

Star Trek: Independence Eyes Uncovered By Dnoth

"That's how you communicate, isn't it? By citing example... by metaphor! ..."

"Sukat, his eyes uncovered!"

- Picard and Dathon, TNG: "Darmok"

PROLOGUE

Stardate: 54073.7 (27 January 2377)

USS Independence

Entering Orbit of Tama

The *Steamrunner*-class *Independence* glided though the darkness of space. It was dwarfed by their Tamarian escort. It had met them at the border of Tamarian space.

D'nas, the Tamarian exchange officer, informed Captain Aurelia it was a *Lokima on the River*- class dreadnought, the same type of vessel that the *Enterprise-D* encountered nine years ago.

Aurelia had Acting Security Chief Lemipil run a few discreet scans. The ship was impressive and could make short work of the Starfleet cruiser. Its shields were nearly equivalent to the 'old' *Independence*, 835,000 terajoules. The real story lay in its phaser output. Its primary weapon could produce a discharge of 340,000 terawatts, four times Starfleet's, top of the line, type-XII arrays...and the *Indy* was only armed with type-X's. It was no wonder why the Federation was so eager to foster a friendship with these people.

Admiral Borel once told her, if the Dominion War had lasted much longer, the Federation would have signed an alliance with the Elder Council, the decision making body of the Tamarian government. The talks fell apart, once the war ended. The exchange program, however, remained...at the behest of the Elder Council.

Provisional Ensign D'nas was selected for the program over a year ago. He was one of the few Tamarians that could wrap his head around how the 'Rai of Luwani' spoke. He came aboard the 'old' *Independence* at Starbase 375.

Sintina remembered how she felt at "baby sitting" a diplomatic appointee. Little did she know how well the young Tamarian did his job in the pilot's seat. Besides the 'Nechayev Incident'...a term she used to describe how the former Fleet Admiral brought her into the circle of her little resistance group...D'nas had served well.

She stared at the back of the Tamarian's head. A hint of regret formed in her gut. She never really got to know D'nas.

In fact, she didn't know many of her officers or crew very well. There were only 212...205 now, people on her ship. Sintina heard of captains memorizing every face and every name on much larger ships. She never bothered to do that. Her excuse was she didn't want to get to know too many people that she might send to die. It was a half-truth. The other half was she had no interest in getting to know them. She had her core group of friends: Karim and Kimula. That's all she needed.

D'nas turned back, "Captain, they are requesting we assume an orbit 1,030 kilometers above the surface in a geosynchronous orbit of Bashi, the central city."

"Alright, make it happen, Ensign." Aurelia continued, "And D'nas..."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Welcome home."

The Tamarian grinned and re-assumed his station.

CHAPTER 1

Supplemental USS Independence, First Officer's Quarters In Orbit of Tama

Mousiqi-e aseel, ancient Persian music, was softly playing in the background. The smell of sandalwood permeated Karim bin Nadal's quarters.

A few months ago, a rather impressive collection of religious icons from several cultures would have been displayed, but they were all lost when the *Courageous-class Independence* exploded. Studying philosophies was something he started since before he joined Starfleet.

He didn't really claim a religion, however. Most, he thought, did more harm than good. Despite that, he could've used a nice, reassuring world view in that moment.

For the last few minutes, he stared out into the void. *'One good thing about all my possessions begin destroyed – no reminders of Nicole,'* he thought.

Nicole Chase was her name. For over six months, they had a very sensual and very intense relationship. She was attracted to him from the moment they met. ...And it was all a lie. Nicole practically flung herself at him. That should've been his first clue. She turned out to be a Section 31 plant. Her actions led to the deaths of eighty people and the destruction of the *Independence*.

In the process of helping the crew, Karim very nearly killed Nicole. ...He would have killed her, if it weren't for the intervention of another dead friend, Jinal.

He disgusted himself over how easily Nicole was able to dup him. He didn't even suspect her. What he really hated himself for was...he missed her. The comfort of having a warm body to sleep next to, walking with her in the holodeck, her scent. He missed it all.

A single tear ran down his cheek.

The door chime activated. Bin Nadal quickly wiped away the tear, composed himself, and said, "Enter."

It was Kimula sh'Somachanar, the ship's counselor and communications officer. He was always comfortable with the Andorian, but not particularly attracted to her. Maybe it was the antennae. She was also a bit too...open for his tastes. Karim was pleased to see her, none the less. "Kim, what's up?"

With a mock grin, she facetiously said, "You're going to be so exited when you hear this."

He rolled his eyes, "Go on."

"We've been invited to a type of coming home ceremony for D'nas tomorrow. I guess they're really making a big deal out of the exchange program's success." The Andorian added with emphasis, "Time to break out the Dress Whites!"

Karim didn't mind diplomatic ceremonies nearly as much as Kimula or Sintina. He was actually looking forward to learn more about the Tamarian culture, but he decided to give the expected reaction. He unenthusiastically rejoined, "Oh, joy."

