

Star Trek: Independence Retributions

By Dnoth

*At least, there may be something worthwhile in disturbing God's peace, "Which,
if not victory, is yet revenge."
~ John Milton, Paradise Lost*

PROLOGUE

Stardate 52863.4 (12 November 2375)
USS Bismarck Relief Mission
Cardassian Colony Pentath III

The dirt in his mouth was completely devoid of moisture. It began to soak up what little saliva he had.

Lieutenant Jason Wells found himself face down on the ground, though, he wasn't entirely sure how he got there. He pushed himself up and spat out the muck. His ears were ringing. The dust from the explosion still hadn't settled.

Wells' mind centered itself. His security training kicked in. He was still in the open. The dust...he could use the dust as cover. Still deaf, Jason managed to get to his feet and stumble to the nearest ally way. The disruptor fire started as he crouched down.

As he brought his phaser rifle to the ready, he assessed the situation. Most of the dust had settled. He could see what was left of Helen Stuttgart, the *Bismarck's* doctor, scattered in the dirt. Captain Windslow was scrambling to the chief of security's position. Only a few meters away was one the medical techs from his ship. She was a Napean; that meant it was Petty Officer Nola. He fired a few bolts of covering fire before he raced to her.

'Was she alive? No time to check now.' Wells grabbed under her arms and dragged her to the relative safety of the ally. Amazingly, he made it without being shot. Only then did he notice more of the away team countering the

ambush as best they could. He saw it was a losing battle. Jason joined in the effort.

His compin chirped, *'Thank god,'* he thought. The voice of the first officer followed, "*Bismarck* to away team, we've detected some type of inhibitor in your area. It's blocking transporters, sensors, and your combadges aren't powerful enough to penetrate the field. Move 1.3 kilometers to the west to get out from under it."

The transmission must have been enough to wake Nola; Jason could hear her coughing.

Everyone should have heard the message, but there was no where to go. Some of the team members where falling back to the west, but most were killed as they moved. The western most people were the captain and Security Chief Caplin.

Wells looked over to his right, where Caplin was. He had to blink to make sure his eyes weren't deceiving him.

A voice from behind startled him, but he realized it was Nola before he could point his rifle at her. "What's the captain doing?"

"That son of a bitch," Wells wasn't sure if he said out loud or not.

The loud rumbling from above distracted him. He looked up in time to see adobe from the building next to him falling. Wells made a spontaneous action to shield Nola from the debris before the impact knocked him unconscious.

CHAPTER 1

Stardate: 53039.2 (15 January 2376)

USS Independence

Holding Station near Cardassia Prime

The star of the Cardassia System seemed to round Cardassia Prime, spilling its light onto the hull of the slim profile of the *Interceptor* class ship.

The space around the planet seemed far less crowded. No Klingon Defense Force vessels could be seen. Only a few Klingon cargo ships lingered.

"Captain's Log: Stardate 53039.2. We're still orbiting Cardassia Prime. The fleet has been maintaining this tachyon grid for 6 days now. It was originally put in place to ensure no Romulan vessels could take any equipment from the surface. Now with the Klingons withdrawing, we're ensuring they don't leave with any more than they're supposed to.

I've been keeping an eye on the Federation vessel we found the items on, and so far, no action or investigation has started. Everyone outside of my command crew assumes the Romulans were pressured by the Klingons and beamed those items back to the surface."

Once again, the captain leaned forward behind her desk in the ready room.

"Why don't you just go to the holodeck and have a masseuse work on you?"

Aurelia took a deep breath as she soaked in the sensation of the EMH MkIV's nimble fingers rubbing a knot out of her lower neck. "The holodecks should be for the crew, not the senior officers."

What appeared to be a Lurilian female cocked her head in disapproval, "But monopolizing an essential medical asset is just fine?"

Aurelia's head was down and her eyes closed as she said, "They still haven't programmed humility in to the EMH, have they?"

The Lurilian's face grew more annoyed than it already looked. She made a point with her elbow and harshly scoured the captain's upper back.

"Ahh!" Sintina whirled around, "You did that on purpose!"

The EMH only responded with an innocent smile.

Sintina didn't need this. One of her few luxuries's was now turning on her. It seemed to be her luck.

Ever since she started this command, it has been one problem after another. Aurelia failed in her first mission to bring back that *Keldon*. Most of the admirals in the region seem to think she's incompetent. Starfleet gave her a problem child of a first officer, and to top it off, her EMH has decided to mutiny.

Aurelia's thoughts focused back on the hologram, "Computer, end EMH program."

The doctor smiled widely, "Thank you." Then she dissolved into nothingness.

'Damn it. We're just sitting here doing nothing. I can't get my massage. Can this day get any worse?'

A series of beeps sounded, followed by voice of Junior Lieutenant Kimula, the *Independence's* counselor and communications officer. "Incoming message, captain. It's Admiral Ross."

Aurelia's hands found her temples. She rubbed them in a circular motion. She did this for several seconds; long enough to concern Kimula.

The counselor's voice came again, "Captain?"

Aurelia straightened up, "Acknowledged. Patch him through."

The familiar face of the human admiral encompassed the small screen on the captain's desk.

Ross began the conversation, "Captain, I've heard about your good work with that incident about a week ago."

Aurelia brightened up a little bit. It was nice to finally get some praise. Admiral Whatley hadn't even spoken to her since the fighters beamed the equipment back to the surface from a Starfleet transport ship. "Thank you,

sir.” She added hesitantly but purposely, “But I’m still confused as to how the equipment got on that ship.”

The admiral offered, “Well, the investigation is now in the hands of Vice Admiral Boral of Starfleet Security. You handled that situation very tactfully, Captain. It could have tarnished the Federation had the Romulans been given the time to accuse us, but they couldn’t thanks to you.”

The mention of Boral gave a small amount of comfort to her. He was the one who informed her that some of the top brass, including Ross she suspected, had concerns regarding her captaincy. Hopefully, the Andorian admiral would get to the bottom of this.

Sintina decided to fish for information with the question, “So are you convinced the Romulans beamed those items to our ships to implicate us, sir?”

William Ross raised his hands up for a moment in a modified shrug. “Well, captain, if it walks like a duck and talks like a duck...”

Aurelia sat back and tried to look satisfied with his riposte.

Ross utilized the pause to change the topic, “At any rate, it’s time for the *Independence* to move on.”

Aurelia inquired, “What about the tachyon grid?” She immediately regretted the question; as she was just glad to be getting a new assignment.

