

# Star Trek: Independence Dark Horses

By Dnoth

*"In time of war, the law falls silent.' Cicero. So is that what we have become; a 24th century Rome, driven by the certainty that Caesar can do no wrong?!"  
~Julian Bashir (DS9: "Inter Arma Enim Silent Leges")*

## PROLOGUE

**Stardate: 52986.5 (27 December 2375)**

**Lakarian City**

**Cardassia Prime**

Gul Aldur Keshet stood with his wife, Nebel. In silence, they rummaged through, what was once, their proud home. Two million people died due to the Dominion bombardment, including their son, Thrain.

Nebel lived through the onslaught thanks to the reinforced walls of the local detention center. She served as the city's conservator and was visiting one of her clients.

Aldur had only now come back to the home world. He was fighting on the Klingon front, when this...betrayal...happened. He never liked the Dominion. *'Cardassia never needed the Dominion. Dukat was a fool for allying with them.'* The thin, short Gul feared this would come to pass. But he didn't anticipate his son would have to pay for the Union's short-sightedness.

Now, the oppression of the Dominion would be replaced with servitude under the Federation Alliance. His blood boiled, knowing that Klingons now polluted his beloved Cardassia. Keshet fought long and hard to prevent the 'foreheads' from reaching his home. He failed...but the fight was not over, yet.

Aldur turned to his wife, "I won't be staying long. I've been in contact with...with someone, who promised resources I can use to force the alien filth from our world."

She looked at him with red, swollen eyes, "I want to help avenge our son's death."

He traced along her prematurely graying hair, "I know...I want you to stay here, you would make a good example for our people to follow. Remind them what it means to be Cardassian."

Nebel clutched his hand, "I will, I swear it."

## CHAPTER 1

### **Stardate: 52997.8 (31 December 2375) USS Independence, Main Bridge Bajoran System**

Aurelia smirked as they dropped from warp at the edge of the Bajoran star system. She knew it was rather indulgent to travel at maximum warp to *Deep Space Nine*. But what was the point to having a new ship if you didn't see what she could do? They had traveled 24.8 light years in just over a day and a half. At best, the *Midas* would have made the trip in 6 days. She helped justify her decision with the fact that Admiral Ross seemed anxious for the *Independence* to start her first mission.

The com line chirped on the bridge. *"Captain Aurelia."*

The captain recognized the voice of her chief engineer. "Go ahead, Jinal."

*"Captain, apparently one of the nozzle heads of the matter reactant injectors failed during the trip. I don't recommend we go to warp again until I replace it."*

Aurelia bit her bottom lip, feeling responsible. Then, she thought better of it, this was a new ship after all. Bugs would show up; and it's better to find out about them now, than later. She could help but wonder, however, "Did it break because of our speed?"

"No, ma'am, it simply had a micro-fracture."

Feeling better Aurelia asked, "How long will you need?"

"It requires shutting down the core and it is not easily accessible, approximately 20 hours."

She sighed, *'Well, at least, we're ahead of schedule.'* The captain responded, "Very well, Lieutenant, proceed."

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Bin Nadal's possessions, what little he had, were still in crates. They were in the exact spot they had been transported to two days ago. Though this

morning, he had begun to unpack. He placed his gi, a traditional Asian martial art uniform, on the bed.

He picked up a black belt. It was from an old form of karate called Isshin-ryu. He learned it for self defense when he was undercover in SI. Standard hand-to-hand combat training in Starfleet was, despite the impression to the contrary, lacking. It gave you just enough overconfidence to ensure you get pummeled in a bar fight. A fact, Karim had learned from experience.

The captain had worked security for most of her career. So she was no stranger to martial arts. Sintina taught him some of the finer points of Brazilian Capoeira and a Tellarite form, which he still hadn't quite mastered. In return, he showed her some restraining techniques. They often spared with each other.

*'Sintina...why haven't I told Sintina?'* Why wasn't he contacting the Federation Council? Why wasn't he sending messages to media organizations? Why wasn't he throwing the biggest damn ruckus he could manage?

He tried to rationalize his silence. He thought back to his Intelligence training. Sometimes it was best to hold onto information. Sometimes it was best to let people think you didn't care. ...Besides, he was just one person. What could he do against all of Starfleet Security? He knew those were excuses, but those thoughts allowed him to get some sleep.

Luckily, and surprisingly, Kimula hadn't pressed the issue after they left 375. He put on a happy face soon afterwards, hoping it would be sufficient to put her at ease. It worked. Now, he didn't have to tell her, or anyone else, anything. He knew, however, if he kept it to himself, he would be just as bad as those that tortured the Founder.

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Sitting at the helm, D'nas wasn't quite sure what to make of the Federation crew he had been thrown into. He noticed as soon as he beamed up to the USS *Budapest* that Starfleet lacked the rituality of the Tamarian Space Forces. Not that he disapproved. It simply caught him off guard.

He still didn't understand what was appropriate and what wasn't aboard Federation ships. He noticed the communications officer often addressed the captain informally. Even more surprising to D'nas, was the fact, the Andorian

was three ranks below the Terran captain. To show such insubordination on a Tamarian ship would have been cause for removal of the blade.

D'nas monitored the progress of the ship at impulse. When he felt the ship was close enough to their destination, he turned his head, "We are approaching *Deep Space Nine*, ma'am."

Aurelia stood from her chair, "Slow to one-eighth impulse. Put *DS9* on screen."

The viewscreen wasn't a screen at all. The main viewer now utilized a hologrid, though it was still two-dimensional. Aurelia couldn't help but think that if the *Midas* had been equipped with this newer technology, Ensign Nar'vook would be alive right now.

Her state of mind wasn't helped when the viewer became active. *Deep Space Nine* resembled a fleet surplus depot; so many damaged ships held station around it. Most of the ships had scorch marks and hull breaches. One *New Orleans* class was missing a nacelle. The saucer section of a *Nebula* looked like a crescent moon. Several tug vessels were still maneuvering, what were once, proud ships of the line.

Bin Nadal broke, what Aurelia just realized was, a long silence on the bridge. "I hadn't realized the extent of our losses until now."

Aurelia recognized some of the hulks, "The *Hood*, the *Adelphi*, the *Gandhi*. All of them are barely being held together."

Only Kimula's macabre sense of duty would force her to check the sensors and then share it with the bridge crew, "I'm reading over 700 corpses on those three ships alone."

Another unpremeditated moment of silence was observed.

Aurelia forced herself back to the task at hand. "*Independence* to *DS9*, requesting holding position."

The response came via audio, "This is *DS9* Ops. Set a heading of 351, mark 39 and hold 2200 meters off our dorsal side."

“Confirmed. *Independence* out.” Aurelia stepped down into the ‘pit’ and placed her hand on the exchange officer’s shoulder. “D’nas, step aside, I’ll bring us in.”

The Tamarian looked up at her with a mixture of fear and confusion. Had he done something wrong? “I don’t understand,” he stated.

Aurelia considered for a moment that he literally didn’t understand what she was saying. Then, she decided to give him a bit more credit, “This is a brand new ship and there is a lot of activity around that station. I don’t want to have a collision and dent the fender.”

D’nas was perplexed on several levels, “Fender?”

Aurelia coldly said, “Just get up.”