"But he had holodeck time last week!" protested Jeff Windslow. His twelve year old face was crunched up frustration.

Susan Windslow defended her six year old son, Paul. "No, Jeff, he didn't. You played your game last week, remember?"

"But I'm ready for the next level!" persisted Jeffery. "Paul just wants to play that stupid Flotter story."

"So, it's my turn!" injected the younger sibling. "And Flotter's not stupid!"

"Yeah, he is."

"Is not!"

"Stop!" blasted Susan in her practiced 'you're-in-trouble-now' voice. "If you boys want to fight about it, no one will have holodeck time this week."

"Mom!"

“But...”

In desperation, the boys looked to their father, who observed the scene from the dinning table. He looked up from his padd, “Don’t look at me. You guys should have seen that coming.”

Jeff stomped off to his room in protest.

Paul stood his ground and began to whimper. In a moment, it would evolve into a full blown fit.

Ethan Windslow, a former captain and the ship’s chief engineer, warned his son, “Don’t start.”

Paul begged with his eyes to his mother. She showed no signs of backing down. So, in pathetic resignation, the boy retreated to his room.

Once her sons were out of ear shot, she joined her husband at the table, “Two holodecks for two-hundred twelve people. It’s tough to book time. I’d hate to waste our reservation.”

“Well,” began Ethan, “it was Paul’s turn.”

Susan had obviously had a long day. Her straight, blond hair was frizzed and her eyes pleaded for sleep. She laid her head on the table and outstretched her arms, “But he always wants me to go with him...and I hate Flotter.”

The admission caused a wide grin on the engineer’s face. He put down the maintenance schedule, held Susan’s hand and offered, “How about I take him?”

Over the last several months, Ethan had slowly reemerged as the person Susan knew before the war. It wasn’t a complete recovery, by any means. But he had been spending less time working and more time at home. He no longer avoided her and the kids. Recently, he actually found excuses to do some of his work in their quarters. The chief engineer did his job, but it was becoming secondary.

While their family was on the *Mendez* and Utopia Planitia, he always put them first. That all changed when they were reunited after the Dominion War. Ethan was distant, even hostile. Susan eventually found out why at his court martial. She didn’t blame him for running during the battle. At heart, he was

a peaceful man. A man not made for war. He was an engineer, husband, and father; not a soldier.

She made eye contact to respond. It was the first time since the war that he made an offer like that. She smiled, "That'd be great, Ethan." Her smile faded, "But I already told them..."

"So," he quipped, "I'll get to be the good guy for once."

She corrected him, "You mean the guy they whine to?"

His smile endured, "I'll take that chance."

Ensign Folana Lemipil, the ship's current security chief, saw Commander 'Runsfast' walk silently down the corridor with his son. She was talking with PO Dorian. The conversation suddenly stopped. Dorian, the operations manager, nodded to Windslow and said, "Commander," by way of greeting. Ethan coolly curtsied back. The Zakdorn security chief, however, avoided eye contact and remained quiet as they passed.

Petty Officer Lewis Dorian was all too aware of the sentiment many held about the commander. He was on ship when Windslow had his court martial. There was a lot of shock among the crew when the truth came out. The former captain, then acting as the *Indy's* XO, was found guilty of desertion, which led directly to the slaughter of over twenty of his former crew. To make matters worse, he tried to lie about it. Windslow was sent to the stockades for four months. His family went with him. A lot of people, including the captain, was disappointed Windslow would remain as their exec. He didn't get any more respect when he stepped down and became the 'new' *Indy's* chief engineer. Once the chief engineer was safely distant, Dorian said to his traveling companion, "I wonder how many people hold a grudge against Commander Windslow on this ship."

"More than you might think," was her response. She added, "And not just on this ship. Word of his cowardice is spreading throughout the fleet. I heard that's why he couldn't get his old job back at Utopia Planitia."

"They didn't want him?"

Forlana came back with, "Would you? ...If I were in command...any command, I wouldn't want him anywhere near my people. He should just resign and be done with it."

"I hardly ever see him," observed Lewis, "whenever I try to find him in engineering, he's usually either in his office or his quarters."

Lemipil puffed, "He's incompetent too."

"No," defended the ops manager, "Things get done that need to get done, but...he doesn't really interact with his engineers much."

"Because he knows how they feel about him," assumed the security officer.

"Possibly."

Lemipil paused for a moment, "Mark my words, the day will come when we need him and he will let us down...I just hope no one dies the next time." She walked off, leaving Dorian behind.

CHAPTER 2

Supplemental USS Independence, Sickbay In Orbit of Tama

Science officer Tang entered sickbay with a wide grin. He searched for Doctor Zo’Kama in the blue-hued medical center. It was rather quiet, but the computer said she was here. He peaked his head into her office. “There you are,” he declared.