“The crisis seems to have faded,” said the admiral. “The Klingons weren’t happy about leaving, but most of them are gone. Sub-Admiral Danclus and Admiral Whatley have been discussing it. Whatley told me this morning, the grid will come down in a few hours.”

“What are our orders, sir?”

“I need you to go to the Lazon system to put a prison camp out of business.”

CHAPTER 2

Supplemental USS Independence, First Officer's Office Holding Station near Cardassia Prime

Commander Ethan Windslow had a few minutes before the mission briefing. He had just got done reviewing the material Starfleet had sent Aurelia. Now, he found himself staring at his barren office on deck two.

Ethan made it a habit of keeping busy in the last few months; lest he start thinking about the past ... or the future. The memory of his life before the war seemed like someone else's life.

His career had been a rather cushy one, as he recalled: serving on a Starbase, then a shipyard. The only real time of major stress was when he was on the *Mendez* as first officer when the 2nd Borg attack of Earth took place. With the exception of that, it was a great time.

He had married Susan while on *Starbase 343*, after courting her on and off for twelve years. They meant during his second year at the academy. After dating for nearly a year, both were ready for something different. The relationship evolved into a unique friendship; each giving objective opinions of their respective relationships and sharing details of sexual encounters. It was obviously a very candid fellowship. Once Ethan graduated, he made it a point to keep in contact with her, but that only lasted for a few months. They eventually moved down their own paths without each other's counsel.

Starbases were much more than military outposts, they were places of interstellar commerce. Between support personnel, families, and traders; there were almost as many civilians on Starbases as Starfleet. Since *343* was a city in space, it took Ethan and Susan nearly 3 months before they ran into each other. They immediately fell back into their relationship. Six months later, Susan proposed.

Life after that, was a joy for Ethan. He and Susan were transferred to *Utopia Planitia*. In 2364, their first son, Jeffery, was born. He could remember the anticipation he felt to get off shift and play with Jeff. Back then, he considered himself a father first, a husband second, and a Starfleet officer a very distant third.

Windslow kept those priorities when he was assigned back aboard ship for the first time in over a decade. On the *Mendez*, Paul was born, Susan remained his steadfast companion, and his career was on track. The *Mendez*, however, was damaged beyond repair when the Borg cube exploded. Luckily, most of the crew survived.

Then came the war. The experience with the Borg had rattled Ethan. The first thing he did when he received the *Bismarck* was to keep his family off it. He knew Susan would object, so he pretended as if he didn't have a choice. It was the first of many lies.

Ethan would never know how many people he had killed by giving the command, "fire." Nearly every night, his eyes welled up as he contemplated his sins. Experiencing the hell of war from the comfort of his own bridge was bad enough ... but then came Pentath III.

Windslow was grateful when he glanced at the chronometer. It was time.

D'nas was momentarily blinded as the sparks he inadvertently caused filled his vision.

"Tolorn when his horse fell!" the Tamarian's voice carried in the Jefferies tube.

Several meters away, in a nearby junction, Jinal inquired, "What happened?"

D'nas shifted his body in a rather unnatural position so he could see the chief engineer. There was obvious disappointment in his face, "The Tamarian modifications will not work with this power system."

"And the sparks?"

The despondency on the Tamarian's face grew, "Sir, I fear I have overloaded this relay."

Though it was obvious, Jinal couldn't help his curiosity, "And what does 'Tolorn when his horse fell' mean?"

"I apologize for my profanity."

The Vulcan masquerader cocked an eyebrow, "Profanity?"

D'nas continued to look down the tunnel, "Yes, it is something one says out of frustration when one lacks the proper tools to achieve a goal."

Jinal nodded with only a hint of a smile, "I understand. Stay here and remove the relay. I will be back with a replacement in a few moments."

"Yes, sir."

The engineer began to move away, but paused and returned to the mouth of the tube, "Thank you for the effort, D'nas."

The exchange officer smiled humbly, "You're welcome, sir."

The Romulan tapped on a panel which opened the barrier to an adjoining tube. He crawled in head first and began to make his way back to main engineering. Jinal's arms and legs shifted from under him slightly. He knew immediately what it was; the ship's impulse engines engaged. Seconds later, his compin chimed, preceding Commander Windslow's voice, "Senior officers to the briefing room."

The port entrance of the briefing room slid open. Jinal found everyone already sitting in their chairs. They all turned toward him as he entered.

A wave of anxiety washed over him. He noticed the doctor in the room as well. *'Had she told them? My god, what if she told them?'*

Aurelia spoke up, "What, were you stuck in a hole?"

Jinal's eyes shifted, not knowing how to respond. *'Stuck in a hole?'* The captain didn't seem angry. The meaning of the statement finally sunk in. Zo'Kama had not broken their confidence. He quickly thought of an appropriate response, "Not a totally inaccurate description."

The captain dismissed her engineer's tardiness, "Tell me later. We've just received a new mission from Starfleet." She gestured to Windslow, "Commander."

Ethan rose from his chair and activated the large display built into the bulkhead. It showed the ship's course from Cardassia Prime to their destination.

The commander began, "Once we are clear of the Cardassian system, we're heading for Lazon II." He tapped on the screen to zoom in on the Lazon star system. "During the occupation of Bajor, the Cardassians started using the planet as a forced labor camp. They continued that practice during the Dominion War." Windslow put his hands on the long, curved table. He managed to look into the eyes of everyone but the captain as he said, "We need to go there and shut the place down."

Lieutenant Commander bin Nadal asked, "Is Starfleet expecting trouble? He looked to Sintina, "Why send a battleship? The war's over."

The Arkonian doctor chimed in before a response could come, "Have the guards been ordered to stand down yet?"

Windslow conceded, "Well, that's the problem. We don't know."

Aurelia elaborated, "The Cardassian government claims they sent the surrender order to the camp, but since then, there has been no contact from Lazon II."

Jinal inquired, "So it wasn't confirmed the camp got the message?"

"No," came from Windslow.

The security chief reasoned, "So worst case scenario: We have to forcefully liberate the prisoners from the camp."

Zo'Kama added, "Even in the best case scenario, we are going to have mentally and physically injured people."

Kimula joined in, "How many people are we talking about here?"

"The Cardassians said there were just over 5,000 detainees," offered the captain.

Bin Nadal was the first to voice the concern many in the room had, "There is no way we can hold that many people."

The first officer addressed the observation, "Which is why Starfleet has chartered a civilian transport."

The Arkonian moved her head, "Civilian?"

