shot."

The deep voice of Worf injected, "If a vessel is tracking the *Independence*, we must assume their communications are being monitored as well."

"Agreed," said Picard. "Even secured channels might not be good enough." He sat with a sigh, "I was also given a warning to not investigate this any further."

Concerned, Beverly assumed, "An admiral threatened you?"

He straightened up, "Not exactly. He suggested that bringing this to light via official channels would not only be ineffective, but put force this rogue group even deeper into hiding."

"He's probably right," commented Riker.

Picard nodded, "Unfortunately so." He looked around the table, "I need options."

The room was quiet for several moments. Finally, Data piped up, "I may have a course of action, Captain."

**Stardate: 54619.0 (15 Aug 2377)**  
**USS *Independence*, Conference Room**  
**H'Kan System**

Aurelia walked in and took a seat, "Report."

Ensign Weston began, "We are holding position inside the system's Kuiper belt to avoid detection."

Then, Science Officer Tang added, "I've been scanning continuously for chroniton fields. Nothing so far, but it would have to be within 100,000 kilometers for the scanners to detect it."

Kimula spoke to that point, "Captain, it's entirely possible there never was any ship."

"Is that your professional opinion?" queried Sintina.

Her antennae waved slightly with her head, "I don't know. Clayton is obviously...disturbed. But I'm not sure if it's over his lost family... or that no one believes him about that ship out there."

Bin Nadal spoke out of turn, "I believe him."

"We all know your views on Section 31, Karim," remarked the captain. She continued, "But I don't trust this man. I won't be duped again." She looked to Faltyne, "I want Easton in the brig. That might give him some clarity."

The Andorian security chief nodded.

"I don't think that's necessary," offered Kimula.

"Neither do I," seconded bin Nadal.

Aurelia's tone was bitterly mordant, "Well, I'm not asking your permission, now am I?"

The comment muted their protest.

"Now," the captain went on, "how are we going to go about making contact with the Vuke?"

"Ideally," said Kimula coldly, "We should approach some sort of scientist, first. Scientists usually have a more open mind about alien life."

Jonin Faltyne informed them, "I ran a passive scan of the system. Most of the Vuke ships are clustered in orbit of their colonies." He got up and activated the viewer, "With one odd exception. The command ship of their third fleet is by itself, moving away from the outermost colony."

“How fast can their ships travel?” inquired Windslow.

“About one-tenth impulse.”

Zo’Kama observed, “It’s nice to know we could always outrun them.”

The comment prompted some glances.

She added, “Not that we’ll have to.”

“Anyway,” Jonin went on, “I’d say that’s our best option. The down side is: there is no place to hide within transporter range of that vessel.”

“Everyone in the system will be able to see us,” said bin Nadal.

The Andorian nodded, “That carrier could get reinforcements within three hours.”

The chief engineer suggested, “Maybe we don’t have to reveal ourselves right away, at least not directly.”

Aurelia cocked an eyebrow, “What did you have in mind?”

## CHAPTER 7

### **Supplemental USS *Independence*, Holodeck One H'Kan System**

Commander Windslow worked diligently under the arch adjacent to the exit of the holodeck. Zo'Kama stood somewhat nervously in the center of the grid.

"How much longer?" the reptilian asked.

The chief engineer manipulated an ODN recoupler inside the open panel, "Transitioning from our data stream to theirs is taking longer than I thought."

The Arkonian stepped closer. She wanted to get this over with. Waiting only made her trepidation worse. She ventured, "Did you ever make first contact, Commander?"

Without looking up, he rejoined, "When I was first officer of the *Mendez*, we made first contact with the..." He struggled with the pronunciation, "Ich-ggu-keeak – very small creatures, but surprisingly fun at a party."

The doctor made a ticking noise, the equivalent of laughing, "It sounds like it went well."

He grinned, "That was a surreal night. It was like dancing with pixies."

"I hope this goes one-tenth as well," she commented.

"I'm sure it will," he offered as he finished his work. "Remember, in the end, it's just two people talking to each other."

The Arkonian smiled, "Thank you. That helps."

He nodded and stood up, "Ok, you'd better get into position." He tapped on his combadge, "Windslow to bridge, we're ready down here."

### **Supplemental Vuke Carrier Three H'Kan System**

It was odd to have an incoming projection without knowledge of its origin. It was standard procedure to transmit that information along with the communication. None the less, it would have to be answered. It was entirely possible it was someone from the medical guild. Or at least, Kudal hoped it was.

Kudal entered the projection room and stifled a cough before she activated the projector. What she saw was not what she expected. She bobbed her head slightly in curiosity. Was the image distorted? No. This was no Vuke. She stood and pointed an accusing finger, "Foreigner!"

The image said in her native tongue, "I...I am Commander Zo'Kama Do'matar of the Feder...the United Federation of Planets. We seek peaceful relations with your people."

This monster was repulsive looking. It had no feathers, no beak; its eyes were small. The only redeeming quality it had was the color of its scales – tan, like her own.

Kudal seemed more suspicious than frightened or excited. She was raised with tales of inferior lifeforms from other stars. They were devious and evil. She moved to the bulkhead. She considered powering off the projector, but didn't. "What do you want, Foreigner?"

The image said, "We...the Federation only wishes peaceful coexistence."

"Conquerors always say that," the Vuke spat back.

Zo'Kama was at a loss, "But..." She glanced down for a moment. Then, back up to Kudal, "What is your name?"

"My name?"

"Yes, your name," replied the doctor. "I want to know how I should address you."

The Vuke was hesitant. She complied eventually, "I am Alpha Kudal, Lead Healer of the Third Fleet." She added, "What was your name again?"

"Zo'Kama and I am also a healer."

Kudal was still weary of treachery, "You are?"

“Yes,” confirmed the Starfleet officer. “We have learned of the illness currently infecting your people. I want to help you find a cure.”

She stepped closer to the projection, “How did you find out about the plague? Have you been spying on us?”

The image’s face changed. It almost looked guilty.

Zo’Kama responded, “We have been observing your people from a distance, yes.”

“Where are you?”

The Arkonian thought for a moment, “Close enough to help you with this disease.”

Maybe it was Kudal’s liberal upbringing. Maybe it was her trusting nature. Maybe it was the realization that she didn’t have the luxury of distrust, considering the circumstances. She asked, “How can you help us?”

### **Supplemental USS *Independence*, Main Bridge H’Kan System**

Captain Aurelia sat casually in the center seat. First contact had gone well enough. Zo’Kama and the Vuke doctor were collaborating via the holodeck. Though the Arkonian had insisted there was only so much she could do without a live sample of the disease; a prospect requiring the *Independence* to move deeper into the system. Aurelia wasn’t thrilled about that idea.

She heard a proximity klaxon from the free standing tactical station behind her.

Faltyne reported a second later, “Captain, I’m picking up a Federation warp signature. It’s heading for our location.”

She stood and turned, “Who is it?”

He checked his readings. “It’s a type-11 Starfleet shuttlecraft; registered as *Pike*. Mothership: USS *Enterprise*.”



**Supplemental**  
**USS *Independence*, Main Shuttlebay**  
**H'Kan System**

Lieutenant Commander Data exited the craft as the exterior bay door slid shut. "Captain Picard felt caution was in order. I am here to assist you in your efforts to detect and expose any nearby vessel utilizing an interphasic cloaking device."

Aurelia commented, a bit defensively, "I have good engineers on my ship, Commander."

Data processed her body language. "It was not my intension for imply otherwise, Captain Aurelia. I simply thought my experience and expertise in this matter may be beneficial to your efforts."

The captain was well aware of Data. He was something of a celebrity within Starfleet. Despite her pride in her ship and crew, she knew enough to put her pride aside. The android would be invaluable. "Of course," she relented, "I'll introduce you to Commander Windslow."

## CHAPTER 8

### **Supplemental USS *Independence*, Holodeck One H'Kan System**

Data and Captain Aurelia entered as the heavy door opened. Commander Windslow was standing at a free standing station on the grid. Zo'Kama was next to him.

"Commanders," began Aurelia. "This is Commander Data from the *Enterprise*. He's here to assist us."

The golden-eyed android offered a hand to each of them.

Zo'Kama had heard little about Data.

Windslow on the other hand, was most impressed. "Mister Data, It's such a pleasure to meet you. I've read all of Bruce Maddox's papers about you."

"Unfortunately," rejoined Data, "I do not agree with many of his conclusions regarding the intricacies of the positronic brain. It is regrettable my father's knowledge and experience was lost with his death."

Windslow took on a perplexed look, "You're father?"

"Yes, Doctor Noonien Soong, my creator."

"Ah," said the engineer, "yes, of course."

The captain excused herself, "I'll leave you to it, Commander."

"Thank you, Captain," the *Enterprise* ops officer acknowledged. Then, he approached Windslow, "I would like to review any progress you have made in your attempts to detect the phased ship."

"Of course," he replied, "Go to my office in main engineering. All the data is there. I'll join you in a few minutes."

Data nodded and turned to exit. Then, he addressed the doctor, "While my medical files are not as extensive as my engineering files, I may be able to assist you as well, Commander Zo'Kama."

The Arkonian was a bit surprised the android was such a jack of all trades, but she never refused another perspective. "I'd be grateful for that."

He nodded and left.

After the door sealed, Ethan offered, "We're lucky to have him on board."

She grinned, "I'd be one arrogant *jatah* if I were as smart as you claim he is."

**Stardate: 54622.6 (16 Aug 2377)**

**Vuke Carrier Three**

**H'Kan System**

Kudal, again, found herself in the projection room. This time, she bowed before the image of the Prima Alpha.

"These aliens, what information have they given you?" asked Prima Alpha Johem.

The lead healer didn't make eye contact with the matriarch. The Prima had a tone about her. It was as if Kudal had committed a crime by speaking with these Federations. At least, there was an undercurrent of chastising to the conversation. "Their healer, Zo'Kama, has introduced me to some very advanced techniques to help isolate the virus."

"Have you told them anything about our defenses?"

She looked up slightly, "No, Prima. They have not asked about them. Zo'Kama seems genuinely concerned about our plight."

Johem's voice boomed, "If these foreigners were truly here to help us, why do they hide?"

Kudal didn't have a response.

The golden-scaled matriarch continued, "Have the Federations told you how to contact them?"

"Yes, Prima," Kudal said diminutively.

"Give that information to me."

**Supplemental**  
**USS *Independence*, Holodeck One**  
**H'Kan System**

A representation of a Vuke appeared on the grid of the holodeck. Both Zo'Kama and Windslow were still in the room as well. This Vuke was not the doctor. She had a regal stance about her. Her golden scales and white feathers were quite beautiful.

The image spoke, "I am Prima Alpha Johem, supreme leader of the Vuke. Show yourself, Zo'Kama."

It was programmed that the Vuke could only 'see' a few meters around her. After some silent prompting by Windslow, the Arkonian entered the perceptual range.

"I am Zo'Kama. I'm honored to meet you, Prima Alpha."

Tact was apparently not emphasized in Vuke culture, "I'm not sure I share the feeling, Federation. Are you the leader of your people?"

"Well, I'm authorized to represent..."

"Are you the leader?" Johem restated firmly.

The doctor took a breath, "No. I am the chief medical officer. I'm not in command."

"I demand to speak with your leader. Speaking with anyone else, I consider an insult."

Zo'Kama resolved herself against the conceit of the matriarch. She looked to Windslow. He nodded. Then, she tapped her combadge, "Captain Aurelia to holodeck one."

**Supplemental**  
**USS *Independence*, Conference Room**  
**H'Kan System**

Captain Aurelia addressed her senior staff, plus Data. Less than an hour had passed since her conversation with the Vuke head of state.

“The queen gave us two hours to reveal ourselves,” she explained.

Ensign Weston rested an elbow on the table, “With respect Captain: or what? I mean, it seems to me the Vuke can’t threaten us if they can’t find us.”

Science officer Tang spoke up, “Yeah, but the whole point of us being here is to gain their trust, right?”

“Besides that,” added the Arkonian, “Kudal and I have reached a point where we really need to work one-on-one with a live sample. I can’t do much more just talking with her.”

The Andorian security chief said, “I recommend against exposing ourselves. Everything we know about the Vuke implies they would attack us.”

“In any case,” commented Data, “It appears the mission objective can not be accomplished unless the *Independence* complies with Prima Alpha Johem’s demand.”

Bin Nadal offered, “If we found ourselves going up against a fleet of Vuke ships, our shields would last for a few minutes. If worse came to worst, we could retreat out of the system.”