The reptilian turned around from a screen mounted in the bulkhead. “Was I supposed to be somewhere else?”

Tang Zian couldn’t tell if she was joking or not. He continued, “There’s a going away party for D’nas at *Jinal’s* at 1900, are you coming?”

She made a grand gesture, “Of course! I would like nothing better than to see off that cute Tamarian.” The tan-scaled Arkonian conspiringly stepped closer and said, “He’s very...inquisitive.”

The word hung in the air. A chill ran down Tang’s spine. He hoped he just had a sick mind and wasn’t assuming something that wasn’t there. At any rate, he was ready to leave. “...Ok, see you later.” He nearly ran into the glass wall that separated the office from the rest of sickbay. Recovering quickly, he made his way to the exit.

Zo’Kama made a ‘*ssih...ssih...ssih*’ sound, the Arkonian version of laughing.

Sintina heard three quick beeps, indicating a visitor to her quarters. She was still in uniform...more or less. She lacked boots and a jacket, but still wore slacks and a red shirt. Her dark hair fell well below her shoulders. The Latino captain grabbed a hair tie and pulled her hair back into a ponytail as she said, “Yeah.”

Kimula, in her full, blue trimmed uniform, entered and quickly made herself comfortable in the captain’s cabin. “Mind if I get a drink?”

Aurelia shrugged, “Nope.” She sat at a nearby couch and rested her black-clad feet on the glass coffee table.

The Andorian returned with a green liquid. She joined Sintina on the couch. "So, are coming to the party?"

"No one told me about a party," semi-mock disappointment was on her face.

Kimula snickered, "Well, it's not a *real* party, since Captain Shelby won't be there..."

"Yeah," began Sintina, "Let's not try to compete with the *Sutherland* on that."

The counselor chuckled. She elaborated, "It's a party for D'nas. Zian is setting it up."

"Oh, I don't know," the captain finally answered, "I'm tempted to let the crew have their fun with this one. Having your CO at a party is a downer."

"Come on," pressed the Andorian. She nudged Sintina, "I hear Pm'ta is breaking out her secret stash."

Aurelia simpered. "All the more reason for me not to go."

Kimula's antennae drooped in defeat, "Alright, be that way." She got up and gulped the last of her drink, "But I'm going to get ready."

"Don't have too much fun," advised Sintina.

A mischievous smile formed on the Andorian's lips, "No such thing."

D'nas looked out the transparent aluminum windows of his quarters. He stared at the turquoise oceans of Tama. It was beautiful...it was home. He learned during his tour that many Starfleet personnel species are away from their homes for years at a time. It was something he couldn't imagine.

The Tamarian truly did enjoy his experience in Starfleet, but it was not something he would choose to do again. The Federations were far too self-centered. He valued the friendships he formed, especially Zian...despite the cultural differences. These people, however, moved quickly and with abandon. They didn't appreciate where they were, because they were always looking to where they were going. He felt...sorrow for them.

In his year with Captain Aurelia, he was involved in seven battles; more than he ever imagined a 'peaceful' people would be in. The façade the Federation showed the Tamarians and the reality were obviously very different. The Council was wise to send him here.

He focused on his reflection. His earth-toned, Sentinel of Tama – Tamarian Space Force – uniform was worn with pride. He had respectfully refused any overtures to dawn the Starfleet garment.

D'nas glanced at the chronometer. It was time to meet Zian at the lounge.

The *Steamrunner* class sported a large main lounge, even bigger than a *Galaxy* class. The *Independence's* lounge was named for a fallen shipmate, Jinal.

Jinal was forced to cause a warp core breach in the *Courageous* class gunship. Through his sacrifice, he saved thirty-eight lives. The official investigation, however, didn't recognize his actions. The admirals in charge of the investigation couldn't accept Captain Aurelia's and Commander bin Nadal's testimony of involvement by a covert Federation agency. So, the late mock-Vulcan engineer went unrecognized...except for the main lounge on the NCC-67091.

Fortunately, the mood in the room was anything but somber. Pm'ta M'tes, the civilian lounge proprietor, was indeed serving more than synthehol. The Caitian barkeep brought out several bottles of 'the good stuff.' She had Bajoran and Yridian ale, Saurian brandy, Terran rum, vodka, amaretto, and Scottish whiskey; along with some legal, natural, psychotropic substances. She even had a small barrel of Klingon Chech'tluth, for those who dared. All of this was, of course, against Starfleet regulations. But rules that prohibit intoxicating substances on ship were rarely enforced, especially since the war. And Captain Aurelia was notorious for looking the other way when it came to the moral of her crew.

Among the crowd, there was a pretty even mix of people in and out of uniform. The ship's unofficial band, *The Impulse Drive*, played something resembling upbeat jazz. The pool and dom-jot tables were taken. A group played darts. Some members of the crew were even beginning to be proficient at D&D.