"Starfleet troop transports are scarce these days," said Windslow.

Kimula rocked in her chair a little, "Considering what these people have been through, it's the least Starfleet could do."

Aurelia rested her elbows on the table, interlocking her fingers, "We'll rendezvous with the transport on the way."

Jinal was about to ask something when the com activated. It was Chief Science Officer Tang Zian, who was currently in charge of the bridge, "Captain, we've cleared the Kuiper belt of the star system."

The captain manipulated a padd and said, "Set a course for the following coordinates and engage at maximum warp."

"Aye, ma'am."

CHAPTER 3

Stardate 53058.7 (22 January 2376)

USS Independence

In orbit of Lazon II

Abreast of the *Interceptor* class vessel was the much larger civilian cruiser *Starry Night*.

Captain Aurelia moved to the aft science station on the bridge. "Lieutenant Tang, scan the planet."

Tang Zian anticipated the order and had already begun. A few moments passed as the junior lieutenant wiped his hands across the flat console. "I'm reading 4,715 humanoid life signs: 2,290 Humans, 1,793 Bajorans, and several other species." His eyebrows crunched up, "That's odd."

Windslow, who was already standing, asked, "What's that?"

Tang swiveled his seat, "I'm not reading any Cardassians...or Vorta, or Jem'hadar for that matter."

Bin Nadal looked back from the tactical station, "It could be a trap. They could have detected us when we entered the system."

The first officer added, "They could be shrouding themselves."

"That wouldn't account for the Cardassians, unless they adapted the genetic engineering somehow," rebuffed Tang.

Aurelia considered for a second; then moved back to the center seat. "Hail the camp."

The Andorian counselor/com officer said after a few seconds, "There's no response."

The captain looked down. For a moment, she considered holding a meeting to go over their options. *'No, I never hesitated during the war and I won't hesitate now!'* She looked over to Windslow, ready to give him the order. Suddenly,

she stopped. Aurelia wasn't second guessing herself this time. She was second guessing her first officer. *'Was this the first time he led an away team since Pentath?'* The captain altered her plans. She stood up again, "Bin Nadal, assemble your security team in transporter room 2. I'll meet you there."

The security chief was tracking until the last sentence. He paused, "Captain?"

Windslow shared in bin Nadal's surprise, but not his confusion. He said nothing.

"You heard me, Commander," Aurelia said.

Karim made a mental note to talk to Aurelia later. Kimula and he could gang up on her, but now was not the time. "Aye, ma'am," and he continued to the exit.

Sintina turned to the XO, "You'll have the bridge."

Before she could take two steps, Windslow inquired, "May I speak with you in your ready room for a moment, Captain?"

She started heading for her office, Windslow in tow, "Make it quick."

Aft of the bridge was the captain's ready room. The doors parted to allow for the pair.

The panels weren't completely shut when Aurelia began, "What?" even though she already knew the commander's grievance.

Windslow decided to let his anger show, "Damn it, I can do this."

This was a side of her XO he often bottled up, at least in her presence. She was taken back a little. Admittedly, she liked it better than his artificial professionalism. She made it a point of never backing down from a confrontational tone, "What the hell makes you think that, *Commander?*"

"I'm not nearly as incompetent as you take me for," he shot back.

Aurelia face grew an evil smile, "If what Admiral Ross tells me is true, yes you are."

"It wasn't his place to tell you and it isn't your place to judge me!"

The captain back off, but only slightly. On the latter point, she knew he was right. But she had a practical reason as well. "I don't feel comfortable putting you in charge of my people down there."

Windslow stepped closer, "They're *my* people too."

Sintina wasn't going to move away. She only locked eyes with him.

Windslow was the one to finch; he stepped back. It was a calculated move to try a new tactic. "Captain, this is my demon. You have to give me a chance to kill it."

Aurelia examined the fish tank for nearly a minute. Finally, she faced Ethan again, "If you let them down, I'll kill you myself."

At first Windslow thought it was an idle threat to reinforce her point. When he looked into her face, he began to realize she was totally sincere. He considered objecting to the intimidation but let it slide considering he got what he wanted. He nodded with a full comprehension of her meaning, "Understood."

The commander turned sharply and left the room.

The climate at the beam down site was chaparral. It reminded one of Utah or Arizona, with only a few distinctions; one being the dark red color of the soil and rock. It wasn't hot at all, in fact, a cool refreshing breeze moved through the valley. It was near dusk, but there was at least another hour of light left. Two moons hung in the horizon.

Bin Nadal was tempted to soak in the view and take the opportunity to center himself, before he remembered his role here. He made a gesture to his security teams. They instantly sprang to action, creating a defensible perimeter.

The tactical officer then opened up his tricorder. He examined the device for several seconds before Windslow stood next to him.

“What are you getting?”

Bin Nadal gestured in a direction, “The nearest individual is about 200 meters away. It looks like there are a couple sites where people are gathered within a 2 kilometer square area.”

Windslow wasn’t kidding himself. He felt the tension in his gut. He had to calm down, *‘This wouldn’t be like last time.’* He hoped his next statement wouldn’t betray his animosity, “Any Dominion life signs?”

“No, still nothing,” reported Karim.

The course of action was obvious, but Windslow had a doubt. If he took point, could he handle it? It wouldn’t look too suspicious if he had bin Nadal do it. He looked to the security chief, “Scout ahead; we’ll keep you in sight.”

Without hesitation, bin Nadal said, “Aye, sir.” He started moving.

As he approached, he realized there wasn’t much cover; only small shrubs. Karim saw a group of people surrounding a fire in the distance. They appeared to be cooking some small game. He moved to a prone position and continued to get closer. He looked back to see his team; they, too, were now lying in the dirt. Bin Nadal stopped to observe his targets. They appeared to be human, maybe Bajoran. He wondered if Windslow would berate him for his next decision, but it seemed worth the risk.

The Persian slowly stood up, holding his phaser rifle by the barrel with outstretched arms. He casually said, “Good evening.”

Startled, the group instinctively reached for their weapons, which ranged from sticks to Jem’hadar *kar’takins* to Cardassian disruptor rifles. They all swung around to aim at the security chief. By this time, Karim was reconsidering how smart he thought he was. The group quickly moved to surround him. Bin Nadal was careful not to budge.

Before they could reach him, however, Karim recognized several voices from his team behind him, “Put your weapon’s down!” They had closed the gap quickly and quietly. It made Karim proud.

A human, clothed in rags, lowered his *kar’takin*, “They’re Starfleet.”