Aurelia sighed, “I’m liking this mission less and less.” She thought for several seconds. Diplomacy was never her strong suit. Her tactical background told her to stay put. Other considerations like ‘engendering trust’ usually wasn’t part of her decision making process. It felt unnatural to her; forced. In the last year or so, she’s been learning, in many ways, being a captain in peace time was much more complex than being a captain in war time. Finally, she ordered, “Mister Weston, set a course to rendezvous with the Vuke carrier we’ve been communicating with. Engage at one-quarter impulse.”

## CHAPTER 9

### **Supplemental USS *Independence*, Main Bridge H'Kan System**

Aurelia felt naked. The *Indy* had left the safety of the ring of rocks and ice behind. They were running with shields down and weapons inactive.

Weston reported from the forward helm station, "Cutting impulse engines; activating maneuvering thrusters."

"We're in the carrier's weapons range," advised bin Nadal.

"Understood," acknowledged the captain. "Continue current alert status." She added, "Faltyne, keep a close eye on them."

"Aye." The Andorian checked his monitor, "Ma'am, I'm detecting movement from the other ships in the system. Most of the Vuke forces are on their way."

"How long?"

He did some calculations, "The nearest group will reach us in 1.5 hours."

"There's some motivation for the doctor," said Karim morbidly.

Aurelia tapped a control on her armrest, "Bridge to Sickbay."

*"Zo'Kama here."*

"Doctor, what can you get done in one and a half hours?"

*"You're kidding, right?"*

Sintina sighed, "Understood. Bridge out."

### **Supplemental Vuke Carrier Three H'Kan System**

The foreigner asked Kudal via the projector, "We've scanned your ship and I'd like your permission to beam a body over to our ship."

Her head swayed slightly. "Beam?" repeated the Vuke.

Zo'Kama took a second to find the words, "It's a technology we have. We can transfer people and objects from one place to another instantly."

"Amazing," she commented. For the first time in a long time, Kudal entertained a glimmer of hope. Surely, people with such technology could find a cure for this illness. She brought her mind back to the conversation, "Of course. You may proceed. But I must warn you. This disease spreads quickly in air. You must take precautions."

"I have," assured the Arkonian. "I've erected a containment field around the surgical bay and then another around sickbay. Contagion won't be a problem."

Kudal blinked. "I'll take your word for that."

### **Supplemental** **USS *Independence*, Main Bridge** **H'Kan System**

Ninety minutes later, the main viewer displayed only a handful of the combat vessels assuming a battle formation around the *Independence*. A total of three destroyers, one frigate, and nearly two dozen fighters now surrounded them. That didn't include the undermanned carrier and her fighters that could be utilized if need be.

It took everything Aurelia had not to call for a red alert. "Yellow alert," she said coolly, "keep the weapons offline."

Karim advised her, "Captain, I recommend we keep shields down as well. Any sudden power change from us might be interpreted as a hostile act to the Vuke."

She was silent while considering her first officer's words.

"Captain?" prompted the tactical chief.

Her face was blank, "Keep the shields down, Faltyne. But," she supplemented, "If you detect a missile launch..."

"I'll have the shields up before it exits their tubes, ma'am," finished the Andorian.

She nodded with approval.

Kimula reported from communications, "Captain, we're receiving a message on a Vuke frequency."

"Tap into the holodeck rig and put it on the main screen."

The Vuke matriarch appeared. She obviously thought she had the advantage. Johem barked, "Provide us with the cure to the disease or be destroyed."

Sintina never did respond well to ultimatums. She stood, "First off, we haven't developed a cure, yet. Second, who the hell are you to threaten us when we're offering you help?"

"You have violated our space. Under normal circumstances, you would already be dead. We understand you came here to assist us. That is why I am giving you this one chance to do so. Hand over the cure."

With clinched teeth, Aurelia rejoined, "I was not lying to you. We don't have a cure, yet. We're not even sure we can make one. These things take time."

The Vuke was silent. She had little choice but to back peddle. "Such an advanced species as yours shouldn't need that much time. You have 23 *hingins*. If your vessel attempts to move, it will be fired upon." She added menacingly, "If you can't create a cure after that, perhaps we can discover it ourselves using the technology on your ship."

Sintina huffed indignantly. "I've been ordered to try to help you people. But lady, if you attempt to board this vessel, you'll find out just how 'advanced' we are." She glanced at Kimula, "End communication."

The Andorian counselor jibed, "Tactful."

Aurelia was in no mood, "Shut up, Kim."

"For the record," reported bin Nadal, "twenty-three *hingins* translates to five hours, 15 minutes."

"Aurelia to Zo'Kama."



*"This is Zo'Kama."*

"Doctor, how well do you work with deadlines?"

**Supplemental**  
**USS *Independence*, Brig**  
**H'Kan System**

Clayton sat on the bench a broke and defeated man. He stared at the deck. He'd been like that for hours. Footfalls indicated someone had approached his cell. He didn't bother looking up.

"Mister Easton," stated Karim.

He looked up from under his brow, "Commander."

The first officer lowered the forcefield and took a seat on an adjacent bench. The field was re-activated by the guard.

"I believe what you're saying, Clayton. The captain is...untrusting by nature. Our experiences with Section 31 haven't helped, either."

He didn't respond.

Bin Nadal continued, "We just want to make sure you're telling us everything."

He said surprisingly calmly, "I told you the truth, but you didn't believe it. What more do you want me to say? Do you want me to lie now? I will if it means getting out of this cell."

Karim frowned. "No. No, I don't want you to lie."

Easton said, just above a murmur, "I never should have come here. You're probably in on it, too."

The Persian leaned back, "It's amazing how these people can so easily destroy trust and goodwill." He stood and gestured to the guard. "That's what they want, you know. We'll never have a unified resistance with so much suspicion and mistrust flying about."

The field dropped and he exited.

## CHAPTER 10

### **Supplemental** ***USS Independence*, Sickbay** **H'Kan System**

Doctor Zo'Kama proceeded with her autopsy. She wore a red bio-hazard suit. Data, lacking a suit, stood opposite of her.

The Arkonian laid down a laser scalpel, "It will take a few minutes for the computer to compare these results with the Vuke baseline from Starfleet Medical."

"It would be beneficial if I processed anatomy information for the species," commented the android. He began walking toward a nearby computer station.

"You haven't done that already?" asked the doctor.

He sat on the stool and began accessing the database, "It was not necessary before now. I would not want to give you faulty advice."

Zo'Kama leaned over his shoulder. The hands moved faster and faster, until they were a blur. The images were changing so quickly on the monitor that she found it difficult to look at. She turned away and rubbed her eyes. "I can't believe you can make sense of that."

Without looking away, Data stated, "I find it difficult to imagine how limiting it must be to be a biological being."

The doctor was silent for a moment. There was something in his tone. She almost felt insulted. Surely, she was just imagining it. "I never thought about it from your perspective."

"Of course, you did not," he quickly rejoined.

The computer chimed. The results were ready. Zo'Kama went to another station to read it over. A few seconds later, her shoulders slumped. "Of course, it's not going to be that easy." She turned to face Data, "The analysis didn't find anything that could cause these symptoms."

"What is your next course of action?"

She sighed, "I'll have to isolate the virus the old fashioned way, which means there is no way I'll even find this thing before the Vuke attack."

**Supplemental**  
**USS *Enterprise*, Captain's Ready Room**  
**Sector 18945**

"Enter," said Picard after hearing the door chime.

Worf entered.

The captain worked on a padd, "Yes Mister Worf, what is it?"

He looked uneasy. "I attempted to contact the *Independence* as you requested..." He hesitated a moment, "but it appears the transmission is being jammed at the source."

The captain sat up, concerned. "Jammed? How?"

"There is no way to tell from this range."

"I find it hard to believe the timing of this to be a coincidence." Picard counseled himself silently for a second. "Investigate this Mister Worf. Make it your top priority."

"Yes sir."

**Supplemental**  
**USS *Independence*, Main Engineering**  
**H'Kan System**

The ever constant rhythm of the warp core hummed in the background.

"Chief Fulton," yelled Windslow to the dark-skinned human across the room.

"Yes sir?"

They met each other half way. Windslow continued, "How many torpedoes have been altered to produce a static warp bubble?"

Both men noticed Data entering. He made a beeline for Windslow.

"Three, sir."

"Step it up, Chief."

Fulton nodded, "Aye."

The *Enterprise* ops officer didn't waste time, "I believe I have discovered a way to neutralize an interphasic cloak, Commander. If we alter the main deflector to emit an inverse tachyon pulse we can directly detect the quantum flux from the ship."

Windslow's brow scrunched up. "I don't see how an inverse tachyon pulse could detect any quantum flux."

Data rejoined evenly, "I would not expect you to understand it. The theories this relies upon are quite advanced."

The *Independence* officer wasn't sure how to react. It could very well be that what Data said was true, but that was beside the point. He decided to begin tactfully, "Commander, I have no doubt of your abilities, but I'm not going to do anything I don't understand. I need you to explain it. Otherwise, I'm going to continue with my original plan of using a differential pulse and then create a static warp shell."

There was a slight edge to the android's voice, "That procedure is flawed." He continued in a more diplomatic, if not condescending tone, "I believe it would be wise to yield to my superior knowledge and experience in this matter."

Windslow was resolved, "No. Not until I fully understand what I'd be doing."

Data cocked his head in concession, "Very well, when would you like to schedule a block of time for me to elaborate?"

### **Supplemental USS *Independence*, Main Engineering H'Kan System**

Even though the technology had been outdated for over 400 years, Sintina could have sworn she heard the ticking of an analog clock. "Time?" she asked.

The response came from tactical, the station behind her, "Twenty-two seconds. Would you like a countdown?"

She looked back at Faltyne, "God, no."

"Do you think the queen will do it?" ventured Karim.

Once it was clear Zo'Kama couldn't deliver, the captain began running battle scenarios in her head. "If she does, we raise shields and leave the system."

"Captain," said the doctor as she rose from a science station, "we do that and any hope for a cure for this plague will be gone. We'd be consigning these people to death."

"I'm not going to risk this ship and crew for people who don't want our help, Doctor." The sentence was stated in a way which left little room for debate.

Zo'Kama wasn't one to be intimidated easily. Many of the crew walked eggshells around Captain Aurelia, but not her. If the captain was wrong, Zo'Kama would call her out on it and she wasn't a 'pal' like Kimula or Karim. In this case, however, the Arkonian knew Sintina was right. Though her gut told her to object, her mind told her mouth to stay shut.

Jonin piped up, "Where receiving a hail."

"Right on time," observed bin Nadal.

Aurelia stood up, "Let's see what she has to say. On screen."

Prima Alpha Johem filled the screen. "I demand you transfer your entire crew to Carrier Three. You will continue your research from there, while we search your vessel for weapons and technology."

Sintina prepared herself for battle, "No."

"You will comply or you will be destroyed!"

"I doubt that," she rejoined calmly.

Zo'Kama stepped up, "Captain, let me go over. I could..."

"At ease," snapped Aurelia.

The Arkonian stood down.

The frustration in Johem's face intensified. There was a stare down between the two women for several seconds. Finally, the queen said, "We demand weapons and medical technology."

Sintina grinned slightly. The matriarch just blinked. "No weapons. I will transport medical supplies to Carrier Three."

Johem bared her teeth. She said tightly, "Very well."

The channel closed.

## CHAPTER 11

### **Supplemental USS *Independence*, Main Engineering H'Kan System**

An alert from a nearby console sounded. Windslow rolled his stool to it. His eyes burst wide. He hurriedly manipulated the controls. "Data, the sensors detected a chroniton field. Help me find the variance."

The android assumed an adjacent station. "The chroniton field is located 85,000 kilometers away. Bearing 34 mark 186. There is a small pocket of hydrogen gas at that location."

"Scan it quickly, before it disperses."

"Scanning," said Data as he tapped the panel.

A few rushed seconds later, Data reported, "I was not able to determine the phase variance of the chroniton field."

The engineer pushed his stool away from the console in frustration, "Damn." He ran his fingers through his hair. Almost as an afterthought, he said, "Windslow to Aurelia."

*"Aurelia here."*

"Captain, we picked up a chroniton field. There's a phased ship out there."

### **Supplemental USS *Independence*, Deck Three H'Kan System**

Jonin Faltyne, the Andorian security chief, caught up to Kimula in for corridor. It was during shift change, so there were several people to maneuver passed.