With a blank look on his face, D’nas managed an “Aye, ma’am.” He stood up, the chair turning as he rose. Not knowing where else to go, he stood at parade rest about two meters starboard of the helm.

Though Aurelia was too busy piloting to notice, bin Nadal gave her a disapproving look. He then, made a quick glance at Kimula. The expression on his face spoke volumes to the Andorian. She made a slight nod in agreement.

## CHAPTER 2

### **Stardate: 53000.8 (1 January 2376)** **USS Independence** **Holding Station At Deep Space Nine**

*"Captain's log: Stardate 53000.8. We've arrived at Deep Space Nine and I'm looking forward to meeting my new 1<sup>st</sup> officer. Gone are the days that captains pick and choose their own number ones."*

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Ethan Windslow paced in front of a docking port on *DS9*. He stroked his terracotta colored go-tee, which had a spattering of white. His hair was a little darker. The slightly taller than average man seemed rather troubled for someone about to reunite with his family.

Windslow didn't notice the outer airlock door open. Only when the inner portal began to roll did his apprehension reach fever pitch. His heart raced once his ears received the word he hadn't heard, in person, in over 2 years.

"Daddy!" A young boy, no more than 6 years of age, made a beeline for the officer and embraced his hips in a death-lock of a hug. Ethan nearly lost his balance from the impact.

Soon after, amongst the other disembarking passengers, was a human woman with short blonde hair. She said nothing and smiled widely as she joined the embrace. Finally young man, probably 12 years old, stood near. The group broke up, after a few moments; much to Ethan's relief.

The twelve year old raised his hand and said, "Hey Dad," as if Ethan had just walked in the door from a day at work.

Susan Windslow examined her husband. Her own enthusiasm must have shielded her from Ethan's notable lack of the same. "What's wrong?"

Ethan realized, for the first time, how truly difficult it would be to keep his façade. He regained himself, even managing to smile, "Nothing. It's just been awhile."

His wife examined him more closely and petted his cheek, "Are you sure?"

He nodded and then looked to his boys, "Come on. Let's go see this new ship."

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Only two weeks had passed since Admiral Ross gave Aurelia command the *Independence*. In those two weeks, she had seen more admirals than in the previous two years. It was a trend, she hoped, that would end once all of the crew were aboard and they were finally underway.

In Aurelia's windowless ready room, she was hosting Ross. After some pleasantries, he inquired, "Have you meant your new executive officer, yet?"

Aurelia offered the admiral a seat, which was taken. She then, rounded her desk, sat, and responded, "Not personally, no. He did inform me that his family just arrived on the station. I thought I'd give them awhile before I made him report."

He rejoined, "It's probably only going to be a temporary assignment for him. You should be getting a new XO in a few months." Ross joined his fingers together and rested his elbows on the edge of the desk, "How much do you know about Commander Windslow?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "What I know of him is from his service jacket: an engineer by trade, worked on the Defiant project, and was one of a handful of survivors when his ship was destroyed a month ago."

"He was in the last escape pod. The only reason the Dominion didn't kill him was because he was so close to the *Bismarck* when she exploded. The pod lost power and it looked like part of the debris."

Aurelia looked down, "I didn't know that."

Ross continued, "The rescue ship almost didn't find it. He was nearly dead when he was finally recovered."

The captain sat back, "Sounds like he's seen plenty of combat."

Ross fidgeted, "Space combat anyway."

She sat forward again, "There is one thing I don't understand. He was promoted to captain a year ago."



Ross seemed to know where the conversion was going, but he allowed Aurelia to continue.

“Why has he been temporarily demoted to commander? It wasn’t in his records.”

The admiral nodded, “A legitimate question.” Ross knew he was supposed to protect Windslow. But if Ethan couldn’t handle some heat, he had no business being part of the project.

For a moment Aurelia thought Ross wouldn’t elaborate, she was mistaken.

“Captain, I need to tell you about an ongoing investigation.”

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Susan Windslow unpacked an old, wooden, analog clock; a family keepsake. Ethan advised them not bring much, as this would probably be a temporary assignment. She noticed one less pip on his collar. When she asked about it, he said, “It’s standard procedure when a captain loses a ship until the investigation is done.” She had no knowledge of Starfleet protocols. So, she took him at his word, it has always been golden.

Placing the clock on a shelf, she admitted, “I’ll tell you, Ethan, I’m glad to get away from my parents in Würzburg.”

Ethan studied a padd. Without looking up, “They never liked me much.”

Susan smiled and sat next to him, “It’s not you they disliked. It’s Starfleet they didn’t like.”

“Hmm.”

She put her arm around his shoulders, “Ethan, are you ok?”

He finally, put down the comfort of his padd and looked at her, “I don’t mean to be cold, Sue. It’s ... it’s just that I’ve had a rough few years.”

Susan couldn’t help but feel he was being selfish, “It’s been hard on us too.” Then, it occurred to her how self-centered *her* statement was. Attempting an apology, she followed up with, “I wish I could have gone with you. I’ve never even saw you in command.”

That didn't seem to help matters. Ethan's face became rigid, "No ... no you don't. It was smart of Starfleet to get families off ship during the war."

The conversion seemed to stall. Then, Sue somberly asked, "What happened?"

The commander avoided eye contact. He couldn't tell her. He could let her know.

Moments later, Paul, Windslow's six year old son, enthusiastically entered the living room from his bedroom. The boy wielded two mock weapons, "Daddy, you wanna play hunt the Jem'hadar with me?" The game was something many children played on Earth during the war. Susan, and most other parents, knew they should have discouraged it, but didn't.

The boy offered the man one of the toys. Ethan lurched back as if the toy was plagued. "No, Paul."

"Why not? I wanna play with you." The boy came, closer.

Ethan's authoritative tone had a bit of panic in it. "I can't, I'm busy."

The boy implored him one last time as he attempted to put the toy in Ethan's hand, "But Dad!"

Ethan smacked the toy out of the boy's hand with enough force to make the child step back to catch himself before falling. "I said, No!"

Paul's mouth was agape, unable to process what just happened. Susan had a similar expression on her face. Finally, the child remembered to cry. Susan rushed to pick up her son, his tears wetting her shirt. She stared at her husband unable to find any words.

Ethan was the one to take the initiative. He rose and strode right for the door, which closed behind him.

## CHAPTER 3

### **Supplemental USS Independence, Main Bridge Holding Station At Deep Space Nine**

Admiral Ross wasn't too upset about the *Independence's* delay, due to repairs. The fact that Aurelia got to *DS9* several days ahead of schedule didn't hurt his disposition.

Aurelia returned to the bridge after escorting Ross to transporter room 2. The doors parted. As she entered, D'nas called out, "Captain on the bridge!" Instinctively, some of the crew came to attention. Aurelia noticed two exceptions, Bin Nadal and Kimula. Both looked playfully at Sintina. She was compelled to return the smile as she ordered, "At ease."

Military traditions such as polishing boots, announcing the captain, and other such "prettiness" was abandoned by the *Midas* crew, with Aurelia's blessing. They seemed trivial protocols, especially during a war.

Bin Nadal didn't break the captain's gaze, indicating to her he had something to say.

Still smiling, her security chief said, "I've established a new game room in an empty crew's quarters."

"Great, where?" came Aurelia.

"Deck 4, room 12."