Another human, who looked Native American, continued to look down the sights of his rifle, "I can see that, Giles."

Giles waved his hand in the air, "So don't shoot them, Chetan!"

All the while, nearly everyone else yelled at each other. Shouts from various people saying something to the effect of, "Put your weapons down!" nearly drowned out the conversation.

Bin Nadal looked at the man who threatened his life, "We're here to help."

"Help? We never needed your help, Starfleet...except once, when the Maquis were being slaughtered by the Dominion!" Chetan exclaimed.

Karim dismissed the comment, "We're here from the USS *Independence*. We're here to take you out of here."

That seemed to surprise the Dakota. He lowered his weapon slightly. "You're not from the Starfleet camp?"

Bin Nadal's still hadn't moved, though his rifle was getting heavy in his hand. He knew if any shooting started, he would be caught in the crossfire. "No."

The yelling died down a bit. A new female voice came from the back of the POW group, "Chetan, do you really intend to kill the people that will get us off this rock?"

Chetan looked back as the woman made her way to the front. A look of shame crossed his face, "I was just mad. I thought they were from the Starfleet camp."

The female turned out to be a Bajoran with dark, un-kept hair. "Well, they're not." The Bajoran looked at bin Nadal, "I'm sorry commander. We're all just a little on edge around here."

Both sides slowly relaxed their guard and moved closer. Windslow walked up next to his security chief. "I'm Commander Ethan Windslow of the USS *Independence*." He extended his hand.

The Bajoran took it, "Ro Laren."

CHAPTER 4

Supplemental Lazon II, Starfleet Camp Cardassian Territory

The arrival of a Starfleet ship in orbit created an ecstatic atmosphere in the camp. The de facto liaison between the Maquis and Starfleet, Ro Laren, had walked up with several officers only a few minutes ago. Once the details were worked out Nola, and everyone else, would be aboard a transport ship. She stayed back from the crowd that now surrounded the new comers, though not by choice. She wasn't able to walk. She developed an infection in a wound on her calf from the initial blast that started this nightmare. The Cardassians could have treated her early, but they allowed the wound to fester. Her captures were good enough, however, to amputate it. Her resulting inability to work in the deuterium mines relegated her to the task of "comfort woman" to the Cardassian guards.

The Napean female put up quite a struggle against her rapists. The bruises and swelling she received for her efforts were almost gone. In the end, the spoon-heads kept her sedated during most of the encounters. She still hadn't decided if she welcomed the mind-numbing drugs or not.

Her greatest friend and only beacon of hope during the ordeal was Jason Wells. He was there every step of the way, doing his best to comfort her. Jason returned from the mass of people and filled her in.

Nola's jaw dropped, "Are you sure it's him?"

The young lieutenant nodded, "I spent over a year on that ship, that's Captain Windslow alright."

This was not the first time they had discussed Captain Ethan Windslow. Nola knew Jason held much more anger toward Windslow than she did. Thoughts of blame, anger, and confusion entered her mind, "What should we do?"

Wells spat, "He should be put to death for what he did." He regarded the two moons in the horizon for several seconds. Finally, he said without looking at her, "We could bring justice to him as well."

Despite the hatred she held, Nola's rational mind kicked in, "We can't do it like that any more." Her eyes began to well, "I can't..." Her words faded; replaced by tears.

Jason wrapped his arms around her. He fought back his tears more successfully. His anger subsided as he held the woman, "You're right." He stroked her black hair, "Once we get back to the Federation, we'll tell them."

Windslow moved away from the gathering of people, so he could report to Aurelia without clamor around him. He was already explaining the situation. "The highest Starfleet officer on site is Captain Remoh of the *Berlin*."

Aurelia's voice came over the line, "*Wasn't the Berlin destroyed a year ago?*"

Windslow didn't feel the need to directly answer the question, "Remoh and several members of his crew have been here ever since. To their credit, the personnel here have continued a rank structure."

"*What about the Maquis?*"

The commander looked around to make sure no one was eavesdropping, "The person who seems to be in charge of them is a Bajoran by the name of Ro Laren. She claims to be a former Starfleet officer who..."

Aurelia interrupted, "*Laren! She's there?*"

Windslow looked in Ro's direction; she and Captain Remoh, a Lurian male, were talking. He couldn't help but wonder what they were talking about considering the relationship between Starfleet and Maquis on this planet. "You know her?"

"*We were roommates in the academy.*"

The first officer was distinctly uninterested, "Ah...well anyway, is Dr. Zo'Kama ready on the *Starry Night*?"

The captain sounded almost giddy. Her lack of restraint gave Windslow another excuse not to like her. "Yep, we'll start beaming them up."

The corridors of a civilian liner were much wider than those on Starfleet vessels. The walls were adorned by works of art from all over the Federation. The art itself was, in fact, an idle image on computer consoles. Aurelia liked looking at Janaran Falls on Betazed much more than the blank, shiny, black surface the interfaces had on the bulkheads of Starfleet ships.

Her only regret was her reunion with Laren would be tainted by the presence of her first officer. She understood his duty to be there, besides he would leave in a few minutes. She found the appropriate door and rang the chime.

An only slightly digitized voice responded, "Enter."

The panels hissed open to reveal a large suite. It had what looked like hardwood floors, natural sunlight and a view out the large windows was an impossible one. The suite appeared to be on some class-M planet with a glorious view of a mountain range in the distance.

Once the initial shock wore off, Sintina realized it must be some type of projection. She found herself examining the room, before her eyes rested on the Bajoran occupant, "I'm jealous."

Ro wasn't yet regarding the captain. She was still looking out the "window." "And all you have to do is spend two years in a labor camp."

Sintina's face moved down. Once again, she hadn't considered her words before she spoke.

The Bajoran got up and started to continue, "Starfleet's generosity knows..." She stopped mid sentence. "Sintina?"

A huge grin rose from the captain's lips, "Hi, Laren."

Ro shot for Aurelia and embraced her. It was something Sintina was not at all expecting; Laren was never much of a touchy-feely person. She returned the show of affection none the less. *'Who knows what those damn Cardies did to her. She obviously needs this.'* Upon the release, Aurelia began, "It's been awhile."

Showing a streak of dark humor, Ro responded, "Well, I've been occupied for the last few years."

As per their relationship, Sintina spoke bluntly, "When I heard you left Starfleet for the Maquis, I wanted to kick your ass. And then once the Dominion cracked down on them..." Aurelia grasped Ro's upper arms, "Well, it's good to see you."