"Counselor."

She stopped for him.

He looked wound up. He clutched a padd in his hand. "What's wrong, Jonin?" she asked.



"I double checked the messages we got concerning Mr. Easton's past." He held up the padd, "The messages themselves seem authentic, but they all were routed to a single relay station before being transmitted to us."

Kimula was a communications officer, so she knew the significance. "That shouldn't be. Not from those locations." She took the padd and examined it. "This relay station shouldn't have even been involved with these transmissions. It's totally out of the way considering the sources."

Faltyne took the next supposition, "Some one could have altered all these documents from all those diverse locations in one spot and then sent them on to us."

She said just over a whisper, "By the gods."

The security officer stated, "Something is very wrong about all this."

### **Supplemental** **USS *Independence*, Captain's Ready Room** **H'Kan System**

The tension in the room was palatable. Aurelia had a foreboding feeling that this was the calm before the storm. If the Vuke didn't attack, the cloaked ship might. She felt the wall at her back.

"Well," observed Karim, "There's no doubt now. Section 31 is out there."

Sintina had her game face on. Karim had seen it before, during the war. She expected to be in a fight very soon. "I want to call red alert," she said.

The Persian shook his head, "You do that and the Vuke will most likely respond."

"I'm not so sure of that," she rejoined, "It seems their bark is worse than their bite."

"Don't underestimate..."

"Captain," came over the com, "*We're receiving a hail...from Admiral Nechayev.*"

Sintina tossed a padd, "Oh that's perfect." She shot an accusing glare at Karim for dragging in to all this. "Send it here."

"Aye."

Aurelia activated the desk monitor. "Admiral," she said tongue in cheek, "how nice of you to call. What can I do for you?"

Nechayev was in her classic stoic mood today, *"I know you're monitoring a ship using a phased cloaking device."*

The captain leaned in, "How do you know that?"

*"Because I'm on that ship, Captain."*

Karim and Sintina shared a startled look.

Aurelia returned to the screen, "You've been trailing us all this time? Why?"

"Besides," interrupted Karim as he joined his captain, "How did your organization get its hands on an interphasic cloak?"

She said evenly, "We invented it, Commander. Admiral Pressman stole it from us in the first place."

"What?"

Aurelia baulked, "How noble of you. It's so nice to know we're taking the high ground in this conflict."

*"That's enough, Captain," snapped the admiral. "We haven't been trailing you. We're here to help you. We believe there is a Section 31 ship nearby. They're after Clayton Easton. He's been a valuable asset to us over the years. If Section 31 got their hand on him, it could compromise our efforts. I'm going to decloak off your ventral side. When I do, I want you to transport Easton and Commander Data to my vessel."*

"Commander Data?" repeated Sintina.

*"I've been working with Captain Picard. He'll want his officer back."*

Karim asked, "But won't the Vuke detect you when you decloak?"

*"No Commander, even when we are not utilizing the phasing cloak, our ship has stealth technology. They won't detect us."*

Sintina was hesitant. She didn't like the situation. She didn't like handing over her prisoner. She didn't like the idea of the counter-31 group using cloaking or stealth technology. And she didn't like the idea of a 31 ship around while she was surrounded by Vuke ships. Her gut told her to pack up and get out of Dodge. But she had been given an order by an admiral...even if it wasn't an 'official' order. Finally, she said, "Alright. I'll have Mister Data escort Easton to one of our transporter rooms."

*"I'll decloak in a moment."*

## CHAPTER 12

### **Supplemental** **USS *Independence*, Main Bridge** **H'Kan System**

It seemed unnatural somehow to Aurelia. She wasn't used to feeling this tense with the lighting on the bridge being so bright. It would feel more comfortable to her if the bridge lights were dimmed and red lights were pulsing. She gently caressed the button on her armrest that would initiate combat stations. She knew something was wrong, but she didn't have quite enough information to act on it.

Bin Nadal reported evenly from mission ops, "Data is on his way to the brig."

She glanced again at the control, "Understood."

The Andorian counselor strode onto deck one with a purpose. She stopped squarely in front of the center seat. She was breathing as if she had been running, "The documents...the documents about Easton, they were faked. I can prove it."

This got everyone's attention on the bridge, particularly Karim's. He left his station to stand closer to the conversation.

Aurelia remained seated. "How can you prove it?"

An indicator sounded from the communication console. Ensign Lyrix turned to face the command officers, "Ma'am," she said, "I have an incoming message. It's garbled, but I think it's from the *Enterprise*."

Aurelia stood. The others faced the main viewer as well. "On screen."

The violence of the crackle on the channel almost made them flinch. There was little on the screen except distortion.

Kimula immediately aided the young ensign in clearing up the transmission. A few seconds later, Captain Picard was on the screen, though the image still wasn't ideal. It seemed Picard was using one of the aft science stations on the *Sovereign-class* bridge to communicate.

"Cap...reli...an yo...ar me?" came from the *Enterprise* captain.

"Just barely. We're attempting to clear it up."

*"Captain, are ...ware of a jammi...ignal orig...ting from your lo...tion?"*

Aurelia looked back to Kimula, "What does he mean a jamming signal? We've been getting regular communications, right?"

Ensign Lyrix was wise enough to relinquish her seat to the more experienced officer. Kimula manipulated the console. "He's right. There is a jamming signal. I'm surprised they were able to cut through it."

Karim preempted Aurelia, "Why didn't we detect it?"

The Andorian didn't look up from her controls, "It's very isolated. On a bearing of 201 mark 67." She looked back, "The exact bearing of the *Enterprise*."

The image on the screen got slightly better. Picard continued, *"We ar...ly able to break throu...he interferen...ue to ingenue... of ...mander Data."*

Aurelia's brow crunched up. "If Commander Data was aware of the jamming signal, he should have reported it to me."

Perhaps the Enterprise captain misunderstood, due to the poor transmission. He rejoined, *"...port to you? I don't understand, captain."*

Aurelia was given pause. She elaborated, "You sent him here to help us."

*"I'm afra...ere must be a mi...munication. Comma...er Data is sitti...ext to me."*

As if to emphasize the point Commander Data's image joined his captain on the screen. The two shared a deep look of concern. They obviously had the same idea. Picard urgently said, *"Capt...urelia, listen to me, you must..."* The communiqué ended abruptly.

Kimula reported, "Whoever is doing this has reinforced the jamming signal. There's no getting through, now."

"Captain," started bin Nadal.

But she didn't need anymore prompting. The other shoe she was waiting for had dropped. She jumped into action. "Intruder alert!"

The bridge lighting dimmed and a klaxon sounded. Now, she felt more in her element. She went on, "Bridge to Faltyne, apprehend Commander Data. Use all necessary force."

**Supplemental**  
**USS *Enterprise*, Main Bridge**  
**Sector 18945**

As soon as the screen went black, Picard swooped around to the helm. "How quickly could we reach the *Independence's* location?"

Data spoke up while the young helmsman was still doing calculations, "We are 52.03 light-years away. At warp nine, it would take 12 days, 12 hours, and 46 minutes to reach the H'kan System, sir."

Riker stood from his station and approached them, "We won't be able to help them, captain."

The C.O. nodded in agreement. He turned to Data, "Identify the nearest ship to the *Independence* and open a channel."

**Supplemental**  
**USS *Independence*, Main Bridge**  
**H'Kan System**

Aurelia could see it clearly now. This faux Data was sent to get Easton and bring him back to Section 31's waiting hands. But, she had seen their plan in time. It wasn't too late and by god, 31 *will not* get away with it again. She would see to that. A simmering rage now drove her. "Aurelia to Faltyne."

*"Faltyne here."*

"Lieutenant, he's going to the brig. Use every resource you have to stop him."

*"Aye. Faltyne out."*

Karim suggested, "I should help them." He began for the turbolift.

"No," ordered the captain coolly. "I need you to man tactical. The second that ship decloaks, throw everything we have at it."

"But, what if it really is..." he began.

She anticipated his comment, "That wasn't Nechayev, Karim. It'd be a simple trick to use a holofilter to make it look like her."

The first officer thought for a second and concurred with her. He brought up another matter, "But if they use stealth technology as well..."

"Tang," Sintina bellowed to her science officer, "It's your job to give bin Nadal a target. Got it?"

The Asian officer made eye contact and a nod. He couldn't help but think to himself that her tone implied an addendum to her sentence – *'...and if you don't, I'll bring hell down upon you.'*

Sintina returned to her chair. "Power weapons."

Now from behind her, bin Nadal cautioned, "Ma'am, the Vuke might interpret that as hostile."

Aurelia had nearly forgotten about the fleet of primitive ships around them. There was no going back now. "That's the chance we'll have to take. I'm not going to let them get Easton without a fight."

## CHAPTER 13

### **Supplemental USS *Independence*, Deck Seven H'Kan System**

The Data impersonator exited the turbolift. The brig was on this deck. He began walking down the corridor. The distinctive sight and sound a forcefield being established happened. Data smirked slightly. '*So predictable,*' he thought. The android tapped his combadge, "Computer, initiate program 'Escape Alpha.'"

The entire deck lost power and fell into darkness. A moment later emergency lighting illuminated everything in a constant, red, dim light. He continued to the brig.

As he rounded a turn, the false Data came face to face with a three person security contingent. The first man didn't even have a chance to react as Data grabbed his head and gave it a horrendous twist. The crunch of bone and flesh gave no doubt that the man's neck was broken. The security officer fell on the deck like a lifeless side of beef.

The second crewman pulled her phaser only to have it smacked out of her hand with so much force that her hand nearly left her arm. Mercifully, she didn't have much time to feel the pain; as the android palm-struck her nose into her brain.

The final officer, Petty Officer Cheveyo Runningfox, managed to fire but the android avoided it with remarkable agility. Immediately, Runningfox did a backward barrel roll; desperately attempting to stay out of Data's reach. To his credit – and surprise – the Pueblo man avoided a grab. The second attempt, however, wasn't fast enough.

The impersonator had Runningfox by the neck. The android held the grown man with an outstretched arm. The petty officer was gasping for air. The artificial hand around him felt like a vice. It took all the effort he could muster to get out, "Data, why?"

The android seemed annoyed at the reference. He brought the *Independence* officer mere centimeters away from his face. The counterfeit Data said with intense resentment, "I won't tolerate being called that one more time! It's not



my name!" He smashed Runningfox's skull against the bulkhead before walking over the corpses and resuming to his destination.

**Supplemental**  
**H'Kan II (The Vuke Homeworld), Divine Palace**  
**H'Kan System**

The interior of the Divine Palace was adorned with gold trim and elegant walls that seemed to be made of a pearl-like substance. The ceilings were high and its grandeur was heavenly. It was by design, of course, the ruling elite had done everything they could to convince the populace that they were nothing less than demigods.

Prima Alpha Johem glided into the war council chambers in the palace. The room defiantly had the feel of a military command center. Monitors on multiple levels were manned by mostly female Vuke with tan scales and colorful feathers. Her golden scales and white plume both impressed and intimidated the Alphas in the room. Heads immediately bowed as the demigod entered.

"What is the situation?" Johem asked.

A female with mostly purple feathers reported, "Prima, the foreigner ship has increased its power output significantly. We believe they are preparing to attack."

The matriarch boomed, "Prepare our fleet for battle!"

The large chamber erupted with kowtowing shouts and applause.

**Supplemental**  
**USS *Independence*, Main Bridge**  
**H'Kan System**

The Persian first officer informed Sintina, "The Vuke ships are beginning to lock on to us."

Aurelia damned Section 31 in her head again. She was totally exposed and surrounded. She doubted the Vuke would standby and let her attack the stealth ship. The moment she launched her attack on it, the Vuke would launch an attack on her. She couldn't come up with any easy solution. There was a chance... "Aurelia to Zo'Kama."

*"Yes, captain."*

"Get a hold of someone in the Vuke hierarchy. Explain the situation to them. Tell them our fight isn't with them."

There was a short silence. The Arkonian was probably slack-jaw wondering how in the hell was she supposed to do that. A bewildered, *"Aye, Zo'Kama out,"* was the rejoinder.

**Supplemental**  
***USS Independence*, Deck Seven**  
**H'Kan System**

Another security officer rushed at the android. The Data duplicate didn't even break his stride as he ripped out the man's throat out.

"Computer, begin program 'Escape Beta,'" he ordered.

**Supplemental**  
***USS Independence*, Main Bridge**  
**H'Kan System**

An indicator sounded behind the captain, from the tactical station. She knew what that sound meant. It coincided with a torpedo launch. She stood and turned, "Karim, what are you doing!"