Kimula felt an immense sense of pleasure at seeing the crew so carefree. It was the first chance for the crew to really unwind. She entered *Jinal's* wearing a simple, but elegant, white dress. It exposed much of her blue skin.

During the three-month journey to Tama, they were still tweaking many of the ship's systems. She heard first hand how Windslow pushed his crew to get the work done. Virak, before she died, was just as tenacious to the security division. Zo'Kama and Tang were really the only laid back department heads, though they still had plenty to do. Then there was the incident with the rogue planet. Eight members of the crew were lost. Add to that, many people...including herself...hadn't fully grieved for the loss of life from the destruction of the 'old' *Indy*. ...But for now, that was the past.

She walked up to Pm'ta, "What do you recommend?"

The Caitian purred slightly, "I've discovered a human drink I think you might like." She began mixing and presented her with a cocktail. "It's called amarretto stone sourr."

A few minutes later, the doctor walked in. She dropped her daughter off at the Windslow's beforehand. Susan assured her they wouldn't be coming to the gathering.

Kimula, working on her second drink, gestured her over. The Andorian asked, "Can I get you a drink, doctor?"

The Arkonian cocked her head, indicating a negative in her culture. She started, "It has no effect on my physiology...except violent diarrhea."

"Oh," said Kimula, obviously wishing she hadn't asked.

Zo'Kama continued, "Besides, I don't need that stuff to act foolish."

"I do," was the Andorian's honest response.

Tang Zian held a pool cue in one hand and patted D'nas' shoulder with the other. "With you gone, who will talk me into going to really strange shoreleave spots?"

"I just hope you begin to see with larger eyes, my friend," said D'nas.

"Oh, I will." After D'nas took his shot, Tang stood closer to the Tamarian, "Did...uh...anything...happen between you and...uh...the doctor?"

D'nas looked up without a hint of shame or jest, "I was curious about Arkonian sexual practices so..."

"Nevermind," spat Zian. "On second thought...I don't want to know."

"Very well," D'nas said and yielded the table to his opponent.

Zian lined up his shot and jibed, "You're a sick man, my friend."

Without missing a beat, the Tamarian commented, "Then perhaps I should see the doctor."

CHAPTER 3

Supplemental Sumcha at the Table (The Elder Council) Bashi, Tama

Rays of sunshine lit the council chambers. The walls were made of adobe and adorned by large paintings of scenes in Tamarian mythology. Seven Children of Tama sat around the heavy wooden table: four females, three males. All were of advanced years.

“Raki’s army waits at the gates! His army large; his fires hot,” warned one of the women, Balah.

“Chenza at court. The court of silence!” started J’tah, another council member, “Picard and Dathon at El-Adrel. The trade...the trade of Itah. Ria and Jiri when the hole was dug.”

A wrinkled male, Soora, added, “D’nas...Hito, his ears listening.”

“Kiteo, his eyes closed!” demanded Balah.

Soora observed, “Mira, once the horse was already gone.”

“Kailash, when it rises,” concluded J’tah. “Temarc. The river Temarc, in winter.” She stood, “The covenant of Tama. Ria...Ria at the crossroads.”

D’nas, Zian, and two junior engineers shared a drink around a table overlooking the vista of space. The engineers, Crewman Jackson and Ensign Berep, sometimes worked with the helmsman and science officer and had developed an association. Berep, a Bolian female was a computer specialist and Jackson, a human male from Vega colony, managed the reclamation systems.

“So,” began Berep, “what will you do now, D’nas?”

He shrugged, “It will be the decision of the Sentinel Council.” The exchange officer added, “Though, I hope to be assigned to an explorer ship.”

"I really hope Starfleet will let us do some exploring while we're out here," commented Tang.

"There is a void region between, what you call, the Orion Cygnus and Perseus arms about 20 light years from here," explained D'nas. "It takes some time to transverse."

"So there isn't much to see, is what you're saying?" surmised Jackson.

"Not at all," replied the Tamarian, "There are many beautiful places to go; many cultures to see."

"Do Tamarians have something comparable to the Prime Directive?" asked Tang.

He unnaturally made a 'so-so' gesture. "We do not hide ourselves from less advanced civilizations as you do. We sometimes offer them assistance and technology that we feel they are responsible enough to have. But we do not impose ourselves on them either."

"Holy crap," came from Zian. He pointed across the room. The others turned. Counselor Kimula was sitting on Petty Officer Cheveyo Runningfox's lap. She was sensually pushing her breasts near his face.

Jackson laughed out loud, "Looks like Runningfox is going to have a good time tonight!"

Berep chuckled, "So that's what she's like when she drinks."

"For awhile, she was interested in Jinal," remembered the science officer.

D'nas assumed, "Apparently, she's stopped mourning."

"No," corrected Tang, "she's drunk."