Ro focused on something very distant, "There were a lot of people who weren't so lucky."

The captain's smile evaporated, "I'm sorry." After a moment, she released her friend.

Laren offered Sintina and Windslow a seat, "I'm sorry our group wasn't more excited about seeing you."

"Obviously, there is no love lost between the Maquis and the Starfleet in the camp," said Windslow as he sat in a rather large, overstuffed chair.

Sintina and Laren shared opposite sides of a similarly luxurious couch next to the vista. Ro elaborated, "It didn't take long after we were liberated for the two groups to start fighting."

Ethan, fulfilling his role there, inquired, "What type of fighting?"

Ro took a breath, "Nothing major. Several fist fights, a stabbing."

Aurelia echoed, "Nothing major?"

"Well, all things considered," offered Ro.

Windslow decided to begin directing the conversation, "There is another issue. What happened to the Dominion forces?"

Ro's gaze returned to mountains for several seconds before she answered. She hated tarnishing his memory, but it was the story agreed upon. "One of the prisoners organized the rest of us and he led a revolt against the Dominion." She now looked at the commander, "Unfortunately, the Cardassians were able to destroy all the shuttles and any other important equipment, including replicators and transmitters, before we could get to them. We've been stranded and starving ever since."

Ethan didn't allow himself to feel the sympathy her words were meant to engender, "When did this happen?"

She shrugged, "I don't know, over a month ago?"

Windslow persisted, "You don't know the Stardate?"

Ro grew angry and looked at her questioner with contempt, "Commander, I didn't even know today's stardate until I got on board."

Ethan drew back, he thought of looking to his superior for support, but he knew he would find none. She had made it abundantly clear what little concern she had about the investigation which was required. To Windslow, it seemed the captain was more worried about catching up on old times with her buddy than performing her role as captain. It's likely she wouldn't have even ordered an investigation had he not brought it up. And once he did, she was all too willing to leave it in his hands. It was the first time she so easily put him in charge of anything, which told him how little she valued it.

Surprisingly, at least to Windslow, Aurelia continued the line of questioning. "We should talk to the person who led the rebellion, what's his name?"

Ro's tone softened, "You won't be able to talk to him. He died in the attack." She again looked out on the artificial serenity. "His name was Thomas Riker."

CHAPTER 5

Supplemental SS Starry Night, Captain Remoh's suite In orbit of Lazon II

After the name, "Thomas Riker" came up; Ethan was given a not so subtle hint to leave from Aurelia. It suited him fine. He had another person to question anyway. Windslow decided it would be best to recruit the presence of the security chief. There was an obvious advantage to have a second person in the room while questioning.

Bin Nadal and Windslow found themselves in an equally impressive suite assigned to Captain Remoh. They all sat around a hardwood table.

Windslow asked, "What do you know about Thomas Riker, sir?"

The Lurian towered over the other two. Captain Remoh had long, thin, white hair going down to nearly the small of his back. His small eyes were hid by deep sockets. All Lurians looked like they were frowning and lacked a distinctive neck. Remoh's jaw opened more forward than down as he spoke. His natural voice resembled a low grumble, "I know he was there since before the war. He was the man most responsible for motivating us to act against our captors."

"So he did lead the revolt?" it was more of a statement coming from bin Nadal.

Windslow pushed on, "Do you know the stardate when the assault took place?"

Remoh's shoulders shook with his head, "No. I had long since lost track of time." He began to examine the grain of the wooden surface. Windslow and bin Nadal allowed him get lost in his thoughts for several moments. No doubt he was reflecting on the hell that had been his life for the last couple of years. "After the defeat at Tyra, we thought we would be killed or left to die in hulks. But the Cardassians picked us up and sent us here."

Bin Nadal remembered the reports, "Only 14 of 112 ships made it out of Tyra." He added after a pause, "You were lucky to make it out at all."

The Lurian's small eyes locked on to the security chief's, "Were we?"

Karim shifted his eyes. He considered apologizing, but doubted if it would do any good.

Remoh elaborated without malice toward bin Nadal. His gaze became distant, "Being the senior most officer, they questioned me almost constantly." The Lurian's arms appeared from under the table and rested on the wood. "They tortured my crew while I was forced to watch." He began to rock in his chair, almost unnoticeably, "They unraveled my first officer's small intestine while he was still alive."

Both officers' mouths were agape. They were unable to offer any sympathy as the captain continued.

"They left him in my cage like that. They were very careful to make sure he wouldn't die of his wounds. They had me kill him instead."

Windslow managed, "What do you mean?"

"Whenever they brought food, they gave me the choice; should I get the food, or him? For weeks, I said he should." Tears began running down Remoh's cheeks. "Then one day I said, 'me.'"

Bin Nadal and Windslow were in shock and simply listened.

Through the, now unrestricted, sobs the captain said, "My first officer died of starvation."

The two *Independence* crew members looked at each other, neither knowing how to proceed.

Ethan Windslow desperately tried to keep his mind from wondering. Had he killed his own as well? *'No! They were already dead. ... Or at least, as good as dead.'* His attention focused as the captain, again, spoke.

Remoh gained some composure, "I told them everything I knew."

Bin Nadal offered, "We should get you to see our counselor."

The Lurian raised a hand, his tears subsiding, "No, I can continue."

Luckily, Windslow's question started a new topic. "How did the conflict with the Maquis start?"

The captain exhaled slowly, "Once we...killed our captors, some of the Starfleet thought it would be best if the Maquis were unarmed. A stand off followed. Ro and I decided we should maintain separate camps. Occasionally, we fought over the best water holes, hunting grounds, things like that." He cleared his throat, "I guess when you are treated without compassion; you lose part of your own compassion."

Commanders Windslow and bin Nadal exited Remoh's suite and began walking down the hall.

The executive officer pondered as they left. He felt something wrong with the people he interacted with from the prison camp; almost as if they were hiding something. It was possible these people just felt guilt about what they had to do. Maybe it was simply the residue of the experience they had endured. It was only a hunch but he saw it in their faces. He knew...since he saw the same thing when he looked in the mirror.

Windslow blankly stated, "Looks like we have two confirming stories."

"You expected anything less?" asked the security chief.

"We still don't know *when* it happened," responded the XO.

Bin Nadal glanced over, "Does an exact date really matter?"

"It makes all the difference in the world, Commander."

"He was a clone?"

Ro corrected Aurelia, "Not a clone exactly; more of a ... duplicate."