"I didn't fire any torpedoes!" He desperately jabbed at the controls. He looked at her, "I've lost weapon's control. The computer is running an automated attack program. I can't stop it!"

Both focused on the main screen. They were just in time to see a shimmering red photon destroy one of the Vuke destroyers.

Aurelia's stomach sank. Her mind went black for a moment. She said, almost casually, "Shields." Then, she repeated with her full command voice, "Shields!"

Karim reported, "At full power."

Sintina's head spun. Had she been tricked again? She refocused and tapped a control on her armrest, "Windslow, what the hell's going on? We've lost weapon's control."

*"I know. We've also lost power on deck seven."*

She shouted at the ceiling, "I want weapon's back, now!"

*"I'll get on it."*

She looked at Karim. There was a hint of something in her eyes. Bin Nadal wasn't sure if he'd ever seen it before in her...it was fear.

She shared her concern, "The fake Data had open access to the ship. God knows what systems he could have tampered with."

**Supplemental**  
**USS *Independence*, Holodeck One**  
**H'Kan System**

The tan-scaled Arkonian pleaded with her Vuke counterpart. "You must believe me, we have no hostile intent. We think another ship followed us into this star system."

Alpha Kudal looked off screen for a moment. Someone handed her a report. She growled menacingly, "You almost managed to trick me, foreigner." Then, she held up a piece of paper in alien writing, "Then, how do you explain this!"

"What?"

Kudal shouted, "You have destroyed one of our ships! I should have known better than to trust you! How dare you lure us into a false sense of security by offering aid to us! You are now dead to me, Zo'Kama. May your flesh rot."

The holographic image ended.

The Arkonian's shoulders slumped. "It can't be true." She exited the grid more confused and dejected than when she went in.

**Supplemental**  
**H'Kan II (The Vuke Homeworld), Divine Palace**  
**H'Kan System**

Johem overlooked a gallery of military displays and monitors. She saw a feed of the destroyer going up in flames. "How many ships are on location?"

"Thirty-eight: 2 destroyers, 2 frigates, and 34 fighters," an advisor reported.

The matriarch looked at a replay of the explosion. It was being broadcast on every inter-planetary channel. Right now, Vuke all over the star system were being enraged at the sight. She declared, "Begin the attack! Avenge our fallen!"

## CHAPTER 14

### **Supplemental** **USS *Independence*, Main Bridge** **H'Kan System**

Bin Nadal steadied himself on the free-standing tactical station as another missile impacted the shields. The console proved otherwise useless to him, despite his continuing efforts override the attack program. The *Independence's* tactical systems targeted various Vuke vessels. He found it interesting, however, that no more photons had been launched and the phasers were operating at 25% power. Whoever, designed this program wanted the *Indy* to lose this battle.

Captain Aurelia felt equally useless. "How much longer can our shields take this?"

Luckily, Karim's display still worked. "Shields are at 88%. I'd guess we have just over a minute before they fail."

Ensign Weston volunteered from the helm, "Should I set a course, Captain?"

She considered a moment. Her mission was all but a failure at this point. Her priorities now were to prevent Section 31 from getting Easton. She didn't have to stay here to do that. The bridge rattled again. "Yes, get us out of the system."

"Standby, ma'am." He reported, "There are a lot of moving ships out there. It will take a moment to plot an escape vector."

### **Supplemental** **USS *Independence*, Deck Seven** **H'Kan System**

The android turned into the final corridor to the brig. As he rounded the corner he saw seven security personnel right next to the reinforced brig hatch. All of them already had their phasers trained on him. To make matters worse the group was several meters away. There was no way he could rush them. He did the calculations. There was only a 5.7% chance he could successfully subdue all seven of the guards, even though he was now armed, without being disabled by phaser blast himself.

Phaser bolts and beams began to fly. The Soong-type android immediately retreated back into the adjoining corridor. The fire narrowly missed him and left scorch marks on the bulkhead. He tapped his compin, "Lore to *Philadelphia*."

*"Damn it Lore, radio silence!"* was the response from a male voice.

"Like it matters now," came from the android. "I can't get to Easton. I'm pinned down. I need a beam out."

*"Their shields are still up and they've somehow managed to eliminate the directorate's embedded override."*

More phaser shots rang out. The security force was advancing on his position. "I've taken care of that. Computer, initiate programs 'Escape Gamma' and 'Escape Delta.'"

*"Standby, we'll have to phase back to normal space for transport."*

### **Supplemental USS *Independence*, Main Bridge H'Kan System**

The shield impacts were so constant now, that there was a low, continuous tremor on the deck. The main viewer showed a graphic display of the *Steamrunner*-class ship with several smaller ships circling it like flies.

"Another Vuke ship has been destroyed," Karim called out from tactical. "Shields at 48%."

"Weston," prompted Aurelia.

Each time the helm officer saw an opening through the Vuke vessels, it was closed up again by strafing fighters. "I can't guarantee we'll avoid a collision, Captain."

A sound came from Sintina. It could have been a chuckle. "Then, ahead one-quarter impulse; they'll move."

A slightly disapproving, "Aye," came from the helm.

"Captain!" said Lieutenant Tang Zian from the science station, "There was a slight...something."

"What?"

He elaborated, "To find the stealth ship, I set the computer to run a constant visual scan of the surrounding space and to report any anomalous light."

Aurelia clutched her armrests as the ship shook, "Get to the point."

"Sunlight is reflecting off an unknown surface," he finally reported, "The object is off the ventral side."

"On screen." A second later, it became very clear what the object was. Though, it was jet black, there was no mistaking the silhouette of a *Sovereign*-class starship.

Karim read her mind, "Could that be the *Philadelphia*?"

Weston commented, "I thought she was destroyed."

"We don't have time to explain it," harped the captain. "Target..." *'Damn!'* she remembered, *'We see it, but we can't fire at the damn thing!'* She whispered to herself, "Easton." She said louder, "Faltyne, report."

*"We have the intruder pinned down. I'll transport a stun grenade to his location in a second."*

"Good. Aurelia out."

An alarm sounded behind the captain. Bin Nadal frantically said, "Captain, our shields are down."

The next tremor wasn't a tremor at all, but a massive jolt.

He updated her, "Hull damage, deck six, dorsal side. No breach."

"I thought we had more time!" barked the captain.

"We did!" retorted Karim. "The shields were turned off."

She cursed in frustration, "God damn it!" *"They are getting away with it again!"* She fumed, *'No, I won't let them.'*

"Captain," began Weston as he tapped at his console in confusion, "The engines...they just stopped."

Another intense quake rushed over them. The hull had been breached. The seasoned officers knew exactly what that felt like.

Karim said something about force fields in place somewhere. Sintina pressed the ensign, "What do you mean, just stopped?"

"Warp and impulse engines aren't responding."

The captain went to the helm and tapped the controls herself. It was an act of desperation. Surely, this wasn't happening. It was some sort of illusion. She didn't mind dying in battle, but not like this – not helpless. It wasn't fair. An unyielding voice inside her bellowed, *'It's happening again. They're going to destroy my ship again!'*

*"Faltyne to Bridge."*

"Go," said Sintina under clinched teeth.

*"The intruder and Mr. Easton were beamed off the ship."*

The captain had to adjust her footing in response to another hull breach. For a moment, she considered sitting down in her command chair and just...waiting. There seemed little else to do. In fact, she did sit down again. She said quite calmly, "Is the self-destruct still online?"

The solemn response from Karim was, "Yes."

*'At least Section 31 will still let me kill myself,'* she grimly thought.

"We're being hailed," started bin Nadal, "it's unclear where it's coming from or the sender."

*'What's to lose?'* "On screen," she said. A light-skinned, human male filled the monitor. *'That face. That face! Collins!'* Without thinking, she blasted, "I'm going to kill you!"



Captain...well, former Starfleet Captain Zackary Collins seemed amused. "Nice to see you too, Captain." He added sardonically, "You seem to be in quite a predicament."

"Fuck you."

The man seemed to be even more pleased to see he had gotten under her skin. "Well, since that wasn't an SOS, I have other places to go. Good luck with the Vuke, Captain." He added as a deliberate afterthought, "Oh, if I were you, I wouldn't be caught alive. I've heard the Vuke don't bother killing their victims before they start eating them. *Philadelphia* out."

## CHAPTER 15

### **Supplemental** **USS *Bluefin*, Captain's Ready Room** **Porrina Sector**

The distinct, deep voice of Captain Joseph Akinola began, "Captain's Log: Stardate: 54624.0. We've finished dropping off some marajii crystal smugglers at *Starbase 17*. It was a rather large shipment. It will take months for the pushers to recover." The dark-skinned human took a sip of coffee, "We're now on our way to *Star Station Echo* to receive new orders. Admiral Bateson hinted..."

The com activated. It was Igna Stauss, his first officer, "*Skipper, you have an incoming message. It's from the Enterprise.*"

He set his cup down. "The *Enterprise*," he repeated, "Why would the flagship be calling us?"

*"You've got me."*

"Well," said Akinola, "Let's not keep Captain Picard waiting. Patch him through." The *Big-E's* captain appeared in his desk monitor. "Captain Picard, how can I help you?"

Picard had over a decade on the *Bluefin's* CO, though you couldn't tell it to look at him. He didn't waste any time, in fact, his speech was slightly rushed, "*Captain Akinola, I have circumstantial evidence that the USS Independence may be in trouble. We believe they may have a very dangerous infiltrator onboard. You're the nearest ship. I was hoping you could go to the H'kan system and investigate.*"

Akinola didn't immediately respond as he absorbed the information.

The Frenchman continued, "*Now I concede, I have no authorization to order you off mission, but Captain...*"

A younger, less seasoned captain may have needed to hear more, but not Joseph. He spoke up, "Captain, if you feel the *Independence* may be in danger, that's enough for me."

Picard grinned and nodded slightly. "Thank you, sir."

There was an unspoken acknowledgement between them. They were both old enough to understand the bond between Starfleet captains. Ship captains were willing to go out on a limb for each other, even with minimal information. It was a trait that seemed to have lessened in the newer generation of command officers.

### **Supplemental** **USS *Independence*, Main Bridge** **H'Kan System**

Captain Aurelia's knuckles were white as she attempted to crush the front of her armrests. The bridge was slowly falling apart around her. Like most of the crew, she was now breathing smoke and other toxins. Her rage subdued just enough for her to start running scenarios in her mind. *'We could manually launch some torpedoes. No, not enough time to manually target them. We could reset the main computer. No, we'd be destroyed by then.'*

Karim reported, "Another hull breach. Deck four, forward section, science lab six has been decompressed."

"Casualties?" she asked.

The ship shook again, "Crewman Escher was blow out into space, but he was transported to sickbay. He's being treated. That makes five confirmed fatalities, 26 severely wounded."

*'The transporter,'* she thought, *'We could attach an explosive to an anti-matter pod and transport it to the Philadelphia. No, that'd take too long also.'* The ship had maybe five minutes until it was reduced to a hulk. The *Philadelphia* would phase out of normal space well before that. She had seconds, not minutes. She called out over the escaping gases and klaxons, "Do we have RCS thrusters?"

Weston shouted back, "Aye."

"No need to sabotage them," commented Karim, "we can't outrun the Vuke on thrusters."

A glimmer of spitefulness entered Sintina's eyes, "Who said anything about running?"

**Supplemental  
USS *Bluefin*, Bridge  
En Route to the H'Kan System**

"How far away is the H'Kan system, Ensign?" queried the captain.

A young, Andorian female, Ensign Drii An'Shiil, reported from the helm, "One point seven light-years."

Akinola began to pace the relatively small bridge, "What's our ETA at warp eight?"

"Fourteen and one-half hours, sir."

The skipper turned to his operations officer, Lieutenant Nigel Bane. "Any luck on hailing the ship?"

"Nope," said the Australian, "The data stream acts as if the *Independence's* transceiver has been deactivated."

Inga stepped closer to Akinola, "Seems Picard was on to something."

"Seems that way," he grimly confirmed. "An'Shiil, increase to maximum warp."

"Aye, accelerating to warp 9.2."

"New ETA?" asked Strauss.

The ensign did some calculating, "Just over nine hours."

The first officer rejoined her aside conversation with the captain, "Whatever's happening could be done and over with in nine hours."

Akinola agreed with a solemn nod.