Karim bin Nadal gave a semi-concerned look as he observed the fondling of his Andorian friend from across the large recreational room. He recently joined a group around the dom-jot table. Among his company was Ensign Lemipil. He leaned over to the acting security chief, "She's going to regret that in the morning."

The Zakdorn jested back, "I don't think Runningfox will."

The first officer shifted to 'shop talk', "I hope you don't feel...bitter about me asking for a new security chief, Ensign."

She said genuinely, "Actually sir, I'm relieved. I'm the first one to admit, I'm not ready to be a division head. I'm just thankful that Chief Hatora has been helping me out."

Karim scanned the crowd, "Where is the chief anyway?"

Hatora of J'bel sometimes felt like the grandfather of the boat, not the chief of it. He knew about the party, but had no desire to attend. That was for young people or idiots...often the same thing. He walked casually around the commons of Starfleet Academy. It wasn't the real thing, of course. His daughter, Latora, often sent him holographic messages. She knew how much he enjoyed his time on Earth...and how proud he was that she made it to the academy.

He smiled as a recreation of his daughter walked toward him. It would be a one-way conversation; but he enjoyed it, none the less. Latora sat on a nearby stone bench. Her hair was long and black. Her eyes were artificially colored violet, a choice he didn't endorse. She wore the gray cadet uniform with gold shoulders. Latora was a sophomore.

Hatora joined her and said, "Hello, Latora," which began the program.

The hologram of his daughter looked at him and smiled, "Hello, father. I visited the Night Owl, like you recommended. You're right, it a great place to get away and study.

My roommate is driving me crazy. She's a Starfleet brat, but her parents are both command officers. She has such a sense of entitlement. She doesn't even study because she expects her parents to pull in favors for her to pass. It's so annoying."

The Chief of the Boat listened with a grin as his daughter relayed her hopes and complaints.

Folana Lemipil, prompted by alcohol, asked a fateful question, "Commander bin Nadal, what's your opinion of our chief engineer?"

A curious look crossed Karim's face, "What do you mean?"

"Well," she elaborated, "as his superior, are you...concerned at all."

He looked at the carpet for a long moment. "I see," he said. Karim made a decision. He wasn't sure if it was appropriate or not, but he followed through. "There was a time when I wanted him off the ship and out of the uniform. I felt just like you do now. What he did was...inexcusable. Leaving people behind is a cardinal sin in Starfleet."

She injected, "So you agree that 'Runsfast' is a coward!" In her enthusiasm, her voice carried.

A few meters away, Commander Zo'Kama overheard the outburst.

"You're talking about a senior officer, Ensign," chided the XO.

"Sorry sir, but I don't feel comfortable..."

His tone became even, "I understand where you're coming from, but..."

A disembodied voice interrupted, "*Commander bin Nadal, could you report to the bridge, please. The Tamarians are requesting the number of personnel participating in tomorrow's ceremony.*"

Karim tapped his compin, "Alright, bridge. I'll be there in a minute." He returned to Lemipil, "We'll pick this up later."

She timidly nodded, "Aye sir."

The first officer walked to the exit and left. Not a second passed after the door shut when Zo'Kama addressed the security chief.

"What did you call Commander Windslow?"

The ensign, too inebriated to sense the reptilian's animosity, answered, "'Runsfast'...since he ran so quickly from..."

The Arkonian could hear no more. Out of instinct, Zo’Kama insulted the young Zakdorn in the traditional Arkonian way. Her mouth opened and a short jet of liquid squirted out. The substance landed all over Lemipil’s face. The saliva wasn’t harmful, in fact, it had healing properties.

Folana wiped at her face in disgust, “What is this!”

“You will not insult Ethan Windslow or his family!” demanded Zo’Kama.

The liquid courage in Lemipil’s veins caused her discretion to fail. Her wet, gooey face morphed into a picture of rage. The Zakdorn’s fist connected with the doctor’s cheek. The tough scales scuffed up Folana’s knuckles.

The entire room froze as Zo’Kama fell to the deck. No one came to the doctor’s defense. No one aided the Zakdorn, either. Everyone was in shock.

The Arkonian slowly returned to her feet and glared at Lemipil.

The security officer regained her senses too late. She put up her open hands, “Doctor, I’m sorry. I...”

A scaled fist made a quick, right jab that rocked the ensign’s face. She stumbled back and shook it off. Folana’s logic was short lived. She rushed back at Zo’Kama. The two females punched, kicked, and scratched each other for several seconds before people began to realize this shouldn’t be happening.

Cheveyo and Kimula didn’t notice the brawl, as they were necking.

D’nas went to restrain the doctor. Berep and Tang held Lemipil’s arms. The combatants were pulled away, though; they still attempted to kick each other.

Jackson panicked. He found his combadge and uttered, “Captain Aurelia, there’s a problem in *Jinal’s*”

CHAPTER 4

Supplemental USS Independence, Deck Five In Orbit of Tama

Sintina strode down the corridor with a groggy face. Her boots were back on, but not her jacket. She was more annoyed at being disturbed than the conflict itself...she wouldn't let anyone else know that, of course.