The captain crossed her legs, "Did you know him very well?"

The Bajoran nodded slowly, "We were lovers. It might have been just infatuation. I also had a..." She convulsed, "...love-hate relationship with *William Riker*."

Aurelia laughed out loud, "You had relations with both of them! My, you have become promiscuous!"

Ro wasn't offended and allowed herself to join the cachinnation.

Laren decided to turn the tables, "What about you? You got around quite a bit during our senior year."

Sintina blushed as she grinned, "Oh yes, senior year. You would bring that up."

"How many times did you kick me out of our dorm for the night?" chuckled Ro.

The captain caught her breath, "Ah, the good ol' days. I haven't been with anyone since I was posted on the *Renegade*."

Laren surmised, "The pressures of command getting in the way?"

The comment ended Sintina's jovial mood. Nodding, she said, "Realizing you have the fate of an entire crew on your shoulders has a tendency to do that."

Ro and Aurelia sat in silence for several seconds. It wasn't an uncomfortable silence. Each woman was simply lost in her own thoughts.

Ro finally spoke, "At least that nightmare is over." Laren shifted position, "So you think the Federation will be lenient?"

"I would think they would consider it time served," said Aurelia.

"I hope you're right."

Again the conversation stalled. Aurelia ran through possible topics to discuss. The one she decided on wasn't her first choice, but it was the elephant in the room. "How did they treat you?"

"I was already familiar with how Cardassians treated their prisoners. I've told you the story of my father."

Aurelia acknowledged. When Sintina first meant Laren, she was a very angry woman. For a long time, Sintina tolerated her rudeness. Until finally, she

confronted Ro about it; Aurelia recalled using the phrase, “cold, heartless bitch,” in the exchange. That was when Laren told Sintina about her father.

When Ro was seven years old, she had been led to a room by a Cardassian with candy. She entered only to find her father bound to a chair. He was then tortured to death as she watched.

After that, a greater understanding and bond developed between the two. They still fought on occasion; they were far too similar not to. Overall, however, the pair was inseparable for most of their days at the academy.

Ro continued, “Experiencing it first hand is much different than hearing about it.”

The captain sat intently, so the Bajoran went into more detail. “They used those of us they bothered to capture as forced labor. As if the deuterium mines weren’t bad enough, they feed us once every 3 days and raped at will. One time about a year ago, production fell. They killed 50 people at random and then told us to increase output by 20%.”

Sintina asked the question she had been wondering about but didn’t have the courage to utter until now. “Did they touch you?”

Ro appreciated the soft, almost child-like, tact she used in the wording of the question. Laren bit her bottom lip as she nodded, “Several times.”

Sintina assumed it was true, but this confirmation hit her hard. At that moment, she was actually proud of all the Cardassians she had killed during the war. She knew the feeling wasn’t worthy of a Starfleet officer, or a human for that matter; but she didn’t care.

CHAPTER 6

Stardate: 53060.9 (23 January 2376) USS Independence, Main Engineering In orbit of Lazon II

Each massive explosion contained in the matter/anti-matter reactor could be heard throughout the ship, if one only listened. To many people on board interstellar vessels, it became unnoticeable background noise. In main engineering, however, the drumbeat was hard to ignore.

“I have already expressed my regret, D’nas,” offered Jinal.

The Tamarian was not mad, but mock torment was an art in his society. “I was in that cramped tunnel for over an hour waiting for you yesterday.” The shy honorary ensign had become much more sociable in the last few weeks. One of his favorite people to interact with was Jinal. D’nas had spent most of his off duty time in engineering. He had a need to make himself useful, even though he was the best pilot on ship.

For the Romulan’s part, he held suspicions of the exchange officer for quite a while before the Tamarian grew on him. At first glance, he thought D’nas was what the humans call, ‘a suck up.’ But he eventually realized the ensign had a genuine and insatiable curiosity. The eagerness to please was not so much to impress others, but to satisfy the Tamarian’s own desires.

The Vulcan impersonator defended himself with, “You could have simply called for me.”

On the verge of laughing, D’nas dramatized, “I could have, but I had faith in my superior officer’s word.”

Jinal often wondered if there were any medical problems that might develop from stifling laughter. He then noticed Commander Windslow enter engineering and it became all the more important to get back into character. D’nas quickly became somber as well.

The executive officer made a beeline to the chief engineer without regard for the Tamarian. “Lieutenant Jinal, I want an engineering team of the surface.”

The so-called Vulcan curtsied, “Very well, sir; for what purpose?”

"I want you to find out whether or not the camp's communications center received the stand down order and try to access the camp commander's log."

"Aye sir," responded Jinal sharply.

Windslow made an about face and took a few steps before turning around, "Oh, and one more thing. Try to determine exactly when that equipment was damaged."

The chief engineer acknowledged, "We'll get right on it, commander."

Only then did the first officer make eye contact with the exchange officer before exiting. There was no time for pleasantries; he had to make things happen.

Commander Zo'Kama Do'matar M.D. had already ordered most of the *Starry Night's* lounges to be turned into triage centers. She now wandered through a series of cots that looked rather out of place in the large luxurious space. As crowded as it looked, many of the patients had been transferred to quarters. She found who she was looking for and began to apply the auto-suture.

Zo'Kama hadn't stopped working for over twenty-four hours. Starfleet, in all its infinite wisdom, neglected to assign additional medical personnel for this mission. She had five members on her staff, which was more than enough for a crew of just over 100; but proved severely lacking given the mass of injuries from the prison camp. The first thing she did was to recruit what few medical personnel the civilian transport had. Even with that, and all the combat medics she could find, they were still overwhelmed.

Her combadge beeped to life, "*Windslow to Zo'Kama.*"

She tapped on it with an only slightly bloody hand, "Zo'Kama here."

"Doctor, I need you to perform some autopsies."

The reptilian huffed, "Not now."

Windslow was obviously annoyed, "*That wasn't a request.*"

Zo’Kama’s voice mirrored his, “I’m not going to waste my time with the dead when the living require my attention.”

“It’s for an investigation. I need the chief medical officer. I’m ordering you to report to the team on the surface.”

The Arkonian retorted, “I’m the ultimate medical authority around here. I will get to your autopsies when I can, but not now.”

Zo’Kama’s combadge seemed to stop transmitting. Several seconds passed, the doctor continued the suture she had been working on. She was nearly finished when Windslow spoke again. The channel had never closed.