Kimula stood from her seat, interjecting, "I assume you both realize we don't need a game room anymore. This ship does have holodecks, you know."

Early on in the Dominion War, one of the casualties was the holodecks. The chief engineer recommend improving the shields and weapons systems, but at the cost of drawing power from non-critical areas. Captain Camar agreed; hence, the holodecks went unused. By the time Aurelia was forced to take command, the ship was in such bad shape, no one would even consider doing anything to take power from the defensive systems.

Aurelia crossed her arms, "True, but I'm used to playing D&D the old fashioned way, now."

Bin Nadal added, "It won't be the same without the rest of our players."

Kimula looked at Aurelia and said with purpose, "We'll just have to introduce the game to new people."

The allusion was lost on the captain, "Yeah, but Karim's right. It won't be the same."

Kimula, decided to be less subtle, "That's the nature of existence, captain...things change."

Aurelia seemed to get the message this time, "Doesn't mean I have to like it." With a sigh, Aurelia rounded the safety railing, heading for the center seat. "At any rate, we have our first mission, now. What crew members haven't gotten on board yet?"

"Twenty-three crew members haven't reported, including the CMO and the 1<sup>st</sup> officer," volunteered Kimula.

Aurelia stopped short of the command chair, "I know about the XO, but we need to get the doctor so she can start processing people." She looked up to bin Nadal, her next order embedded in the statement, "We're going to have to move up our schedule."

Bin Nadal curtsied, "I'm on it." He moved to the port exit. To his left, was a stairwell to deck two; to his right, a turbolift; the set up was mirrored on the starboard side. As he neared the lift door, it opened and he nearly ran into someone.

Karim took a step back and quickly assessed the situation. Another officer, a commander, stood centimeters away. The commander didn't seem nearly as startled as bin Nadal was. The security chief experienced a quick sense of disappointment in himself because of that fact.

*'I'm disappointed because from that?'* Karim observed with disgust. There were far more important things for him to be disappointed about. He had almost managed to push the events at *Starbase 375* out of his mind. A terrible wave of guilt washed over him.

He forced himself back to the present situation. "Oh, welcome on board commander. I'd chat more, but I'm on a mission."

Windslow stepped aside, allowing the 'mission' to continue without comment. Bin Nadal disappeared behind panels joining together.

Aurelia was rather proud of herself as she produced a polite smile. "Ah, Commander Windslow, welcome onboard the *Independence*."

Kimula rose and turned to see her new superior. Her genuine smile served to make Aurelia's look much more artificial.

The barrel-chested man straightened up, "Commander Ethan Windslow reporting for duty."

The captain gestured to her left, "Commander, this is Ship's Counselor Kimula." Her hand then moved to the bow, "There at the helm is our Tamarian exchange officer, D'nas."

D'nas only minimally moved to make eye contact and nod at the commander.

Aurelia then moved to her original position. "And you briefly meant our chief tactical officer, Karim bin Nadal."

There were others on the bridge, including an ops officer, but Aurelia didn't remember her name yet. So she left the introductions unsaid.

Kimula moved to meet Windslow with an outstretched hand. "Welcome, Commander."

Windslow cordially, but not enthusiastically, accepted the invitation.

Aurelia made no indication of following suit. "Well, we have a mission already. Let me brief you in my ready room," as she motioned aft.

"Yes sir." At the indication of Aurelia, he entered first.

Aurelia made a quick glance at Kimula after Windslow couldn't catch it. Kimula wasn't entirely sure why. Without explanation, the captain joined him in the ready room.

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Windslow stood 'at ease,' not wanting to take a seat until it was offered. Aurelia made her way to the far side of the desk. "Have a seat, Commander," as she did the same.

He pulled out the chair, "Thank you, sir."

Aurelia crossed her legs and rested an arm of the edge of the desk. "Oh, don't do that. I prefer 'ma'am.'"

Windslow nodded, "To be honest, I never thought it was necessary to call female officers, 'sir.'"

A stray thought entered Aurelia's mind. *'What about addressing species with more than two sexes?'* She was about to vocalize it, but decided not to look for problems just yet. In a tone of fake optimism, she said instead, "We've made our first agreement. That bodes well for our relationship."

Sensing the comment was synthetic, Windslow moved on, "And our mission?"

Aurelia shifted position, now fully facing the man, "We are to track down a rogue Cardassian vessel. It is one of many that haven't surrendered to Federation forces. It was last seen in the Badlands."

Windslow stood, "We should get moving, impulse signatures don't last long in the plasma storms."

Aurelia looked up from under her eyebrows, "We will. The doctor still needs to get on board."

"I'll go get her," as he started for the door.

"I already have someone on it."

Windslow turns on his heel. Frustration brewing in his eyes, "Other than her, do you have all hands yet?"

Aurelia leaned back in her chair and her defenses went up, "No, we have several crew members that are either on the station or nearby ships."

In quick succession, the commander stepped forward, leaned down and placed his hands on the desk. "What have you been waiting for? I'll issue an immediate recall order and we can get underway."

Aurelia immediately meant the challenge. Even though she was a head shorter and full 30 kilograms lighter, she had faced down more imposing figures than the man that now stood before her. By god, she would not be intimidated by, what she considered, a sub-standard officer.

“As you were commander. First off, this is a new ship. We’ve detected a defect in the warp core and my engineer needs several hours to repair it. We can’t go anywhere until then. Second, don’t take that tone with me. And third, I know you have more experience as a captain than I do. But whether you like it or not, you’re not in command here...I am!” Aurelia thought she used amazing restraint by not mentioning the investigation. She didn’t quite want to tip her hand on that yet.

Fire burned behind Windslow’s eyes. It extinguished somewhat as he recognized she had valid points. He gathered what composure he could as he raised himself to a more respectful posture. He took a deep breath, “So, how can I help get things done?”

Sintina remained standing as if to confirm to the commander that she won the argument. “We weren’t supposed to leave *DS9* for several days until this assignment came up. The crew will be taken off guard.” She paused to regretfully acknowledge the fact that Windslow thought of something she hadn’t, yet. “Go ahead and issue that recall order. Get everyone onboard so they can get familiar with the ship.”

Windslow acknowledged and began for the exit. Aurelia, however, simply couldn’t end the encounter on a conciliatory note, “Then, I suggest you talk to our department heads to get a feel for our situation.”

He made the slightest ‘humph’, then turned, “Aye, ma’am.”

“Dismissed.”

The commander was more than ready to execute that order.

## CHAPTER 4

### **Supplemental Rogue Cardassian Vessel Rakal Cardassian Badlands**

The *Keldon* class ship resembled a battle axe against the light emitted from the plasma storms.

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Gul Keshet decided it was time for his senior officers to meet the new "Intelligence Observer." He introduced the man as they waited for dinner to be served. He gestured to the former Obsidian Order agent, "This is Shau Darcis. He will be accompanying us on our future missions."

"Milord, this is ridiculous," spat Glinn Levara Sulle, the *Rakal's* first officer. She had penetrating blue eyes and a rusted Klingon *dk'tahg* was lashed to her thigh. It was common for Cardassians to take trophies off their fallen enemies. She continued, "The Order no longer exists. How can they assign an observer?"

Darcis met the challenge, "The Central Command no longer exists, either."