**Supplemental  
USS *Independence*, Main Bridge  
H'Kan System**

Aurelia's despair seemed like a lifetime ago. There was now only one overriding thought on her mind: *Get Collins*. She turned to Tang, "Do you still detect the *Philadelphia*?"

Smoke filled the upper third of the deck. He rejoined, "Yes. They haven't recloaked, yet."

"Weston," she ordered, "Adjust the ship so the warp core ejection hatch is in line with the coordinates of the stealth ship."

He looked back with some confusion, "Ma'am?"

"Now!"

The ensign snapped back to his station, "Aye."

She heard bin Nadal's unbelieving voice, "You're going to use the warp core as a projectile?"

"It's the only weapon we have control over," she stated coldly.

"But," he pressed, "Without shields, we'll be damaged at this range too. Not to mention the Vuke ships."

She stood, and blasted, "We have no choice!"

Kairm became silent.

Sintina tapped her compin, "Sintina to Windslow."

There was no response, but another minor hull breach.

Kimula volunteered, "We've lost internal coms."

The captain didn't hesitate. She moved to the engineering station on the bridge. She asked Weston, "Are we in position?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Captain," began the Andorian counselor, "You can't eject the core without warning the people in engineering!"

“There’s no time!” she shouted.

“But Sintina...”

It was too late. She was already entering her command code. Captain Aurelia pressed the eject initiator.

## CHAPTER 16

### **Supplemental USS *Independence*, Main Engineering H'Kan System**

Engineering was in chaos. Everyone rushed around from station to access panel desperately attempting to prevent the ship from falling apart around them.

Windslow was quietly proud of his team. Though not all of them personally cared for him, all performed their duty professionally in the face of dire circumstances. At the moment however, he didn't have time to praise them. He manipulated the controls directly adjacent to the warp core. "Did that do it?" he called out.

A crewman responded from across the chamber, "Yes Commander, the coolant interlock is back up."

The chief engineer briskly returned to main console on the opposite side of a transparent bulkhead. He continued to look over lines of computer code. He was imputing an algorithm to detect any anomalous commands. It was an effort to try to rid the ship's computer of its sabotage.

Another panel several meters away exploded. The ensign near it was blasted to the deck with several burns to his face and hands. He shrieked in agony.

Ensign Jani Birhanu rushed to aid him. The African woman tapped her compin, "Transporter room four, send Crewman Bell to sickbay." A moment later he dematerialized and Birhanu assessed the damage. She turned to Windslow, "The gyromagnetic stabilizers are offline, sir."

The former captain rejoined without looking up, "Focus on replacing the magnetic spindle bearing. If the intermix chamber gets any hotter, we'll blow ourselves up."

"Aye," she began toward the vertically aligned warp core.

Suddenly, a massive rush of air blew Windslow toward the warp core. It was so intense his face was plastered against the transparent partition. He was able to see Birhanu wasn't so lucky. She was flying uncontrollable toward the vacuum.

As abruptly as it started, the hurricane stopped. Birhanu slammed into forcefield that now surrounded the void where the warp core once was.

**Supplemental**  
**Former USS *Philadelphia*, Main Bridge**  
**H'Kan System**

Lore pushed the terrified Clayton Easton out of the aft turbolift. The *Sovereign* bridge was highly altered from its Starfleet standard. There were many more displays. Not only was it a ship command center, but a covert listening post for the entire sector. Lore still had on the gold Starfleet uniform. Everyone else was adorned in black tunics. No one bore ranks or division indicators.

One man stuck out, however, not due to his clothing, but his demeanor. A light-skinned human male approached Easton. He had black hair, a scarred face, and seemingly black eyes. A twisted pleasure emanated from him. "Clayton Easton," the man began, "I've been so looking forward to seeing you."

Clayton nearly lost control of his bowels. The Section 31 agent might have well said, *'I've been so looking forward to torturing you.'*

The 'captain' continued, "I'm Zackary Collins. You can call me Zack."

Lore cut in, "The mission is over. Keep your end of it."

"Quite true," Collins said. He adjusted a control device strapped to his wrist and pressed a button.

Immediately, Lore was weak-kneed. His body language displayed immense pleasure.

Collins looked on with amusement. It was ironic, for a long time Section 31 was at a loss as to how to ensure Lore's loyalty after they 'procured' him from Commander Maddox. They considered reprogramming him, but many admired the Soong-type android just the way he was. It was his idiosyncrasies that made him invaluable to the directorate; besides that, no one knew how to properly reprogram him. It was Lore himself that provided the answer. He was able to manipulate his 'brother' by remotely controlling his emotions. The directorate decided to use the very same technique on



Lore. Now, the only way for Lore to experience intense emotions is by the good graces of his handler. Luckily for 31, he was an addict.

Safeguards were put in place of course. The control device on Collins' wrist monitored the wearer's bio-signs. It only worked when in direct contact with the assigned wearer and that person had to be in a 'normal' state of awareness.

"Collins," reported the agent manning the operations station, "*The Independence* – it's launched its warp core right at us."

The crew wasn't used to seeing their director caught off guard, "What?" He didn't wait for any elaboration, "Raise shields. Phase..."

A massive jolt rocked the ship. The room went dark. Everyone on the bridge, even Lore, was knocked off their feet. Collins slammed hard on to the deck.

Lore recovered first, "Report."

No one answered right away. He moved to the operations console. The operative manning it was alive, but his back and been broken. Lore unsympathicly pushed him aside. He noticed others were now moving. He reported, "The shields were up at the time of impact. It's the only reason we're still alive."

"How bad is it?" asked Collins as he favored his left side.

"Shields are inoperative. Main power is offline. Emergency back-ups are on. The Engineering section is..."

"Is what?"

Lore looked back, "Most of it's gone. The aft quarter of the ship has been destroyed." A warning klaxon brought Lore's attention back to the display. "We're losing containment of our warp core."

"Eject it!"

Lore was already doing it. A few seconds later another blastwave hit the ship. They were forced forward, though they were more prepared for it this time.

"Additional damage," came from Collins once they steadied out.

“Decks 22 through 24 have been obliterated. Forcefields aren’t working, but emergency bulkheads are in place. Everything is either destroyed or offline. Life support is operating at emergency levels.” He looked back with his golden eyes, “We’re adrift.”

Collins had underestimated Aurelia. His jovial attitude was gone. Enough games, it was time to play for keeps. “Find pilots for the remaining fighters in the main shuttle bay. Scramble whatever we have left. Tell them to finish off the *Indy* quick. Then, we’ll evacuate the *Philly* and vaporize what’s left of her.”

### **Supplemental USS *Independence*, Main Bridge H’Kan System**

“Report!” ordered Aurelia over the sound of fires and sparks.

“Multiple hull breaches all along our ventral side,” began her first officer. “Main deflector destroyed. Massive damage to the port nacelle. Transporters offline. Main Power offline. Emergency bulkheads can’t contain all the breaches. I’m ordering an evacuation of decks 8 through 10 and 6. Twelve dead; 36 wounded.”

She brushed aside the grim report. She couldn’t grieve at the moment. Her job wasn’t done, yet. “What’s the condition of the hostile?”

“Fourteen Vuke fighters have been destroyed and one of their frigates. It looks like the rest of their fleet is falling back.”

Impatiently, she prompted, “I meant the *Philadelphia*.”

Karim puffed slightly. “It wasn’t a direct hit. Massive damage to their aft section. They seem to be totally disabled.” He added, “Since the Vuke left phaser range, we’re no longer firing.”

“Can we get weapons back?”

The Persian attempted to do so, “No. I’m still locked out.”

“Damn,” commented the captain.

"I do have some good news," said the Andorian counselor, "We have inter-ship communications back. Whatever was blocking it is gone."

"There's something," Karim remarked.

Kimula suggested, "We still have thrusters. We should try to get some distance between us and the other ships."

Sintina's jet black ponytail swung around as she faced the Andorian female, "We're not done here. I'm not going to let Collins get away again!"

The vengeance in her voice hushed the bridge.

A moment later, bin Nadal reported, "Captain, the *Philly's* launched four *Javelin* class fighters. They're heading this way."

"Well, scramble our shuttles. If he wants a dogfight, we'll give him one." She looked over to ops, "Dorian, make it happen."

"Yes ma'am. I'll alert pilots."

"With respect," started Karim, "Type 8's and Type 10's are no match for those fighters."

She shot him daggers, "If you have nothing positive to say..."

Dorian informed her, "Two Type-10's and Three Type 8's are all that's operational. The others are damaged."

The Latina knew Karim was right. At best the shuttles would distract the fighters for a time. After that, they'd make short work of the crippled *Independence*.

The Euro-African told Sintina from operations, "Ma'am, I'm coming up short on pilots."

Bin Nadal didn't wait for the command, "I'm on it." He moved to the turbolift. The doors opened. Then, something happened he didn't expect. Sintina's eyes caught him.

Aurelia watched as Karim paused for a second at the threshold. Was she going to lose another friend today, she asked herself. A wave of regret

suddenly washed over her. She was almost ready to apologize to him. He nodded. It was as if he knew exactly what she was thinking. She returned the gesture. Then, he left.

## CHAPTER 17

### **Supplemental USS *Independence*, Main Shuttlebay H'Kan System**

Since the forcefield network was offline, all the pilots had to be sealed in their crafts before the main door was opened. Karim was the last to enter the cavernous bay. He noticed the deck was littered with pieces of the internal structure. There was a visible dent in the overhead two decks up; perhaps from a dud Vuke missile. He rushed to the Type-10 shuttle reserved for him, the *Sharlin*.

The Persian's hopes for the upcoming battle increased slightly. He remembered the Type -10's were designed to function with the *Defiant* class ship. They were just short of an all out fighter, sporting 3 phasers and even micro-photons torpedoes. The Type-8's, on the other hand, were little more than personal transports with only two phasers. He suddenly regretted claiming one of the more capable shuttles. He was surely condemning an inexperienced crewman to death who piloted one of the inferior crafts. As the first officer entered the ship and began the start up sequence, the doubt and guilt was pushed aside. He had ordered people to their deaths before. This time, he might be joining them.

The *Independence* rattled as the *Javelins* outside opened up. Without shields, their phasers were slicing through the hull. It was time to go.

"*Sharlin* to shuttlebay control. Open the door." The massive hatch began to slide upward. "*Indy* squadron, launch immediately. Focus all your fire on the closest fighter. Maybe we can take one by surprise."

A series of acknowledgements came in.

There was enough room in the larger-than-average bay for all of the shuttles to launch abreast of each other. The formation swooped up to the dorsal side of the *Steamrunner* class ship. A *Javelin* was directly ahead of them performing a strafing maneuver on the larger vessel. All five shuttles engaged the fighter at once. The constant stream of phaser fire weakened the *Javelin's* forward shields as it came toward them. By the time the formation of shuttles passed it, the fighter was reduced to a fire ball.

Lieutenant Commander bin Nadal said over the com line, "We got lucky on that one, people. The remaining three fighters are breaking off their attack on the *Indy* and targeting us. Don't go toe to toe with them. Use the starships as obstacles. Shuttlecrafts *Cullen* and *Zammis*, pair up and pick your target. *Katsulas* and *Frazi*, do the same. I'll take the remaining fighter."

**Supplemental**  
**H'Kan II (The Vuke Homeworld), Divine Palace**  
**H'Kan System**

The tactical display reflected off of the matriarch's golden scales. "What is happening?" she asked a military advisor.

"I...I'm not sure," the Alpha admitted.

Prima Alpha Johem had ordered a retreat after the Federation super-weapon was detonated. It wiped out nearly half of the fleet. They detected another massive explosion, but it wasn't near any of their ships. Perhaps, it was a follow up demonstration the foreigner's power.

The Vuke queen wasn't ready to concede defeat, yet. However, it was obvious more reinforcements had to reach the battle site before another offensive.

Now, something else was happening. But, there was so much radiation in the area scanners were unable to get a clear picture.

**Supplemental**  
**USS *Independence*, Main Bridge**  
**H'Kan System**

Lieutenant Faltyne had reassumed his station on the bridge. He informed Aurelia, "One enemy fighter destroyed. The others are breaking off and engaging the shuttles."

"There must be something we can do to help them," suggested Kimula.

The ensign at the helm offered, "Maybe we can use the ship itself; hit them with our hull."

Captain Aurelia was interested in the idea, but she needed a better tactical overview. She looked to the Andorian at tactical for an assessment.

Jonin glanced at the display and began to shake his head, "I don't think so. We're too slow. They could easily avoid a collision; not to mention the damage we'd take in the process. We don't need another hole in the ship."