He spoke in a very cool, even tone, *“When can you get to it?”*

Zo’Kama toyed with the idea of making the commander wait until she could get some sleep, but reconsidered. She was well within her rights and the regulations, but she saw no need to add to an already hostile working environment. “I should be able to do it this afternoon.”

“Fine,” the line closed this time.

She looked over all the beds and wondered if she could manage to keep that obligation.

Kimula sh'Somachanar’s office was arrayed with soft blues, whites, and lavenders. Not only were they relaxing colors, but it reminded her of her native Andoria. She often kept it cool in her office as well, unless a client objected.

She heard more descriptions of vile treatment and abuse in the last day than she had during the entire war. It was draining her emotionally to hear story after story of horror. Kimula found herself becoming numb. Now, she was meeting with a human male. His name was Kevin Giles. The Andorian struggled to keep her empathy as he spoke.

“I wasn’t even in the Maquis or Starfleet. I was just a merchant on Lakesh. They took my family and me.” The man’s eyes began to water. Kimula had seen it all too often. He continued, “I haven’t seen my daughter or wife since

the war began." Water formed tears. "I don't know if they're dead or alive." Giles held his head in his hands, crying.

Kimula moved to lay her hand on his shoulder. She was ashamed of herself to admit it, but her best "lines" were now getting old. She gave a weak consolation. "What they did was terrible. It's ok to feel bad."

Kevin burst out, "We weren't part of their war! I liked the Cardassians! I was just trying to provide for my family and they took it all away from me!"

The counselor attempted to provide a comforting word; none came to mind.

"They never even bothered," his sobbing began to mask his words, "to investigate my background. They just assumed because I was human ... I was a threat." He began to hyperventilate, "What kind of ... monsters ... rip families apart ... put them in prison ... and throw away the key?"

She knelt on the floor in front of Giles and placed her hands on either side of his face. "Try to breathe, nice and slow," Kimula said in her most soothing voice.

Giles complied for a moment, only long enough to catch his breath. He concluded, "I didn't even get a trial." He smirked as he wiped a tear, "Not that a Cardassian trial would do any good."

The light hearted moment caused the Andorian to smile.

"What type of people are capable of something like that?" asked Kevin.

Just then, Kimula was inspired. She finally thought of something to say that might be helpful. She made sure to make eye contact. "People who allow fear to rule them. I know you want to be angry with them; don't. Pity them. The citizens of the Dominion and Cardassia live in a constant state of fear. They don't know how to make a decision out of compassion or understanding. The only deciding factor for them is suspicion and hatred. That's the difference between us and them."

Instead of helping, the comment only seemed to bring more despair to the human's face. He spoke softly; it seemed as if it wasn't even directed at the counselor, "Are you sure about that?"

Her antennae involuntarily arched toward each other, "What do you mean?"

The man sat up straight, almost in a panic, “Nothing, forget I said it.”

CHAPTER 7

Supplemental SS Starry Night, Ro Laren's Suite In orbit of Lazon II

The serenity of Ro's suite didn't reflect the seriousness of the conversation being held there. Ro, formerly Lieutenant Ro, had spent the last few minutes explaining her actions at the Hugora Nebula.

Six years ago, she completed the Advanced Tactical Training course. Shortly afterwards, Admiral Nechayev tapped her to infiltrate the Maquis. Lieutenant Ro made contact with a Maquis cell on the Juhraya colony. She was to lead the Maquis into a trap near the nebula, where a small Starfleet taskforce waited. Instead, she sabotaged the mission and joined their cause.

All this Aurelia already knew. What she didn't know was why, until now.

Laren concluded her story, "...I suppose the turning point was when Macias died in the raid. After that, I just couldn't go through with it."

Aurelia's mind was disjointed. The Starfleet officer in her wanted to scold Ro. The other half felt guilty for not sharing her fate. A thought came to her to lighten the mood. She bantered, "Well, between that and Garon II, I'd say Starfleet won't take you back."

Ro acknowledged the assessment with a nod and a grin. After a moment, she said, "I suppose when we get to Bajor, I'll apply for the militia."

The captain was hesitant to bring up her next point, but she could delay it no longer. "We're not going to Bajor, at least not yet."

Laren had wondered about that, but still didn't believe it. She stood, "You're telling me the Federation is going to arrest the Maquis members!"

"It's just a formality. The charges will probably be dropped."

The Bajoran asked, "How do you know?"

Sintina broke eye contact. She answered the question with details of her orders. "I've been ordered to take you and your group to Betazed."

“Why Betazed?”

The captain responded, “It’s relatively close, is a large transportation hub, and, well ...”

“It has the legal infrastructure to deal with all of us,” interjected Ro.

“Yeah,” admitted Aurelia. She then added rather coyly, “And a large counseling center.”

Laren paced, “I can’t say I’m surprised. The Federation was always petty.” She looked again at her former roommate. Ro wanted to be mad at Sintina. In the past, she wouldn’t have thought twice about snapping at anyone; whether they were the cause of her problems or not. If being in a Cardassian labor camp teaches you one thing, it’s restraint. “When to we leave?”

Aurelia stood, sensing Ro’s hospitality was waning. “As soon as the investigation is over. My first officer should be done with it soon.”

Ro turned to gaze out at the artificial landscape, “I want to get out of here, Sintina; even if it is just to go to jail again.”

A pin-point of light became two; one moving to the ground and one to the sky. That set established the containment field. Another set appeared just after the first; moving in the same fashion. The molecules of Dr. Zo’Kama began to find their coordinates. She was brought back into cohesion and the containment field dissipated.

The doctor carried a case with all the equipment necessary to perform her gruesome task.

The Arkonian sense of smell was far superior to that of humans. She immediately knew the direction of the corpses. Her predatory instincts could lead her to death. She began to walk. As she traveled, the assault on her senses grew stronger. She could already tell the flesh was spoiled.

Zo’Kama came to a small valley made of blood red rock. It was filled with the dead.

The pile had a thick layer of ash and bone on the surface of it. Someone set fire to the bodies. The fire never reached most of the bodies in the interior of the mass. She could see where some of the local scavengers had pulled the non-burnt corpses from the core of the pyre to feast on. The combination of burnt and rotten bodies forced her to dawn a respirator. The only organisms feasting now were the planet's decomposers. With a sigh, the reptilian shook off her fatigue and made her way down into the failed funeral pyre.

She soon found herself wading in the bodies. They were only Cardassian, Jem'hadar, and a very few Vorta. Apparently the survivors didn't see fit to have their dead share the site with them. Some type of larvae resembling large maggots were everywhere. She moved the life forms aside with a gloved hand and began to examine the dead.