Keshet's hooded eyes winced slightly and he interjected, "Not as it once did. But I assure you, the Central Command still endures on this ship, Darcis."

The observer had no desire to upset his new asset...not yet, at any rate. He bowed slightly, "Of course, Gul."

The master of the vessel turned to his technical officer, "Lajal, what's the status of the cloaking device our new intelligence observer has most graciously provided?"

Lajal shook his head, "It's a Klingon Class IV cloaking device. It's not top of the line, but it works. The problem is, it's not compatible with our systems."

"Can it be made to work?" asked Sulle.

"With time," began the technician, "but it will take at least two weeks."



Sulle was about to object when Keshet raised his hand, "That's why we're in the Badlands. We will stay here, concealed, until the cloak goes on-line."

"Hiding like frightened Bajorans," commented the first officer.

Keshet's reserved demeanor failed slightly, "Glinn, we've fought together for several years, so I will let that pass." He leaned back. On his necklace, a single ketracel-white tube shifted, "Together, you and I helped liberate Pentath III and we razed the 'forehead' colony of ves'Lan to the ground."

"Yes, milord."

"In that time, have I ever given you cause to doubt me?"

"No, milord."

Darcis grinned as Sulle was taken down a notch.

Satisfied that the squabbling was over, for the moment, Keshet held a glass in toast. "As Legate Damar simply said, 'for Cardassia.'"

The others, including Darcis and Sullie, joined him. They echoed, "For Cardassia."

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Two weeks after the grand celebrations of victory over the Dominion, the promenade on *DS9* had settled down quite a bit. Bin Nadal wasn't sure if it was his own mood; the drastic change since he was here last; or the survivors of those ships outside, which were roaming around like zombies that gave the place the atmosphere of a morgue.

His destination surely wouldn't help his disposition. The computer indicated the new doctor, an Arkonian, was in the infirmary. The scene he encountered once the doors split open was not the one he expected.

A human doctor, the CMO of the station presumably, just got done saying something. He and the Arkonian started chucking, if you can call the sound from the reptilian 'chucking,' at whatever the punch line had been.

Karim began wondering if the Arkonian was male or female. In mammals, the females of course, had some type of nutrient producing glands. The Arkonian

had no breasts per say. So he wasn't sure how to distinguish the sex. The voice seemed feminine, but that didn't mean anything.

After the two regained their composure, they turned to acknowledge bin Nadal.

"Dr. Do'matar?" presumed the security chief.

The reptilian answered, "Dr. Zo'Kama, actually. Family names are only used in very formal ceremonies in Arkonian society."

"Ah, ok...Dr. Zo'Kama. I'm here to tell you that the *Independence* has moved up its schedule. The captain needs you onboard so we can head out."

The Arkonian didn't seem to be bothered, "Very well." Then, the doctor turned to her *DS9* counterpart, "Thank you Dr. Bashir, for your medical notes."

Bashir seemed to become uncomfortable. "Please doctor, wait a moment."

Zo'Kama hesitated.

Bashir turned and quickly grabbed a laser scalpel. Before anyone could react, he made a superficial incision on his forearm.

Bin Nadal gave a confused look. Zo'Kama seemed mildly amused.

Bashir stepped up to Zo'Kama. He cleared his throat, and attempted to be humble, "I hope this doesn't embarrass you, but ... could you spit on my wound?"

Zo'Kama summed up some mock annoyance. "I usually use a dermal regenerator, but I suppose..." The reptilian opened its mouth and a stream of liquid ejected from it, landing squarely on the 3 centimeter long cut. In a flurry of bubbles, which if one didn't know any better seemed like acid, Dr. Bashir's injury disappeared.

Bin Nadal had never seen, or heard, of anything like it.

Bashir was more educated, but just as impressed. "Remarkable! I knew Arkonian saliva had healing properties, but I have never seen it first hand!"

The Arkonian would have been genuinely annoyed, but few people knew about the ability. So, the reptilian wasn't asked to show it off often. Zo'Kama then jested, "I just wish my spit could do surgery for me too."

The comment prompted another round of chucking.

As the Arkonian made her way for the exit, it said, "Excuse me, I have to round up my daughter."

Bashir was obviously satisfied, "It's been a pleasure, doctor."

Bin Nadal began to follow the Arkonian out, but paused; allowing the door to close behind the reptilian. He then, turned to Bashir before he could return to his work, "Doctor?"

*Deep Space Nine's* CMO turned, he must have assumed bin Nadal left with Zo'Kama, as he seemed surprised to see him still there. "Yes, can I help you?"

Karim sheepishly asked, "How do can you tell the difference between a male and female Arkonian?"

Julian couldn't restrain a smirk, "Male Arkonians have several small spikes on their head. Females lack those spikes. Commander Zo'Kama is female."

Glad to have his ignorance evaporate, "Thanks, Doctor Bashir."

"Any time," the residual smile still on his face.

Again the two began to part ways when a connection was made in bin Nadal's mind. He said to himself, but unintentionally loud enough for the doctor to hear, "Bashir."

"Something else?" came from Julian.

Trying his best not to be confrontational, but knowing the statement itself would be, "You're the one who cured the Founders, right?"

Karim still made it a point to read up on intelligence reports. Within the SI and Starfleet Security communities, two factions had become apparent in the last few weeks. The first defended Bashir with the argument that the cure was really the only thing that convinced the Founder to end the war; a view bin Nadal tended to share. The counter argument was Bashir, via Odo, made

the most important bargaining chip for future Dominion-Federation negotiations useless.

Bashir's mood instantly became somber, "That's right. What of it?"

"I suspect you made quite a few enemies when you did that."

The doctor's retort came immediately, "I doubt the officers who would've died at Cardassia Prime, to say nothing of the Cardassians themselves, are among them."

Realizing he gave the wrong impression, bin Nadal raised his hands in an apologetic gesture, "Oh don't worry doctor, I was one of those officers you saved. I don't have anything against you." After an uncomfortable silence, he altered the conversation slightly, "I still can't believe the Romulans nearly committed genocide."

Bashir's look of distrust became one of confusion, "Romulans?"

"Sure. The security reports I've read conclude the Tal'Shiar originally infected Odo just prior to the Battle of the Omarion Nebula and allowed it to spread from there."

Julian paced for a moment without saying a word, allowing his anger to ferment with each step. He flung his arms in frustration as he spoke, "I guess I shouldn't be surprised that they'd try to rewrite history!"

"Who?"

Bashir leaned back against a console as he crossed his arms. He managed to calm down. He looked up from the floor, "Section 31."

Before Karim could ask the obvious follow-up, the pair noticed a Bajoran nurse waiting with a padd in hand. She took advantage of the nervous moment to accomplish her task. She presented the padd to Bashir, "Doctor, I need you to sign off on these prescriptions."

Julian took a breath, shifted his weight back on his feet and took the padd, "Of course." Once he had signed off, the nurse retreated again.

Once she was out of sight, Bin Nadal resumed, "Section 31?"

Bashir shook his head, "You probably wouldn't believe me if I told you."

Bin Nadal never liked being out of the loop. It was one of the reasons he went into Starfleet Intelligence in the first place. On the other hand, Karim thought, *'What good was the burden of knowledge if I refused to act on it?'* He attempted to alleviate the guilt he felt. He assured the doctor and himself, "I prefer not to be kept in ignorance, doctor."