The door to the lounge parted for the captain. Needless to say, the party had broken up by then. Most people, including Runningfox and Kimula, had left. Zo'Kama and Folana were still restrained, though calmer. Everyone looked at Sintina like they were teenagers caught with pornography.

Aurelia pointed to the doctor, "You," then Lemipil, "and you. Follow me."

The two agitators grimaced and reluctantly left with the captain.

The trio walked in silence. Aurelia didn't look back at them. Folana was certain the captain was leading them to the brig. Aurelia, however, didn't take the turn to the turbolift. Neither Zo'Kama or Lemipil spoke, though; it was obvious both had a question.

Aurelia paused at the entrance to the gymnasium. She opened the hatch and gestured the two to go in. She joined them and the door slid shut. The brawlers stood expectantly. The captain showed no emotion and paced a bit.

After a few anxious moments, Aurelia began, "I could give you both a reprimand." Her voice rose an octave, "Hell, by all rights, I could charge you both with striking an officer and conduct unbecoming."

The security officer stood at perfect 'attention.' The Arkonian was more lax. Wisely, they said nothing.

"But I'm not going to do that."

They relaxed a bit.

"You two want to fight," Sintina continued, "fine. This is the place to do it. Fight."

Folana and Zo’Kama shared a perplexed glance. The Zakdorn regarded Aurelia, “Ma’am?”

“Fight,” she repeated.

“You can’t be serious,” said the doctor.

Aurelia’s response was deadpan, “Yes, I am.”

Lemipil stepped forward and began to explain, “I’m sorry, ma’am. It was my fault...”

“Shut up,” stated Aurelia.

The coarse comment took the two by surprise.

The captain continued, “Save your excuses. I don’t know what it’s about and I don’t care. I can’t make you get along and I won’t try.” She moved forward, pointed at them both, and said with resolve, “But I warn you now, it had best not get in the way of your duties.” She turned for the door, “Computer, once I leave, secure the gym.”

“Acknowledged,” responded the computer.

“You’re just going to lock us in here?” asked the doctor.

Sintina nodded and pointed to a distant corner, “The sparring equipment is in that locker. I work out in the morning at 0600. I’ll get you out then.” Without another word, the captain left.

Lemipil held her head. Her buzz was totally gone. She looked over at the doctor.

Zo’Kama half-mocked, “Do you prefer the red gloves or the black?”

Captain Aurelia found herself, once again, at *Jinal’s*. It was all but empty. To his credit, Crewman Jackson was helping Pm’ta clean up. She walked up to him, “Crewman.”

He snapped to attention, “Yes ma’am.”

Her eyes were half open, "The next time a fight breaks out, don't call me. Solve problems at the lowest level. That's what the chain of command is for." She didn't wait for a response and promptly returned to her quarters.

Cheveyo and Kimula entered the lieutenant's darkened quarters. The caresses started...continued as soon as the hatch shut. The Pueblo passionately kissed the nape of the Andorian's neck. She moaned softly in pleasure.

Deep in the security specialist's mind, he knew she was compromised. The toxins in his system, however, pushed that fact to the back burner. He said in between kisses, "I've never... been with...an Andorian before."

She grabbed the sides of his head, "There's a first time for everything."

The kissing moved lower and lower, finally reaching her breasts. He looked up, "Remember that thing you like to do that you told me about at *Jinal's*? I'm up for it."

At the mention of her late friend, the inebriated counselor's mood switched. "Jinal," she said. Tears formed, "Gods, I miss Jinal."

It took a few moments for the petty officer to realize his companion was no longer receptive.

She pushed him away, "Let me tell you about my friend, Jinal. I don't think you ever met him. He was so shy. I wished it wasn't so shy."

He examined her in confusion. "Huh?"

Her legs slowly failed and she slumped to the deck. "I miss him," she sobbed.

Runningfox, in his altered state, only stared at her. It didn't take long for her sobs to evolve into snores. He murmured to himself, "Well, hell." Dejected, he exited Kimula's quarters.

On deck three, Tang and D'nas walked abreast of each other down the corridor. The ship's lighting had gone dim, indicating the late hour.

"So much for your going away party," commented the Asian.

"It's alright," D'nas rejoined, "it was an experience."

Zian chuckled, "That it was."

They parted ways to their respective rooms.

"Good night, D'nas."

"May your soul rest well, Zian."

CHAPTER 5

Stardate: 54074.6 (28 January 2377) USS Independence, Gymnasium In Orbit of Tama

The double doors of the gym parted. Captain Aurelia looked rested...almost chipper, in fact. She wore a sports bra and shorts. Her petite, mocha body was toned and amorous. Secretly, the captain enjoyed it when some of the crew ogled her when she worked out. She examined the facilities. Lemipil and Zo’Kama slept on the deck on opposite sides of the room. Sintina grinned mischievously and pressed on a computer terminal inlaid in the bulkhead. “Computer,” she began in a hushed tone, “conduct a five second test of the audio fire alarm in the gymnasium. Authorization: Aurelia gamma-eight-one-five.”