Sintina nodded. There was nothing they could do to help even the odds for the shuttles. Besides, Collins was presumably still on the *Philadelphia*. He was the priority for her. Transporters were out. All the shuttles were being used. A workerbee would never be able to get passed the fighters. She asked Weston, "Maneuvering thrusters are still working, right?"

He checked, "Some of them. We have 40% functionality."

"Good enough. Bring us along their port side. Prepare to extend our starboard umbilical." She turned to Faltyne, "Prepare a boarding party. Meet me at the starboard docking hatch." She left via the forward turbolift.

The two Andorians shared a look of concern.

Jonin tapped his compin, "All available security personnel, draw heavy weapons and rally at the starboard docking hatch. Faltyne out." He briefly glanced at the other bridge officers and entered the aft lift.

Kimula, Weston, Dorian, and Tang all looked at each other. It was quieter than it had been, though, warning and klaxons still sounded in the background.

"Well," started the female Andorian, "I guess I have the bridge."

### **Supplemental Shuttlecraft *Sharlin*, Near the USS *Independence* H'Kan System**

The stars in Karim's forward window drastically changed position as he employed an evasive move. Despite his efforts, his aft dorsal shields were down to 70%. The fighters were just too damn fast. Their shields were better. Their armaments were better. As if that wasn't bad enough, the computer couldn't get a solid target lock. At this point, Karim was just trying to avoid being hit.

The *Independence* was on the move. He was attempting to use the moving ship as a barrier, keeping extremely close to it. That in itself was a balancing act.

An indicator went off. The *Katsulas* just exploded. A voice came over the open comline, "My aft shields are gone! I can't get him off me! Someone help!"

Bin Nadal took up the call, "I'm on my way, *Frazi*. Hold on." He made a beeline for the other Type-10. It wasn't tactically very smart, but if he didn't, another shuttle would be gone. He paid for his actions. The shuttle rocked as he took another hit on his aft side. Now the aft shields were down to 43%. He couldn't do anything about that right now. The *Javelin* pursuing the *Frazi* was dead ahead. He achieved a lock and fired a single micro-torpedo. It hit the fighter on its starboard side. Its shields absorbed it, but just barely.

Karim apparently annoyed the enemy pilot. The other fighter broke off the *Frazi*, headed right for him, and opened up phasers. Luckily, his forward shields were in better shape than his aft. They held up to the barrage; down to 38%. He got some good shots off as well as the two strafed each other.

*Frazi* engaged the ship following bin Nadal. The smallcraft effectively switched their targets. *Unfortunately*, the *Frazi* bit off more than it could chew as the fighter launched a micro-torpedo. It nailed the Type-10 shuttle right in the cockpit. The *Frazi* disintegrated.

It was now two Type-8's and a Type-10 verses three *Javelins*. The odds were not in Karim's favor.



## CHAPTER 18

### **Supplemental USS *Independence*, Sickbay H'Kan System**

So many people were limping or being carried into sickbay Doctor Zo'Kama had a hard time finding places to put them. She was stepping over wounded on the floor. The room was full of moans of agony, cries of pain, and the constant communication of medical personnel.

The youthful-looking EMH mark II had already been activated. Luckily, it had its own independent power generator. The Arkonian chief medical officer had no qualms about using it in situations like this.

The reptilian was currently treating a poor human female, an engineer, who had inhaled plasma from a blown EPS conduit. Her lungs were burnt to a crisp. "I need anesthizine over here," she said to a nearby nurse. Zo'Kama was quickly tossed a hypo-spray. She placed it against the woman's neck. As the medicine ejected, the engineer's muffled attempts at screaming stopped and she went unconscious.

The doctor carefully, but quickly made it to the medical replicator incorporated into a bulkhead. She ordered, "Blood-gas infuser, species: Human." The alcove remained dark. "*Sza'cha!* The replicators must be offline."

The tan-scaled Arkonian looked around and spotted a seemingly uninjured Caitian petty officer that was comforting a crewmate, "You, go to cargo bay one and get me a blood-gas infuser."

The male felinoid looked up perplexed.

Zo'Kama insisted, "You have 5 minutes to find it and come back or this person will die!" pointing at the other shipmate.

"What does one look like?" he asked.

The doctor replied sardonically, "It will say 'Blood-gas infuser' on the box. Now go!"

To his credit, the Caitan left his friend and stated, "Yes sir."

A chill came over her as she thought, *'The isolation forcefield may be offline as well.'* Zo'Kama sprinted to the isolation bay hatch and checked the readouts. The forcefield was offline, but luckily the bay itself was still sealed. The forcefield was but one layer of protection. The prospect still made her nervous. With all the jolts the ship is taking, she'd much rather have that forcefield in place.

Even so, there was no time to brood about it. There were people to treat...lots of people to treat.

### **Supplemental Shuttlecraft *Sharlin*, Near the USS *Independence* H'Kan System**

Karim turned hard about, back toward the *Indy*. He went under the saucer section. The shuttle was less than two meters below the hull. He had to avoid several large pieces of debris that was falling off the ship.

He checked his scanners. The two Type-8's were in trouble, but still in the fight. He had two of the three fighters on his tail. Phaser beams were constantly entering his field of vision from behind. His shuttle buffeted as one impacted; aft shields down to 6%. He needed to do something quick.

As he approached the end of the saucer section, he noticed the port nacelle was venting warp plasma. *'Perfect.'* Karim tapped his insignia, "Bin Nadal to Windslow."

*"Windslow. Go."*

The *Sharlin* was guided into a helix around the nacelle by the first officer. "I need you to ignite the warp plasma on my mark."

*"That'll destroy most of the nacelle,"* the chief engineer protested.

The shuttle was nearing the end of the nacelle. It was odd to see it not attached to the now destroyed main deflector. Karim had one fighter less than 5 meters aft. The other held its distance. "Minor detail at this point, don't you think? Get ready."

There was a short silence. The shuttle was now passed the nacelle and in the bluish cloud of super-heated gas. *"Ready,"* reported Windslow.

Bin Nadal accelerated to full impulse and began a rapid climb out of the plasma. "Now!"

The force of the explosion forced the Persian back into his seat. He lost flight control for a moment as the craft rode the shockwave. Power fluctuated and klaxons rang. After a few seconds, it calmed down.

He checked his tactical screen. The fighter immediately behind him was destroyed. The other *Javelin* was still there, but seemed to be disabled.

"Computer, report," he commanded.

The serene female voice responded, "*Torpedo launcher two offline. Aft shield failure. Forward shields at 19%. Starboard impulse engine offline. Micro-fractures in the hull detected. Evacuation is recommended.*"

"Estimate how long until the micro-fractures become critical?"

"Indeterminate."

He slowed the vessel and turned it around. He could see the *Indy* nearing the black *Sovereign*. Both ships were little more than hulks. The *Philly's* whole aft section, including the nacelles, were gone. His own ship didn't look much better. The saucer section was pot-marked with holes and gashes. And now, only one nacelle extended off it.

An alert dragged him away from the view. The *Zammis* had just been obliterated. This fight wasn't over yet, he reminded himself.

### **Supplemental Former USS *Philadelphia*, Main Bridge H'Kan System**

The *Philadelphia* bridge was much more orderly than the *Independence's*, but no more useful. It was illuminated only by red alert indicators and instrument panels.

Lore, still in Starfleet clothing, said from the ops station, "Only one of our fighters is still operational and the *Independence* is extending its docking corridor." He added spitefully, "Any other bright ideas?"

Collins sat in the center seat with his hands templed. He was not used to being on the losing end of things. Still, Section 31 regularly turned defeats into victories. It was how they operated. And there was no way in hell he'd let some damn wannabe like Aurelia get the better of him. He looked up from under his brow, "Just one." He activated the internal broadcast channel, "This is Collins. Prepare to evacuate the ship. Get to your escape pods or transport shuttles and proceed to the rally point. We'll be picked up in a day or two. Collins out."

Unlike most escape pods in the regular fleet, the *Philadelphia* was equipped with warp capable pods. They could only go warp 2 for ten hours, but it was enough to get out of sensor range of most vessels.

The retrofitted *Sovereign* class also had another unique feature. Section 31 couldn't risk any of their ships falling into enemy hands. So, there was a fail safe system to vaporize the ship. It didn't rely on a warp core to breach to destroy the ship like conventional starships. Throughout the ship, there were independent tekasite explosives.

Lore stood and gestured to Clayton Easton, who had been sitting at an aft station. "What about him?"

"Take him to the Captain's Yacht with us."

Lore uncaringly grabbed the man by the arm. The trio entered a turbolift. Before the hatch closed, Collins said to the empty bridge, "Computer, Checkmate Beta One. Enable."

The confirmation tone sounded as the doors slid shut.

## CHAPTER 19

### **Supplemental USS *Independence*, Deck Seven H'Kan System**

The bronze-skinned captain rounded a corner after a quick stop at the armory to find her boarding team was already waiting for her. All told, the boarding team consisted of: Lieutenant Faltyne, Senior Chief Hatora – an Illyrian, herself, and six other gold-clad security personnel. She had hoped to see more. It hadn't dawned on her how severe the casualties had been thus far between the battle and the infiltrator. This really was all that was left of the ship's security forces. Three of the crewmen were wearing phase-absorbing armor and helmets. All were armed with pulse rifles. She noticed stun and photon grenades dangling off some of their uniforms.

Senior Chief Hatora was already in the umbilical, which was securely fastened to the *Philly's* docking hatch. The Illyrian was setting up shape charges to breach the hull.

The Andorian informed her, "Chief Hatora will need a few more seconds to calibrate the charges."

Aurelia understood it was a precise operation. If the explosives were misaligned, they would destroy the docking corridor as well. It simply couldn't be rushed.

Several moments later, the Illyrian with his distinctive 'V' shaped forehead ridge, emerged from the umbilical. "We're set."

The team braced themselves for the blowback. The captain gave a nod to the chief. A rush of hot air and a flash of fire later, Sintina ran into the smoky corridor. She soon found herself in the *Philadelphia*. The resistance she expected wasn't there. The darkened halls were empty. The rest of the boarding party joined her. They paused there only for a moment. Then, the captain ordered, "Let's get to the bridge."

### **Supplemental Shuttlecraft *Sharlin*, Near the USS *Independence* H'Kan System**

The Type-10 shuttle was sluggish with one impulse engine out. The last fighter and the *Cullen* were circling about each other in front of the two larger starships. The *Cullen's* shields were nearly gone. The *Javelin's* was at 50%. Karim opened fire, but missed. He was concerned about hitting the *Cullen*, since he couldn't achieve a target lock. The Type-8 received another hit from the more maneuverable fighter. Her shields were down.

The first officer called out, "*Cullen* pilot, use your emergency transporter to beam to the *Indy*. Do it now!"

"Aye."

A few seconds later, another beam lanced at the shuttle. The *Cullen* disappeared in a fireball. There was no time to confirm if the pilot made it out. The *Javelin* promptly turned to intercept him and opened fire.

Karim dipped the shuttle down into a dive. He managed to avoid the volley, but nearly collided with the dorsal side the *Independence*. He pulled back up hard, reacquired the hostile, and fired everything he had. Two of the six phaser beams hit their target. He launched three consecutive photons as well. The first one glanced off the fighter's shields. The other two missed and the target as he altered course. Even with the glancing blow, the *Javelin's* shields were all but gone. The problem was, so were Karim's. It came down to who would land the next hit.

Bin Nadal couldn't afford to play cat and mouse anymore. He had to be aggressive. Phaser beams and photons let loose constantly. He headed directly for the fighter. All he had to do was hit the damn thing once! The *Javelin* was quick and agile. It parried between the shots. But Karim had him on the run.

Without warning, the fighter came to a stop. Bin Nadal didn't react in time, he over shot the hostile. Karim had less than a second to act. If he didn't, that *Javelin* would have him dead to rights. He initiated a warp pulse just as a micro-torpedo would have finished him.

Within a fraction of a second, he found himself several kilometers away from the battle site. The Persian quickly brought the shuttle about. He had remembered several years ago the *Stargazer* warp jumped toward its enemy and visually confused them. It was called the Picard Maneuver, since it would take awhile for light to catch up, it would appear that there were two of him

in the fighter's window. It wouldn't trick the fighter pilot long, but maybe just enough to get a good shot off.

Bin Nadal initiated another warp burst to the *Javelin* and immediately opened fire with photons and phasers. The barrage tore into the craft, reducing it to rubble.