Julian seemed to be considering whether or not to involve the security officer. Karim saw the moment of the doctor's decision in his face. Bashir leaned in, "What if I were to tell you that the Federation has an organization more devious and covert than the Obsidian Order or the Tal'Shiar?"

## CHAPTER 5

### **Supplemental USS Independence, Captain's Ready Room Holding Station Near Deep Space Nine**

The only thing Tang Zian knew of Starfleet was the war. He graduated on 50401 just a few months before the joint Cardassian/Dominion forces captured the station he now orbited. During said war, Zian served as a member of the science team on the USS *Galaxy*. He was thrilled at the posting. It was quite a privilege for a raw cadet. He imagined discovering new worlds and running into all kinds of new aliens. All that was put on hold at the Second Battle of Deep Space Nine; the opening conflict of the Dominion War. It was not the career he had intended when he entered the academy.

None the less, Lieutenant Tang was hopeful of this new posting. He didn't know much about his new assignment, other than it was a new class of vessel. And 'new,' Zian thought, meant it would be on the outskirts of known space. Finally, he would be an explorer.

Butterflies began moving as Tang made his way to his new captain's ready room. It was always a surreal moment when you meant your new CO. The person behind this door would be responsible for his life and safety for the indefinite future.

He stopped just short of the entrance, took a deep breath, and tapped the panel, which would announce his presence. A tense moment later, a female voice said, "Enter." *'Here's to first impressions,'* Zian thought as he passed through the doorway.

\*\*\*\*\*

Not again, Aurelia thought, as a young Asian science officer approached her desk. There had been a steady flow of officers and crew who felt it necessary to introduce themselves ever since they left *Starbase 375*. It was an expected kiss-ass ritual, of course, but Aurelia tired of it quickly.

The young officer said, as he snapped to attention, "Lieutenant Tang Zian reporting, ma'am."

*'At least they're starting to call me 'ma'am.'*" The captain decided not to get up. "Hello, Lieutenant." Sintina skimmed over a padd, "Seems you're my new Chief Science Officer."

Tang responded with a healthy amount of pride, "Yes, ma'am."

"Have you had a chance to look at our science lab?"

Zian still stood at attention and began to wonder if the captain intentionally left him there, "No not yet, ma'am."

"Well, I'm going to be honest with you ..." Aurelia then noticed how rigid he was. She then remembered, "At ease." The science officer complied. "The science lab is not up to par to a *Galaxy* class'."

Tang's shoulders slumped for a second, but he then recovered, "I guess that's to be expected, ma'am. This is a smaller ship after all."

The captain leaned back, an evil yet sympathetic smile on her lips, "I don't think you understand."

Tang cocked his head.

Aurelia elaborated, "The science lab on this ship was literally an after thought."

Zian pouted as if he was a child and Aurelia had just grabbed a cookie out of his hand. "It was?"

Sintina's smile became more sympathetic, "This was designed to be a gunship. We are lucky to even *have* a science lab."

Tang began to contemplate what forces in the universe he had so thoroughly enraged to engender such a fate. He recalled where he was and decided it wasn't the place to wallow in self pity. There would be time for that later. He grasped for a sliver lining, "Do you think we'll be on the outskirts much, ma'am?"

"I have a feeling we'll be on patrol duty for awhile."

Tang blankly nodded, not looking at anything in particular.

Aurelia truly did feel for you young man. She was never in the science division, but she understood the desire to do what you've been trained for. Not intending to be ironic, she offered, "I hope your tour on the *Independence* proves to be interesting."

Tang exhaled through his nostrils, a grin appearing on his face. "That's a Chinese curse, you know?"

"What's that?"

"May you live in interesting times."

Aurelia considered the phrase for a moment and thoughtfully said, "I can see how that might be a bad thing."

Zian had nothing to add but his continuing grin.

Aurelia prompted him, "Well Lieutenant, I'll let you get acquainted with...what you've got. Dismissed."

Tang bobbed his head, "Ma'am," and allowed the captain a respite, at least until the next officer decided to show up.

\*\*\*\*\*

The door of Gul Keshet's suite slid open with a clang. Glinn Sulle crossed the threshold. Like most of the ship, the primary colors in the room were grays and browns. It was sparsely decorated. The gul turned off "The Majesty of the Union", an epic ballad, composed during the Second Republic. He regarded the woman, "Yes, Glinn."

Once the hatch closed, she began. "Who is this...Darcis?"

Keshet's pitted face remained stoic, "I first met him at our base of operations on Celtris III. He claimed to represent anonymous benefactors that, while sympathetic to the cause of the True Way Party, couldn't openly support us." He shifted in his chair, "In addition, they want the Founder."

"The Founder?" she repeated.

"It's something we'll have to plan carefully," he elaborated.



Her eyes began to blink rapidly, "Are you sure it is wise ally ourselves with whomever he represents?"

The gul stood and walked closer, "I know they are providing weapons and leks that will greatly aid us in liberating Cardassia." He paced for a moment before halting, "Beyond that, you need not concern yourself."

Sulle forced herself to relent. "As you wish." She began to exit.

Keshet added, "However, watch him with a vigilant eye, Glinn."

She was reassured to hear him say that. She nodded before leaving.

\*\*\*\*\*

Deck four housed Sick Bay, Transporter Rooms 3 & 4, and an unassigned crew quarters that bin Nadal had confiscated.

"The Game Room" was first established on the *Midas*. It proved to be invaluable for maintaining the crew's moral. When ever someone came across a new game it would be added to the room so anyone could come in and play it. The 'old' game room had everything from 3-D Chess to Strategema. Someone had even acquired the Cardassian game of Kotra, though no one asked where the crew member got it.

The new game room was sparse by comparison. Kimula was now putting the final touches on a miniature landscape atop a table in the room. The doors distracted her. She broke a small tree as they slid open. She looked over to see Aurelia, with a dart board in tow.

"Ever heard of a door chime?" mockingly barked Kimula.

Aurelia moved her head to the side, seeing the cause of her frustration. She responded with a wicked smile, "Eh, you would've broken it with the chime, anyway." Aurelia turned slowly, as she took in her surroundings. "We might even find room for a Dom-jot table in here."

"We're going to have to spread the word. This crew doesn't know about our tradition," offered Kimula.

"True."

Kimula decided now was as good a moment as any, "Speaking of new crew members..."

Aurelia began to mount the dart board. She had heard too many of Kimula's speeches to not know where the conversation was going. Sintina drew out her answer, "Yes."

Kimula had two people she wanted to talk about. She decided the best strategy was to bring up the Tamarian first. "I think you're being too hard on D'nas."

"Oh?" not turning to face the Andorian.

"I've talked with Karim. He says he's good. Better than you think."

Aurelia finally faced Kimula. "It's bad enough I'm going to have Command down my neck because of this guy; I don't need you to do it to." She stepped forward, "Look you, Karim, Jinal; we've been through a lot. You guys have earned my trust and respect; this new crew hasn't yet."

The Andorian counselor had already decided to defend the Tamarian, "He's earned the right to be here. So has everyone else. Besides, if you're mad at Command for sending him here, fine. Don't take it out on him."

Sintina examined the carpet and sighed. She looked back up, "Karim says he's good?"

Kimula nodded. At this point she knew Sintina would concede, but the real challenge lay ahead.