Immediately, an ear piercing klaxon reverberated throughout the room. Both the doctor and security officer jumped up in a daze. Aurelia observed with a smirk. It took a moment, but the brawlers found the captain and became aware of the prank.

Once the alarm ended, the captain stated in an innocent voice, “Good morning!”

Lemipil and Zo’Kama weren’t as enthusiastic. They drudged closer. It was then, Sintina noticed the Zakdorn’s black eye and the dried blood from the Arkonian’s lip.

Aurelia addressed them without malice. “From now on, keep it in the gym, understood?”

Two meek, “Yes ma’am’s,” was the response.

She gestured to the exit, “Now get out of here and get cleaned up. We beam down to the surface at 1100 hours.”

Without acknowledging each other’s presence, the two left.

The door shut behind the captain. She shook her head with mild amusement. Sintina walked toward the equipment, “Computer, begin Aurelia workout playlist.”

Da-da-da.

"Come in," called Susan Windslow as she rose from the breakfast table. The two boys, Ethan, and an adolescent Arkonian continued to eat and small talk. She smiled wide when the entrance revealed Doctor Zo'Kama.

The Arkonian began, "Thank you for watching Zo'Kala. I apologize for the sudden change of plan."

Susan approached her, "That's fine. 'Kala was the perfect guest. ...Well, once we got her warm." She saw the line of blood coming from the doctor's mouth. "What happened?"

"I was forced to defend your family's honor," she proudly stated.

By now, everyone was focused on the conversation.

"What are you talking about?" questioned Susan.

The doctor's eyes met Ethan's.

"Three crewmembers still haven't reported for duty," elaborated Karim. He sat across Aurelia in her ready room. "...including Kim." He tapped his padd, "But Runningfox did."

"What does that have to do with her?"

He tipped an eyebrow, "Oh...nothing." The first officer changed the subject, "So I heard there was a fight last night."

Sintina chuckled, "Yeah, and Crewman Jackson called me about it."

"Sorry about that ma'am," he said, "I'll ask Chief Hatora to instill certain, unwritten protocols on the lower ranks."

She waved it off, "It's a rookie mistake."

Bin Nadal stood, "If there's nothing else, I'm going to embarrass Kimula."

“By all means,” the captain jested.

As the door parted, Karim nearly ran into Commander Windslow.

“Excuse me, sir,” offered the chief engineer.

The Persian quickly recovered, “Not a problem.” He moved off.

“Captain?” requested Windslow.

She waved him in. The door closed.

“You need something, Commander?” Aurelia started.

The Oregon native took an ‘at ease’ stance. “Ma’am, it has come to my attention that I’ve become a divisive figure among the crew.”

She huffed, “That’s not news, Windslow.”

“Still,” he persisted, “it’s never come to blows before.”

Aurelia assumed that was the reason for Lemipil’s and Zo’Kama’s confrontation. It was no secret how the young ensign, and several others, felt about the disgraced former captain. She shrugged, “Are you offering a suggestion?”

Ethan glanced down for a moment. He had no course of action for her. There were always people onboard that didn’t care for someone else. It was a fact of life on a starship. He had dealt with it himself when he commanded the *Bismarck*.

There was only so much a captain could do. Still, he felt...guilty. This situation involved intense emotions. Once, a crewmember even called him a traitor to his face. He didn’t report it. ...Maybe he was getting exactly what he deserved. Finally, he looked up, “No ma’am. I don’t have any specific recommendation. I just...I want you to know, I regret making your job more difficult.”

Sintina leaned back and swiveled in her chair slightly. A small smile crossed her face. Her respect for man was upped a few notches. She leaned forward and rested her arms on the desk, “You let me worry about that, Commander.”

"Yes ma'am."

"You're dismissed."

"Yes ma'am." He turned to leave.

Sintina added, "Commander, you'll have the bridge when we beam down."

He respectfully curtsied, "Aye ma'am."

Lieutenant Commander bin Nadal pressed the enunciator for the fourth time. He gave up, "Computer, open Lieutenant Kimula's door. Authorization: bin Nadal..."

Suddenly, the hatch slid open. Kimula stood near it and held her head. "Shut that damn noise off," she pleaded.

He smirked at the sight of the hung over Andorian. "It's 0945."

"Oh no," she retreated back into the room.

Karim added before he left, "Remember, Dress Whites for the ceremony."

"Oh gods," he heard from Kimula before the door shut.

About an hour later, Captain Aurelia entered transporter room one. She observed her senior officers loitering. When they noticed her presence, they made their way to the dais. All wore the white and blue tops with black slacks. The formal uniforms were trimmed in gold. On her uniform, the blue portion of was white, denoting her status as captain.