As he sighed in relief, the computer informed him, "*Hull micro-fractures have increased in size. Explosive decompression imminent.*"

### **Supplemental USS Philadelphia, Deck Twelve H'Kan System**

Aurelia's ponytail bobbed constantly as she and her team were now in a full run toward the bridge. So far, they had encountered only two unarmed, black clad personnel. Both were swiftly stunned.

Lieutenant Faltyne was growing concerned. Perhaps this altered *Sovereign* was more automated, so it didn't require many crewmembers. Even so, he would have expected higher resistance by now. He glanced at the chief running beside him, knowing he was thinking the same thing. They had little choice, however, but to follow their captain; who was barreling ahead.

As she was sprinting, the captain nearly ran into more Section 31 operatives from an adjoining corridor. She brought up her phaser as she recognized them. It was Easton, "Data," and Collins. Before she could react, the phaser was stripped from her hand by the android. Bones in her hand cracked and popped. She retreated out of his reach as she cried out. By then, her team had opened fire.

Lore, obviously not liking the odds, withdrew back into the hallway in which they had come. Collins quickly pulled Easton with them.

Collins led the three into the nearest door. Once inside, Lore quickly locked the hatch. It was very barren room. The operative quickly realized it was one of many unused crew quarters. It was small, probably intended for enlisted personnel. There were no windows. And no way out.

Lore groaned, "And now what fearless leader? We're trapped in here and it won't take them long to get through that door."

The former Starfleet officer was no fool. The directorate recruited him for a reason. He was nearly a genius, devious, and calculating. He had gotten his team out of tougher situations than this when he was part of Starfleet Special Mission Team 11. Yes, he was a heartless killer, but he was a professional one. He had no qualms about standing his ground and fighting it out, but only when he felt he had the advantage. This wasn't one of those times. Captain Aurelia had taken him by surprise with her warp core attack. He had been improvising since then.

A phaser was beginning to cut through the door.

Collins extended a hand toward Lore, "Give me that phaser." The android did so. He continued, "If they can cut through the door, we can cut through the deck to a lower level. The Captain's Yacht is only two decks down." He adjusted the settings on the weapon.

"It will take you longer to cut through the deck plates than it will take them to get through the hatch," observed Lore.

"Not if I be less subtle about it," rejoined Collins. "Level 16 should do it." He pointed the phaser at the deck.

Lore picked up a terrified Easton and got up against a nearby bulkhead.

With a single shot, the weapon had created a meter wide hole in the floor. Unceremoniously, Lore dropped his captive into it. He quickly followed. Collins picked up the rear.



## CHAPTER 20

### **Supplemental USS *Independence*, Main Bridge H'Kan System**

The Andorian junior lieutenant moved from her communications station to the center seat. The smoke on the bridge was slowly dissipating. The klaxons were silent. The red alert lights still pulsed, however. "Dorian, what's going on out there?"

The dark-skinned human spoke with an English accent, "All the fighters appear to be destroyed, but..."

"But, what?"

"I'm not sure what I'm reading. The sensors are barely functioning. I think there are several small warp fields being established." He turned to her, "I think the other ship is being evacuated."

The counselor in Kimula took over for a moment. Collins didn't strike her as someone who would abandon ship, unless... She immediately tapped her combadge, "Kimula to Aurelia, respond."

*"This is Faltyne. The captain is busy cutting through a door."*

The Andorian's antennae stood on end, "The *Philadelphia* is being evacuated. It's possible a self-destruct has been activated. I strongly recommend the boarding team return to the ship."

*"Can Lieutenant Tang confirm any energy spikes?"*

She looked at the science officer. He shook his head. "No, but I can't believe they're just going to abandon their ship."

*"Agreed. I'll take it up with the captain. Faltyne out."*

### **Supplemental *Philadelphia*, Deck Twelve H'Kan System**

Sintina cradled her injured hand and used her phaser with the other. She finished cutting out one side of the door and kicked it in. She began to rush in when the Andorian security officer spoke up, "Captain, Kimula thinks this ship may explode at any moment. I agree with her."

Chief Hatora added, "That would explain why we've seen so few people. We should leave, ma'am."

The Latina paused halfway through the cut portal. She looked as if Faltyne and Hatora had gone mad. "We can't leave. I won't let him get away again!" She didn't wait any longer. The captain disappeared into the hole.

The rest of the team hesitated.

The chief prompted the Lieutenant, "Sir?"

Jonin examined the carpet for a moment. He had to make a decision. He wasn't willing to risk the lives of the boarding party. They had no idea how much time they had. The captain obviously wasn't thinking clearly. It might cost him his commission, but he knew what he had to do. Well, it would cost him his commission if he survived this, he thought darkly. He met eyes with Hatora, "Take the rest of the team back to the *Indy*. I'm going after the captain. If there's any indication this ship is going to explode, separate the umbilical and get as far away as you can."

The Illyrian was experienced enough to know he didn't have time to argue. He looked back at the other six officers, "Back to the *Independence*. Double time. Let's move!"

As the others left, Faltyne dropped down to the next deck.

### **Supplemental Philadelphia, Deck Fourteen H'Kan System**

The captain got to the heavy hatch leading to the captain's yacht docking chamber. There were viewing windows into the chamber. She could still see the dorsal side of the support craft. They hadn't launched yet. It wasn't too late. She frantically began to open the hatch. It was locked. Blue lights began filling the docking chamber, indicating decoupling was seconds away and the room would be decompressed. It didn't matter to her. She tried desperately to override the lock. She could do it. She knew how. Just a matter of seconds.

*'Damn it!'* She tapped the wrong button. She was so close. He couldn't get away. Not again! *'Not again!'*

Sintina could see the docking latches release. *'No!'* She bashed the access panel. She stepped back and unsheathed her phaser.

The captain's yacht began to drift down.

She set the weapon to level 16. *'I won't let him get away!'* she shrieked in her mind.

The docking chamber was now fully decompressed. The yacht was leaving.

Aurelia took aim at the hatch. Her finger began to press the trigger.

Another phaser beam hit her from down the corridor. She staggered back. As she lost consciousness, she saw Faltyne running toward her. *'No...'*

Faltyne quickly put the petite woman into a fireman's carry position and began running back toward the docking hatch. He was able to tap his compin, "Faltyne to any remaining shuttlecraft."

*"This is bin Nadal."*

As he ran, he said, "Collins, the imposter, and Weston are leaving in the captain's yacht. Can you intercept?"

There was a hesitation. *"Yes. Bin Nadal out."*

### **Supplemental Shuttlecraft *Sharlin*, Near the *USS Independence* H'Kan System**

The first officer returned to the control panel and set an intercept course. "Computer, take the phasers offline and route the power to the structural integrity field."

*"Confirmed."*

The shuttle accelerated to the underside of the *Sovereign* class ship. "How much time did that buy me?"

*"Please restate question."*

"How long until explosive decompression?"

*"Three minutes, two seconds if the craft remains at sub-light speeds."*

He now had visual contact with the captain's yacht. It was also painted matte black, but he could see it. Karim altered course slightly to catch up with them. He had one working micro-photon launcher, his shields were down, and he had one impulse engine. Not to mention the fact, he had three minutes to win this fight. However, he had no more desire to see Collins escape than Aurelia did. As he approached the yacht, he came up with a plan. He'd have to be quick about it, though. Otherwise, he'd be in a far worse situation. "Computer, target their aft shields."

*"Target locked."*

He began to see the yacht's nacelles light up and the ship disappeared into subspace.

Bin Nadal had a choice to make: let them go, or go after them. For a fraction of a second, he entertained the idea of activating his escape transporter and beaming back to the *Independence*. He had done his bit for the day.

On the other hand, Collins and Section 31 had to answer for their transgressions. A 31 plant, Nicole Chase, had used and seduced him on the previous *Independence*. Chase had attempted to kill their whole crew in an effort to eliminate them and get an *Interceptor* class ship for their shadow fleet. It would have worked had it not been for the efforts of the late chief engineer, Lieutenant Jinal.

Before that, Collins had attempted to kill him, Admiral Uhura, and Norah Satie. The only thing that saved his neck that time was the timely intervention of Commander Ivan Cherenkov.

As he recalled these instances, his choice became clear. He had to try - for Jinal and all the others who died.

Bin Nadal didn't fancy the idea of confronting Collins *and* the android. One was challenge enough. He'd have to get the jump on them or this wouldn't work. He set a pursuit course and engaged the warp drive.

Immediately, the computer warned him, *"Micro-fractures are expanding. Explosive decompression in 9 seconds."*

Karim had caught up with the yacht in short order. He launched several volleys of micro-photons. Two hit. Their aft shields were down. It was now or never.

**Supplemental**  
**USS *Independence*, Main Bridge**  
**H'Kan System**

An alert sounded at Tang's station. His jaw dropped. His eyes sagged. Reluctantly, he turned toward Kimula. "Sir, the *Sharlin* – Commander bin Nadal's shuttle – it's been destroyed."

The news hit the Andorian like a ton of bricks. She wanted to break down right there, but she couldn't. She was in command. Kimula started to say something, but stopped. Then, she simply rejoined, "Understood."

## CHAPTER 21

### **Supplemental USS *Independence*, Main Bridge H'Kan System**

The bridge was still in silent mourning for their first officer. The reverence was broken by a call, "*Faltyne to bridge.*"

Kimula absently tapped her breast, "Bridge."

*"The captain and I are onboard, get us out of here."*

"Weston," was the only thing she said.

He took the cue, "Disengaging umbilical. Firing thrusters."

The blue-clad Andorian sat in the center seat. She was lost in her own thoughts for quite awhile. Finally, she asked, "Distance from hostile?"

The ensign reported, "Three kilometers."

She looked to Tang, "How far do we have to be?"

"It's hard to say, sir. It depends on what type of explosive it is." He did some quick calculations, "If it's anti-matter based: at least 50 kilometers; if it's not: maybe 10."

Weston offered, "The best speed I can get is 5.7 kilometers per minute."

"Let's hope it's not anti-matter based," grimly mused Kimula.

The Asian science officer piped up a moment later, "Sir, I'm reading internal explosions in the *Philadelphia*. This is it!"

"All hands, brace for impact," called Kimula.

Less than a second later, a massive force slammed into the right side of the ship. New klaxons sounded. Sparks flashed at nearly every terminal. A plasma fire erupted at the science station. Tang immediately covered his face and rolled on the deck in agony.

Kimula couldn't do anything but hold on for dear life.

Amidst the chaos, all the klaxons, consoles, and lights went off. Now, only sparks and fires illuminated the bridge.

Slowly, it calmed down. The ship was still in motion from the force of the explosion. With the inertial dampers offline, she still had to hold on tight to prevent being thrown against the bulkhead. She managed, "Weston, can you fire thrusters to stop us?"

The young man struggled to reach the console, "Helm not responding."

With great effort, the Andorian tapped her compin, "Windslow, we need thrusters."

*"Hold on. Attempting to manually fire."*

Gradually, Kimula found it took less and less effort to stay in the chair. Until, the ship finally came to a full stop. Her head was throbbing from the G-forces. Her hands still clinched the armrests in a vain attempt to keep the room from spinning.

"Report," she managed while still suffering from vertigo.

The bridge was still nearly black.

Dorian offered as he checked his station, "None of the bridge controls have any power, sir."

Kimula felt a little stupid. She could see that for herself. She reopened a channel, "Bridge to Engineering, report."

*"We've got nothing, Lieutenant. I think I can get battery power back up in about 20 minutes. All the same, I'd start breaking out the EVA suits, if I were you."*

"EVA suits," she repeated, "Is it that bad?"

Windslow responded, *"The problem is, I don't know how bad it is. We could've lost all the starboard sections of the ship for all I know."*

Kimula said somberly, "Right."

**Supplemental**  
***USS Independence*, Cargo Bay One**  
**H'Kan System**

The first thing Sintina experienced was a cold chill. She was laying on something hard and cold. She opened her eyes, it was dark. There were a few moving lights. It took her a moment to realize the lights were beacons being held by medical personnel. They were winding their way through rows of injured and dead on the deck.

She moved up to her elbows. "Crewman, come here." She was still too groggy to fully understand where she was.

The Tellerite medic scanned her with a tricorder, "Lay still, Captain. You suffered a severe concussion. You were lucky Lieutenant Faltyne was able to get you out of that rubble after the other ship exploded."