Aurelia waved her hands up, "Alright, I'll give the kid a second chance."

Kimula was never known for beating around the bush, "Good. Now what's the deal with Commander Windslow?"

Aurelia snickered, "Let's just say, I'm going to be kicking and screaming until he's off the ship."

Kimula saw no sarcasm in her eyes, "Why?"

"Ongoing investigation, I've been told not to talk about it."

With that, Kimula hit a brick wall. Now it was time to reach out to Windslow.

\*\*\*\*\*

Darcis sat alone in his room. It took him some time to guarantee a secure transmission to his contact. Now, on the small screen, was the image of a Romulan colonel.

"It's about time you contacted me," complained the Romulan.

Shau ignored the statement, "Keshet seems to working out well. His plan for getting the Founder out of Federation hands has merit."

"I'm pleased to hear that," commented the colonel. "I also wanted to alert you to something."

"Oh, about what?"

"Due to our alliance with Starfleet and the Klingons, I'm privy to some fleet deployments."

\*\*\*\*\*

Jinal arrived on the bridge. He felt all eyes on him, as the crew waited for his report. He meant Aurelia's gaze. Her question was the same as everyone else's. He saw no reason to continue the suspense, "The nozzle has been replaced. We can go to warp at anytime, Captain."

Aurelia felt herself getting giddy. It subsided as she turned to her 1<sup>st</sup> officer, "Commander, what's the final head count?"

Windslow consulted the display built in to the armrest. "We have eighty-four officers and crew with 11 civilians; a total of 95 personnel."

"Ninety-five, ok." The captain rose and made for the helm. She stopped and took a glance at Kimula in the communication's chair. Kimula returned the look. The captain retired to her seat. "D'nas, take us away from the station."

Luckily, the Tamarian didn't notice her trepidation, "Aye, ma'am."

The local traffic had slowed down somewhat since their arrival. D'nas coordinated with *DS9* operations and soon the ship had left the station behind.

The captain's excitement did not go unnoticed by the crew. Even though, the repairs took a full hour less than the estimate; it seemed like forever to have her orders in hand, a new ship, and unable to proceed. She was literally on the edge of her seat. "Set a course for the Badlands, warp 9."

"Course set," came D'nas from the helm.

"Let's go."

## CHAPTER 6

### **Stardate: 53009.3 (4 January 2376)** **USS Independence, Main Bridge** **En-route to the Badlands**

"The *Keldon's* ventral shields have failed!" bin Nadal informed Aurelia without turning for eye contact.

The bridge was dimmed. The only light came from displays and the red alert signal. The klaxons had been silenced.

Windslow added, "Our shields our holding at 67%."

Hovering behind bin Nadal, the captain bragged, "They can't go head to head with us." She then moved closer to the helm, "D'nas, keep us on their ventral side. Karim, target their warp core."

The 1<sup>st</sup> officer stood, "Our orders are to disable the *Keldon*, not destroy it."

Aurelia jolted around, stabbing Windslow with her eyes. She didn't like being corrected by anyone. The fact it came from that bastard made her blood boil.

"They're targeting our pulse phasers ... minimal damage," came from the tactical/security officer. "Orders, ma'am?"

The captain forced herself to turn her back on Windslow, "Target their tactical sensors."

"Aye, locked and firing." Bin Nadal then reported, "Their sensors are offline."

"Get them in a tractor beam."

"Got 'em," reported the Ops officer.

Aurelia's pride could not be hidden. She chanced a glance at her XO to gloat. He seemed unimpressed. She turned to the Ops officer, "Now beam the neurozine charges into their bridge and engine room." Then, she returned to bin Nadal, "Get your boarding party over there once it's confirmed the crew is out."

Tang chimed in from the aft of the bridge, "It's confirmed, ma'am."

Aurelia's mood totally changed as a broad smile went across her face. She casually walked about the bridge, putting her hands behind her back. She raised her head slightly, "Computer, end simulation. Return to normal function."

An acknowledgement signal apparently came from the ceiling. The lighting in the room was restored.

Windslow had returned to his seat. Aurelia sat next to him. "Good work, everyone. Bin Nadal, continue the next stage of the operation in holodeck 2."

He swung his chair around and headed for the turbolift, "Aye."

Another officer immediately assumed his still warm station.

Aurelia said to no one in particular, "God help me, I do love this ship."

Windslow cautioned, "Overconfidence can be a killer, Captain."

Sintina saw her opportunity to make a jab, "Or lack of it."

The conversation abruptly ended with the comment. Only a few seconds past when Kimula reported from behind them, "Captain, we're receiving a transmission from Starfleet Command. It's a broadcast. ... Ma'am, they're making the terms of the Treaty of Bajor public."

Aurelia shifted in her chair to see her comm./counselor, "Well, give us the summary."

"The Federation, Klingons, and Romulans divide up the rest of the Dominion fleet, and each has been given authority over different sectors of Cardassian space. ... The Cardassians have to reduce their fleet by 60% and turn over all Dominion technology. The remaining Jem'hadar are to return to the Gamma Quadrant. Some Vorta are to be tried for war crimes. ... There's more, but those are the big points."

The captain then raised the display next to her and examined it for a moment. "I never would have thought the Federation would take so much space. The territory we took is more than the borders were pre-Cardassian war."

Kimula commented, "The spoils of war."

Windslow turned somber, "In history, there have been many examples of a new war to fight over the prizes of a previous one."

Aurelia looked at her XO with mocking eyes.

\*\*\*\*\*

Darcis burst on to the bridge. "I have information that Starfleet has sent a ship to look for us."

"How could you know that?" questioned Sulle.

"The 'how' is not important," he rebuked.

The gul turned his chair, "The cloak won't be ready any time soon." He thought for several seconds, "This changes nothing. We are in the best position we can be in."

The glinn leaned close, "What if the Starfleeters find us?"

Keshet smirked and gestured to his body armor, "Then, I will put one of their communication pins right here."

\*\*\*\*\*

The contorted image of the *Interceptor* class vessel soon appeared normal as it dropped out of warp. Several kilometers beyond, there raged the seemingly endless fire in space; known commonly as "The Badlands."

\*\*\*\*\*

"Yellow alert," commanded Aurelia. Nearly spontaneously, a dull tone sounded and several amber lights appeared around the bridge. "Science, Tactical, start scanning for a Keldon."

A duo of "Ayes" followed.

Aurelia strode to the helm station. She stole a look from bin Nadal as she leaned close to the Tamarian. "Some say I've underestimated you, D'nas." The helm officer turned his head, but said nothing. He obviously wasn't sure what she intended to do. "Here's your chance to prove your abilities. If you

can navigate through the Badlands without one of those plasma funnels hitting our shields, you will have gained my confidence.”

The challenge was something the Tamarian understood all too well. A high stakes test of skill was a common practice in the Tamarian Space Forces. For the first time, since he set foot on this Federation ship, he felt confident. It showed in his speech, “They will not come close to our shields, Captain.”

Aurelia was pleased to see the aplomb in his face. Aurelia knew she had a tendency to be a hard ass, but felt she had to be to get the performance she expected. She had no reason to doubt the ensign’s ability, but if he could do this; she would be genuinely impressed. “Alright, D’nas, set a search pattern and take us in.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Within moments, the *Independence* was engulfed in the ungulating chaos of the plasma storms. It effortlessly parried the torrent of flames as if it were choreographed.