Aurelia had mixed feelings as she looked upon them. Ensign Lemipil, minus the black eye, was rigid. Luckily, Zo'Kama wasn't in attendance. Tang looked nervous...or excited...maybe he just had to pee. D'nas was adorned in a very formal, earth-toned long coat; apparently, the Tamarian version of the dress uniform. He looked serene, as he usually did. Kimula's skin was a deeper

blue than normal. When Sintina made eye contact with her, she offered a weak grin. Karim greeted the captain.

“Thank god for the wonders of modern medical technology,” he whispered.

Sintina rolled her eyes and commented, “Have I ever told you how much I hate diplomatic affairs?”

He grinned, “You might have mentioned it a few times.”

She sighed and joined the others, “Let’s do this. Energize.”

EPILOGUE

Stardate: 54094.1 (4 February 2377)

USS Independence

En route back to Federation Space

"Captain's log; supplemental. After spending a week on the Tamarian homeworld, Starfleet is sending us to the Klingon-Gorn border area. Tang, and several others, were disappointed that Command didn't let us off the leash for awhile. I'm not surprised, though, exploring is still low on Starfleet's list of priorities.

On the upside, the diplomatic part of the visit went pretty well. I didn't piss anyone off and my crew behaved themselves...for once. There is some residual tension from the confrontation between Zo'Kama and Lemipil...I have a feeling, that's going to be an ongoing issue.

For now, however, we're back on the road. It will take awhile to get there, but we're scheduled to dock at Starbase 90 for crew replacements and supplies in early May."

A wall of cool air hit Karim as the door to Counselor Kimula's office opened. Coming from an ice world, she often kept it cool. An entire wall was fitted with a recirculating waterfall. The Andorian loved the sound of the cascading water. She was forced to get a new one when the 'old' *Indy* exploded. Blues, greens, and purples filled the room.

Kimula smiled wide, "Hello, Karim. I was surprised when you made an appointment."

"Well," he began as the hatch hissed shut, "I just felt like talking." He plopped on the couch.

She placed a padd on a nearby end table, giving him her complete attention. "You can talk to me about whatever you want. You know that."

Karim joshed, "I heard a story from young Crewman Runningox."

The Andorian turned a dark blue, "I ah...don't really recall much."

He grinned, "I know. But it made me wonder, who does the counselor talk to when she needs to vent?"

She looked down, "I guess I'm a bit of a martyr when it comes to that."

He touched her knee, "If you need to talk..."

Kimula nodded and her eyes watered. She placed her hand on his, "Ok...I will. But not right now, ok?"

"Fair enough."

The room was silent for a few moments.

Karim decided to put Kimula back into her more traditional...and more comfortable role. "I was thinking about Nicole, again."

Kimula hesitated. She knew the hatred and guilt Karim felt. She suspected that he believed he was responsible for the destruction of the *Independence* and the deaths of eighty people. She had tried to persuade him otherwise, but he merely placated her.

The first officer continued, "I wonder who killed her if it wasn't us. Nechayev swears her group had nothing to do with it."

"There was no evidence of foul play aboard the *Gibraltar*," she remembered.

Bin Nadal sighed, "To quote a great Terran scientist, 'God doesn't roll dice.'"

"What?"

"There's no such thing as coincidence." His gaze wondered, "Section 31 must have had her eliminated."

The Andorian grimaced as the secret organization was mentioned. She never really bought into the idea of it. The deaths of so many friends...Jinal's death, however, turned her into a reluctant believer. "It's so frustrating. We don't even know who those people are. It's like they don't even exist."

"Oh they exist, alright," Karim countered. "Nechayev is in the process of identifying their operatives. She and Uhura have been trying to figure the hierarchy for years."

“And then what?”

The question hit Karim like a ton of bricks. He had never considered the next step. How could Section 31 possibly be purged from the government? They were so entrenched. Where did they end and the Federation begin? He met her eyes, “I don’t know.”

D’nas walked into the candle lit chamber. The great images of Tamarian mythology stared back at him. He approached the seven Elders. The former exchange officer removed the blade from its sheath. The seven each produced their own Betoken of Uzani. The knives were held high in the air for a moment. Then, each Tamarian kissed the side of the blade, and returned it to their sheaths.

Balah, one of the old women, started, “Temba, his arms wide. Kira at Bashi. *(Give us your story.)*”

He nodded and said, “Ria...the trade of Itah. Sokath, his eyes uncovered. Kira at Bashi. Opii, when she wrote. The kingdom of Soma. Morden and his shadow. When Nek saw the temple. As Rafa’s arrow flew. *(Via the exchange program with the Federation, I learned great things. The story the Federation gave us about them is not entirely true. Most are honorable people, but there is a hidden force at work. We should gather more intelligence. I know some people we can trust.)*”

END