He moved to the next person. She looked around. She was in one of the cargo bays. She wasn't sure which one. The ship and crew were obviously in bad shape if the bay had been converted to a triage center.

Aurelia tried to sit up, but that was a mistake. She got extremely woozy. She laid back down for a second and tried again, but much slower this time. She managed to get to her feet. The medics were too busy with other patients to protest. The captain stumbled to a nearby locker and retrieved a flashlight. Then, she headed for the exit.

**Supplemental**  
***USS Independence*, Main Bridge**  
**H'Kan System**

By the time Aurelia made it to the bridge, battery back-ups were running. At least some of the consoles were activated. As she walked out of the lift, she saw Jonin, Kimula, Weston, and Dorian manning their respective stations.

She locked eyes with Faltyne. The captain was still dizzy. It robbed her of the disposition she would have preferred at that moment. At any rate, she was more concerned about the ship's status. "Report," she ordered coldly, still staring at Faltyne.



The Andorian didn't shy away, "We have massive hull breaches on almost all decks. Emergency bulkheads are holding. Decks three, six, and eight through ten are uninhabitable. We have minimal life support on the port side of the other decks and two port thrusters." He gestured to the tactical display. "The Vuke are massing. I believe they are almost at full strength. We're moving away from them at our best speed."

"Which is?"

"Using both port thrusters in unison, we're traveling at just over 900 kilometers per hour."

Sintina huffed, "So they'd be able to catch up with us in a matter of minutes."

"Yes, ma'am."

Aurelia slowly made her way to the center seat, "How long until they are ready to go on the offensive again?"

Faltyne responded, "The last of their reinforcements will reach them in two hours."

She looked at him despondently, "Weapons?"

He shook his head, "Even if that malicious program isn't still in place, we don't have the power to use them."

The captain eased down into the seat, and began to rub her forehead. "Options?"

The bridge was quiet. There were no options. She sat back, "Issue phasers to everyone. Prepare for Vuke boarding parties."

Kimula started, "Captain, there's something else."

Aurelia looked over. She looked simply miserable. There was a line of dried blood down her face, apparently where falling debris had hit her.

The counselor didn't want to tell her, especially not now, but it couldn't wait. She choked up as she said it, "Karim didn't make it."

Sintina put her head in her hands and began to sob ever so quietly. At that moment, she already felt half dead. She failed her ship, again. She failed her crew, again. She failed her friends, again. She had failed herself, again. She was a complete and utter failure, just like her father said she'd be.

The captain sat there, motionless, for nearly a full minute. Finally, she walked to the weapon's locker on the bridge and handed phasers out to the remaining command staff. She saved one for herself. Then, made a ship wide announcement, "Aurelia to *Independence* crew, you have all fought bravely. I am proud of each and every one of you." Her eyes continued to water, "I wish I..." She stopped herself, looked down at the phaser in her hand, and continued, "If you should find yourself overwhelmed by Vuke forces, I recommend you save your last shot for yourself. Good luck, Aurelia out."

## CHAPTER 22

### **Supplemental USS *Independence*, Main Bridge H'Kan System**

The last two hours were the longest in Sintina's life. Most everyone, except Faltyne and Kimula, were in cold weather gear. It was well below freezing throughout the ship. Illumination was still restricted to palm beacons. Windslow had managed to get the two remaining thrusters to go a bit faster, but that wouldn't make much difference. They had a final count of the casualties: 34 dead, 58 severely injured. Forty percent of the crew were incapacitated.

Aurelia watched her breath and waited for the inevitable. The final logs were made. There was nothing left to do, but wait for the Vuke to attack.

She had faced death before. There were many times she thought she might die. This time was different, however. During the war, death came quickly – if you were lucky. Usually, you didn't have to just sit and wait for it. She found she didn't like the time. It was invariably used to rehash past mistakes. The more she thought, the more regretful she became. There were so many regrets. She had never let anyone too close - so many lost opportunities.

The captain tapped her compin, "Aurelia to Windslow, any luck on long range communications?"

*"I'm afraid not, ma'am. The entire array has been destroyed."*

"Understood. Aurelia out."

Faltyne softly reported, "Ma'am, that disabled fighter from the *Philly*...it just exploded. I think the pilot initiated a self-destruct."

She nodded, "One less 31 agent in the galaxy." Sintina asked, almost casually, "Is the Vuke fleet moving, yet?"

"It just started to, ma'am."

"ETA?"

The Andorian checked his panel, "They'll be in weapons' range in just under five minutes."

The Latina stood, "Aurelia to crew, prepare to repel boarders. Use whatever tactics you feel are necessary. Aurelia out."

**Supplemental**  
**H'Kan II (The Vuke Homeworld), Divine Palace**  
**H'Kan System**

The queen's white crown of feathers bobbed gently as she came to hear the report from her military advisor.

The advisor said, "We have begun the charge. The Federation's ship appears to be crippled. We are reading much lower power output than before."

"Good," she commented, "We will take the technology from their ship and develop our own cure for this plague. Fire when ready, Alpha."

She curtsied, "As you command, Prima Alpha."

**Supplemental**  
**USS *Independence*, Main Bridge**  
**H'Kan System**

"Dorian," said Sintina, "is the screen working?"

He manipulated his controls, "I think I can get it up. Standby."

"Aft view. I want to see them coming."

"Aye."

A second later, the main viewer crackled to life. The screen was filled with dull grey craft of various sizes and shapes. There was a flash of light from one of them. Aurelia soon realized it was a missile launch.

It was confirmed by Faltyne, "Incoming, brace for impact."

The ship shifted. She could feel the hull had been breached once again. "Damage?"

Dorian fielded it, "Direct hit, main shuttle bay. No reports of injury."

Next, at least a dozen flashes emerged from the ships. There was nothing anyone could do but watch them get larger and larger on the main viewer.

Captain Aurelia forced herself to stand a bit taller and braced herself for death.

The main viewer lit up with bright red orbs. They were totally different than the missiles. She realized they were photons torpedoes. They detonated all the incoming missiles. Aurelia looked back at Faltyne for an explanation.

"It wasn't me."

The captain's combadge chirped, *"Captain Akinola to Captain Aurelia, would you like a ride?"*

She disbelieving responded, "Who is this?"

*"I'm captain of the USS Bluefin, a border cutter. Captain Picard thought you might need a hand. Prepare your ship for towing."*

A single tear escaped Aurelia's right eye, "God, thank you, *Bluefin*."

There was a slight pause. The voice on the other end was now solemn, *"It's what we do, Captain. Akinola out."*

**Stardate: 54625.1 (17 Aug 2377, 05:00)**  
**USS *Bluefin*, Bridge**  
**H'Kan System**

Immediately after closing the channel with his counterpart, the veteran captain began directing his crew. "Mr. Sarnek, move us 200 meters off their bow, towing posture." He moved to his new tactical officer, Lieutenant Shelton, "As soon as we're in position, extend our shields around the *Independence*."

The Caucasian man acknowledged, but added, "Sir, our shields won't be able to take much being extended that far."

The captain commented, "They don't have to last long, just enough to get out of here."

The Vulcan helm officer reported, "We are in position."

Without missing a beat, Shelton added, "Shields in place."

Nigel Bane offered from ops, "Incoming hail from the *Independence*, audio only."

Akinola made a gesture with his hand, "Put her up."

*"Bluefin, our inertial dampeners are not fully functional. My engineer is working on it, but we can't handle warp speeds, yet."*

"Will our friends be able to keep up at full impulse?" asked the cutter captain.

*"No."*

"Understood, Bluefin out." He continued his fine-tuned orchestra. Operations like this were exactly what the crew trained for. "Full power to SIF. Engage aft tractors."

Bane confirmed, "Tractors engaged and holding."

The skipper sat down, "Mr. Sarnek, set course 87 mark 43, full impulse. Watch your acceleration. Engage."

## EPILOUGE

**Stardate: 54628.3 (18 Aug 2377)**

**USS *Independence* under Tow, Captain's Ready Room  
En Route to Starbase 17**

*"Captain's Log: Stardate, 54628.3. We are now moving at warp six, thanks to the Bluefin. We'll arrive at the starbase tomorrow..."*

Captain Aurelia sat at her desk. The display showed the personnel KIA. She continued her log, "I'm not looking forward to writing thirty-four 'sorry for you loss' letters." She glanced down and huffed softly, "As I'm sure family members aren't looking forward to reading them." She leaned back, "When we arrive at starbase, there will surely be a hearing about what happened. I don't know what Starfleet will do to me." The Latina sighed deeply, "I did what I thought was right at the time...small comfort."

The door enunciator chimed.

"Computer, end log." She faced the door, "Come in."

The boarder cutter skipper walked in the now fully illuminated office. He started, "I'm sorry, Captain. I had Commander Strauss review our sensor logs, but she couldn't find any hard evidence of that stealth ship you talked about. If we could go back maybe..." He let the sentence slide. There was no going back to the H'Kan system.

Sintina looked dejected. She stood and leaned against the window frame. She stared out absently.

"For what it's worth," Akinola said, "I believe you."

She faced him, "Thank you, I...I think I needed to hear that."

The elder captain gave a grandfatherly smile. It went away as he added, "I've had a run in or two with this 'Section 31' – the supposed guardians of the Federation. They're very dangerous people." He stepped closer and gazed out the same window Aurelia had looked out before, "They had my CMO, Calvin Baxter, killed. He was a dear friend."

Both captains respected each other's moment of silence.

Akinola spoke up, "You're not involved with the counter movement, are you?"

"I...we were unintentionally sucked into it."

He smirked, "Well, I can sympathize with that. A word of advice," he offered, "don't trust them, either."

She nodded silently.

The skipper returned the gesture and moved to the exit. He stopped short and ended with, "If you ever need anything, call. Us pawns have to stick together."

Sintina just barely managed a grin.

Akinola bowed slightly and left.

The captain returned to her chair. The face on the screen was that of bin Nadal's. He was the one who got her involved in the counter 31 group in the first place. Had it not been for him, she might have a pretty respectable career.

In hindsight, he did do one thing for her: he opened her eyes. She didn't care about politics or covert operations before. If Karim hadn't taught her otherwise, she probably wouldn't care about Section 31 and their tactics, even if she knew about them. Over the years, he had become her conscience. He had pulled her from the brink more than once. He had helped her to grow beyond just being a compliant soldier. Thanks to him, she was just now starting to truly understand being an obedient trooper and being a Starfleet officer were two entirely different things. From now on, she would have to do better, have to be better – for Karim and for herself. She would have to face those dark places inside her that she had ignored and buried for so many years. The thought chilled her to the bone, but she could do it. She would do it, to honor her friend. Karim wanted nothing else for her but to grow as a person.

She felt so ashamed of herself.

Kimula's voice came over the speaker, "*Captain, you have an incoming transmission from Captain Picard.*"

She recovered from her brooding slightly, "Put him through."



The balding man appeared on her screen, *"Captain, I've heard what happened. My sympathies to your ship and crew."*

"Thank you, Captain."

He went on, *"We believe the Data imposter was another android made by Dr. Soong, named Lore. It is extremely distressing to know he has been reactivated and working with this shadowy group, no less. I promise you, Captain, I will do everything in my power to expose these people."*

She nodded absently, obviously not holding out much hope for his efforts.

Picard took a long breath and continued, *"I was also informed of your...drastic attempts to confront the captain of that stealth ship."*

Aurelia wondered who on her crew had contacted him. She bet Windslow told LaForge and LaForge told Picard. She'd have to have a word with her chief engineer. At the moment, however, she felt a lecture coming on, "Captain, with all due..."

He benevolently put up a hand, *"I succumbed to revenge myself once. It very nearly cost me my ship, my crew, and the whole future of humanity."*

This admission was not what Sintina was expecting.

*"It took a very brave woman to call me out on it."* He grinned, *"She reminds me a little of you, in fact."* He leaned back, *"It took me a very long time to let go of that anger and hate. I'm still letting go."* The captain was lost in his own thoughts for a moment, *"I called you to let you know, I understand how you must feel."* He leaned in, *"And to ask you to not give in to vengeance. Nothing good will come of it, I promise you that."*

Surprisingly, Aurelia wasn't offended by his words. Normally, she would have viewed it as an attack on her, but not today. She could only think to say, "I'll do what I can."

The conversation seemed to have stalled.

Picard curtsied and said, "Godspeed, Captain Aurelia."

He went to end the transmission, when Sintina piped up, "Thank you, sir."

He smiled slightly and the screen reverted to the Starfleet insignia.

**THE END**