\*\*\*\*\*

After several minutes of observing the talent of the helm officer, Windslow gambled an off the cuff comment, “Where’d you find him? I’ve seen seasoned pilots have more trouble with the Badlands than D’nas.”

As much as Aurelia wanted to make a denigrating retort to her 1<sup>st</sup> officer, she had to concur with his assessment, “I’ll never underestimate a Tamarian again.”

\*\*\*\*\*

*“Captain’s Log: Stardate 53011.1. We’ve been searching the Badlands for the rogue Cardassian ship for 4 hours with no success. I’m very anxious to see how this crew reacts in combat if it should become necessary. It’s 02 hours, I’m tired and I want to take a nap. But to be honest, I don’t trust Windslow to be in command should we find the Keldon.”*

\*\*\*\*\*

Bin Nadal’s eyes had grown heavy. He looked at his scanner display and saw nothing but plasma activity. It didn’t help his grogginess. At least D’nas kept



busy in the pilot's seat. Windslow had the Conn, but Aurelia was only in her ready room. Karim knew there was a problem between the two, but didn't know any more than that.

He allowed his mind to wonder. What could he possibly do with the information Dr. Bashir had told him. ... What little he told him. Bin Nadal didn't know if he was in denial about the whole situation, in shock, or simply a coward. He was collecting information, he reasoned to himself. It's not like Bashir offered any tangible proof. He claimed he had a corpse in the morgue of an operative, but that in and of itself didn't prove anything. A body was a body.

Karim had been distracted with battle drills since their departure from *DS9*, anyway. He had to contact some of his friends in SI...try to confirm what Bashir had said. He could also use SI to inform the Federation Council about the Founder. He had developed several unofficial channels. No one would have to know the report came from him.

There had always been a kind of rivalry between Intelligence and Security ... Several beeps from his console pulled him back to the here and now. Any drowsiness he had evaporated, "Sir, I've got a contact."

Windslow's heart jumped a beat as he stood, "Can you identify?"

Bin Nadal had to compensate for the electromagnetic background produced by the plasma. "Wait a moment... It's a *Keldon*, sir!"

Windslow was brought back to his former glory, "Has it detected us yet?"

The tactical officer manipulated his panel, "No, sir." He then, looked over his shoulder, not wanting to agitate whatever the situation was, but having little choice, "Sir, should I call for the Captain?"

Windslow had the wind taken out of his sails by the question. He realized, however, it was an appropriate one. "I've got it." He appeared to speak to no one, "Captain to the bridge."

Seconds later, the petite form of Captain Aurelia entered from the aft of the room, "Report."

Windslow turned his torso, "Looks like we've found our *Keldon*. It hasn't detected us yet."

Aurelia momentarily rested her hands on the railing behind the command chairs, “Well, it’s about to.” She rounded the railing and assumed her position, “Red alert! D’nas take us into weapon’s range.”

## CHAPTER 7

### **Supplemental Rogue Cardassian Vessel Rakal Cardassian Badlands**

"Milord, a Starfleet cruiser is on an intercept course! They are battle ready." reported Sed Mesec.

Sulle beckoned, "Combat alert?"

Keshet templed his fingers, "Alert the crew, but keep our defenses down. Let the Starfleeters think," he shrugged, "whatever they want to think."

\*\*\*\*\*

Aurelia reminded the crew, "Command's orders are to force that ship to surrender and return it to Cardassia Prime. We don't know why this ship hasn't complied. It's possible it didn't get the surrender command. We'll fire on it as a last resort, understood?" Even as the words flowed from her mouth she anticipated conflict.

Several nods and acknowledgments came from the bridge officers.

Windslow inquired, "They can detect us by now, what are they doing?"

The rejoinder came from tactical, "Shields and weapons are active; hostile is not targeting us, yet. They're holding position."

Kimula advised, "We're in communications range."

The captain stood, crossing her arms, "Alright. Let's hope they are in the mood to talk. Open hailing frequencies."

"Open."

"This is Captain Sintina Aurelia of the Federation Starship *Independence*, we demand that you stay at your current position and stand down. Your government has surrendered and you are required to return to Cardassian space with us. We're sending you the official command now. Please respond."

A tense moment followed on the bridge. Bin Nadal had his finger hovering over the activator of the pulse phasers. Kimula listened to the background static of her earpiece. Windslow sat on the edge of his seat, elbows resting on his knees with his fingers intertwined. D'nas ran through possible evasive maneuvers he could enter in his head. Tang's immediate use had come to an end, which only added to his anxiety. Aurelia held vigil at the center of the room.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Phh," Keshet commented, "I don't recognize that provisional, puppet government."

Sulle inquired, "Should we respond?"

"No," he turned to Mesec, "What type of vessel is that?"

"I'm not sure, Gul. It's not in the databanks."

"Tactical assessment," ordered the first officer.

Mesec took a moment to comply, "It looks like a warship, milord. I've never seen a Federation ship so heavily armed."

Keshet got up and looked over the sed's shoulder to confirm the analysis. He concluded, "We'll have to withdraw." He returned to this command chair, "Prepare for warp once we exit the Badlands."

"Withdraw?" protested Darcis.

The gul tugged at his armor. He informed the observer, "One of the rules of war is not to engage an enemy unless you know you can win."

A look of panic consumed Sulle's face, "Milord, Lajal said the warp core would be off-line while he adjusted some systems for the cloak."

The gul shot daggers at Darcis, as if it was his fault. He quickly returned to more pressing matters. He looked at this first officer, "Tell Lajal to reactivate it immediately!"

"Yes, milord."

The Cardassian gul hated breaking one of the tenants of warfare, but he saw little choice. Keshet turned to his tactical officer, "We can delay our response no longer. Keep in a defensive pattern. Target their weapons."

\*\*\*\*\*

After what seemed like too long a time, Kimula offered, "They did get the message, ma'am."

Then bin Nadal added, "They still haven't locked weap... Now they have! And firing!"

"D'nas, evasive!" yelled Aurelia.

\*\*\*\*\*

The focused energy beam failed to hit its target by only meters due to the seemingly erratic shifting of the *Independence*.

\*\*\*\*\*

Mesec reported, "Negative impact. The hostile is very agile."

Keshet barked, "No excuses. Continue your attack." He pressed a button on his wrist device, "Keshet to engine room."

*"Lajal here"*

"How long for warp?"

*"Momentarily, milord."*

"We need to make our escape, now," the gul commanded.

*"Understood"*

\*\*\*\*\*

Now standing, Windslow quipped, "So much for talking."

"That's a decision they'll regret," boasted Aurelia. "Fire pulse phasers, target their shields!"

With practiced efficiency, bin Nadal executed the order. He confirmed, "Aye, firing."

\*\*\*\*\*

The thrusters on the *Independence* fired. She pointed her devastating arsenal toward the target. In a flurry of energy, blinding blasts erupted from twin cannons on the dorsal side of the ship.

The salvo hit hard against the protective shell around the *Keldon*. Its shields fluctuated from the onslaught. Finally, they could no longer hold back the deluge. The last of the bursts of phaser energy impacted on the hull; leaving a blackened char in their wake.

\*\*\*\*\*

Bin Nadal turned in his chair, probably more than he should have under the circumstances, but his astonishment couldn't be contained. "Their ventral shields are down."

Aurelia felt a swelling of pride, "That should show them they're no going to win."

Bin Nadal turned again to his task at hand, "They're returning fire." A mild earthquake swept through the ship. "Forward shields down to 88%."

Aurelia straddled the patrician between the helm and tactical stations, "D'nas, try to keep us on their ventral side. Karim, silence those disruptors."

\*\*\*\*\*

"Rotate! Rotate!" snapped Keshet. "Don't let them see our wounds!" He addressed the pilot, "Take us out of the plasma storms, full impulse."

"*Gul Keshet*," came Sulle from the engine room, "*the warp drive is ready.*"

"Excellent." He again spoke to the helmsman, "Initiate *precisely* when I tell you."

\*\*\*\*\*

From behind Sintina, Windslow observed, "Captain, they're running. They're only 40,000 kilometers from the edge of the Badlands."

Aurelia looked over her shoulder, "And?"

The first officer's response was cut short with a shout from the tactical station, "Incoming torpedoes!" Instinctively, the bridge crew grabbed whatever happened to be around them to brace for the collision.

Two intense jolts rocked the ship. One coming even before the other was done.

Bin Nadal reported, "Forward shields down to 43%."

"Keep working on those weapons, Karim."

"Aye."

Windslow plopped in his chair quickly analyzing the console next to it. "They're getting close to the edge." Aurelia only turned her head enough to dismiss him. He took a more ominous tone, "Captain, if they go to warp..."

Aurelia waved her hand, "Fine!" She returned her attention to D'nas, "Pursuit course, get us close enough to tractor them, and get us back on their ventral side!"

"Aye," replied the helmsman as he instructed the *Independence* to move at full impulse.

Windslow stood with horror, "No, back us off!"

Not knowing what to do in such a situation, the Tamarian officer looked for guidance in his captain's face.

Coldly and calmly, much to her surprise, Aurelia stated, "Ensign, you will follow my orders. Catch up to them."

"Belay that! Captain, you're putting the ship in unnecessary risk!"

Aurelia again looked at D'nas, "Do it."

\*\*\*\*\*

"They're pursuing," volunteered the combat officer.

Gul Keshet stared at his opponent on the viewer. "Good." He looked at the pilot, "Maximum warp, at my command."

\*\*\*\*\*

Tang agreed with Windslow. He had seen tricks like this before. He could only offer, "The *Keldon* has exited the plasma storms. It's going to warp."

Aurelia argued, "So will we once we..."

The view screen suddenly caught her attention. A tsunami of plasma barreled toward them.

Only Tang and Windslow truly knew the implications of what the others gawked at. As the first officer hurried to his seat, he raised his voice, "All hands brace for imp..."

Aurelia's vision involuntarily moved from the view screen to the ceiling. She became vaguely aware that her body was not in contact with anything. It then occurred to her, it soon would be.

She couldn't decide which to be more concerned about: the physical pain of the impact or the fact she couldn't breath. She saw D'nas and bin Nadal. They seemed to have weathered the impact better than she. The Tamarian laid on the two stairs going down the 'pit', but he raised himself to his elbows. Bin Nadal had some how, or perhaps by chance, stayed in his seat. The air flooded back into her lungs as he attempted to shake off what was no doubt a mild concussion.

The captain rose to her feet, but only with the assistance of her chair, "Report." Before the word had left her mouth she saw at least some of the damage. Kimula lay unconscious behind the XO's chair. It was probably fortunate considering, what appeared to be the Andorian equivalent of, her fibula projected from her leg. Before anyone could respond to her previous question, she added, "Medical teams to the bridge."

Aurelia realized the shaking on the bridge hadn't quite subsided. She assumed it was her legs.



Bin Nadal began, "Shields holding at 8%."

Windslow continued, "Injury reports from all decks; no fatalities, yet."

Tang was next, "I'm detecting at least seven micro-fractures in the hull; several EPS overloads; anti-matter containment in pod 3 failing."

Aurelia hit her compin harder than she intended, "Jinal."

*"Here, captain."*

"You see that containment pod?"

*"Aye, I'm already on it."*

"Good," Aurelia turned to Tang as she noticed Dr. Zo'Kama entering the bridge, tending to Kimula. "What about the *Keldon*, can you track them?"

The lieutenant shook his head, "Not with all this plasma activity."

Aurelia still felt as if she were on a merry-go-round. She wanted answers, but didn't want to admit her ignorance on the bridge. "Stand down from red alert." Her eyes met her first officer's, "Commander, follow me." The two entered the ready room aft of the bridge.

\*\*\*\*\*

Mesec looked at his lord, "They've been damaged. They're not giving chase."

Keshet allowed himself a grin. He boasted to his crew, "The first of many victories against Cardassian oppressors."

Darcis stepped forward and whispered, "Gul Keshet, if you need a new safe harbor, I might be able to provide one."

The gul turned to face him, "Courtesy of our benefactors?"

Darcis smiled wide, "Of course, milord."

\*\*\*\*\*

Sintina was happy to sit in her chair. She clutched her head in an attempt to stop it from spinning. "What the hell just happened, Windslow?"

Windslow took a seat, "It's a Maquis trick. Apparently, the Cardassians picked up on it."

Aurelia's hands moved up her head, annoyance and embarrassment in her face.

Ethan elaborated, "The gul on that ship knew enough that if he initiated warp that close to the storms, the warp field and subspace stresses would have a wake effect on the plasma and they would destroy us for him. I assumed you knew about it." He then leaned closer, intent in his eyes, "As captain, you should have educated yourself about such tactics."

Sintina rose at the provocation, "Don't you presume to tell me what captains should and shouldn't do, *Commander!*" Windslow backed off. Aurelia unnecessarily continued the attack, "The sooner Starfleet finishes that investigation, the sooner you won't be my problem anymore."

Ethan leaned back, "You know about that?" It was more of a statement than a question.

His only rejoinder was a cold stare.

He looked down, "Please don't tell my family. They don't need to know about that."

Sintina wanted to feel guilty about punching below the belt, but didn't, "They'll find out eventually, but you should be the one to tell them." The captain concluded with a bit more sympathy in her voice, "Get out."

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With a sigh, Bajoran medic Girani entered her darkened quarters after a long day of work. She sat at her desk; with one more duty to attend to. She removed a small oval device from a drawer and placed it on the monitor in front of her. A moment later, the screen came to life, her purple and brown uniform reflecting the light; a middle-aged human male of African decent wearing a black tunic filled the display. "Report," he ordered.

"The Doctor found a new friend. A security officer named bin Nadal."

“That is the second time in just over a week I’ve heard that name in a report. We’ll have to keep an eye on him just to make sure he doesn’t put two and two together.”

“What about the Doctor?”

He shook his head, “It’s too soon to act. Be wary, the Old Woman has Listeners everywhere. She’s gotten too close lately and she’s been more aggressive about finding sympathetic officers.” He added, “Besides, the Doctor might still prove to be useful.”

“And the engineer who helped him?”

The older man took on the sound of a father, “Don’t worry so much. No one kills one of our own without a penance being exacted.” He leaned forward, “In our line of work, patience is a virtue.”

**END**