Windslow had ordered her to find an overall pattern of death. With methodical professionalism, she identified death wound after death wound: bludgeoned from behind, disruptor blast to the kidney, slit throat.

The doctor had no reservations about jumping into the pile. Instead of thinking how morbid her job was, she found herself wondering about the large maggots and other vermin she encountered. She even considered taking a maggot back to the ship with her to look at it closer. She returned to her work: stabbed in the left lung, abdominal laceration, suffocation...

It was 21:30 hours as Ethan Windslow read the CMO's autopsy report. He was alone in his deck two office.

He saw his family two hours per day, on average. The first officer reasoned away his absence. *'They're used to not seeing me anyway.'* That was his favorite excuse; along with hiding behind his work.

Luckily his wife, Susan, didn't often seek him out either. Both had always been independent people. He knew she was concerned about him, but she had infinite patience. At least, Ethan hoped she did.

Ship's Counselor Kimula had suggested they have family sessions. So far, Windslow had managed to stop it from coming to fruition.

'The investigation will be over soon. Then, things will get back to normal,' he thought.

The door chime rang. "Enter."

Jinal, the chief engineer, strode in the room holding a padd. He handed it to Windslow. "Commander, here are our findings."

The XO scanned over the document for several minutes. Jinal, whom had not yet been dismissed, could only assume the position of 'at ease' and wait.

At last, Windslow spoke; though, more to himself. "This corresponds to Dr. Zo'Kama's report." He looked up at the engineer, "Well, now we know."

"It appears so," agreed Jinal.

"Dismissed," said Windslow. The Vulcan curtsied and exited. Ethan waited until the door slid shut. Then, he activated his communicator, "Windslow to Captain Aurelia."

"Aurelia here."

"Captain, my report is ready."

CHAPTER 8

Supplemental USS Independence, Deck 2, Briefing Room In Orbit of Lazon II

Aurelia waited for the meeting to begin. Once again, science officer Tang was left in charge of the bridge. Bin Nadal sat on her immediate left and beyond him, counselor Kimula. All sat in silence; which was a rare moment when the three gathered. This mission had tapped their emotional reserves more than any would care to admit. No subject seemed appropriate to bring up; at least not until Windslow gave his findings.

Only slightly late, the trio of Windslow, Jinal, and Dr. Zo’Kama entered. Obviously, the XO had gone over a game plan with the other two. Aurelia wanted to roll her eyes at the latest example of her first officer’s artificial professionalism. She wondered if he had gone as far to coach their presentations. They all took seats with out so much as an acknowledgement. The trio exchanged glances a final time before Windslow began. “Dr. Zo’Kama will start with her findings.”

The reptilian doctor placed her arms on the table as she leaned in. “I identified the cause of death for approximately 70% of the Dominion and Cardassian forces assigned to the planet.” Without realizing the macabre nature of the statement, she added, “The rest of the bodies were too incomplete for analysis.”

Several of the people present dipped their heads or eyes solemnly.

The moment was lost on Zo’Kama as she continued. “Many of the Cardassians and Vorta were bludgeoned, stabbed or shot to death in the back as they were trying to flee.”

The captain ventured a guess, “So the guards were overwhelmed by the prisoners and panicked. That seems to collaborate the prisoners’ story.”

The doctor ticked her head instead of shaking it, as was customary in Arkonian society. “No, the Jem’hadar were different.”

“The Jem’hadar fought back?” interjected bin Nadal.

Zo’Kama jerked her head to the left even before the security chief was finished, “No, according to the angle of the wounds, nearly all the Jem’hadar seem to have killed themselves.”

Kimula offered, “That doesn’t seem like Jem’hadar to me.”

Before more could be said, Windslow spoke, “Jinal, tell us your findings.”

The Vulcanoid engineer rose and made his way to the large display embedded in the forward bulkhead. He tapped on it and the screen filled with a database of information. To Aurelia, it looked like some type of log. Jinal explained, “The communications array was damaged and non-functional, but its transmission log was nearly intact.” He isolated one entry and maximized it. He made sure to direct the next statement to his captain, “Before the array was damaged, the camp did receive the surrender order.”

Aurelia’s heart sank. Time seemed to slow. Her eyes were open but no images registered in her brain. She found herself after what seemed like several minutes. In reality was only a few seconds. Sintina began to notice everyone in the room was staring at her. Her mind rushed to find some type of explanation. She came up with one, “Maybe the camp commander ignored it or didn’t implement it yet.”

Jinal stepped closer, “Not likely. The commander’s log and security recordings indicate the prisoners were brought out of the mines and into a holding area. The commander stated that he intended to request a third party transport and send the prisoners to a neutral planet.”

“He was apparently killed before he could send that transmission,” added Windslow.

Aurelia convinced herself he said it just to put salt in the wound. Despite that, the evidence was mounting and she had to ask the question. “So what happened?”

Bin Nadal spoke out of turn and stole some Windslow’s thunder. “Well as for the Jem’hadar, they’ve been known to commit suicide once the surrender order reached them. They interpreted the surrender as the Jem’hadar failing the Founders.”

"The penalty for failing the Founders is death," said Kimula to no one in particular. Then the counselor grasped for a straw in an attempt to aid Sintina. "Would they have killed the Cardassians and Vorta as well?"

Windslow answered, "Maybe. But if that were the case, why would the POW's lie about it?"

Again, the focus of the room shifted to the captain. This time disbelief was replaced by rage. She returned their looks, gritted her teeth, and clinched her fist under the table. "There is only one way to fill in the holes here."

Ro Laren's darkened room was flooded with light when the door opened to allow Sintina. For a split second, she regretted getting the access codes from the captain of the liner. She didn't think Laren would be sleeping quite yet. The fury soon alleviated her concerns. The room became dark again. Aurelia didn't wait for her eyes to fully adjust. She made her way to the bedroom and paused long enough for her to see a form in the bed. She leaned over the bed and pushed the shoulder of the slumbering Bajoran. "Ro," she simultaneously said in her best command voice.

In the next instant, Aurelia felt the tight grip of Laren's hands around her neck. The fingers professionally targeted her carotid arteries. The sudden loss of blood flow to her brain nearly caused her to lose consciousness. Quickly, Sintina made a forward swirling motion with her right arm, which not only removed the assaulting hands but also trapped them under her armpit; but only for a moment. An impact, Ro's foot, hit squarely at the base of Aurelia's skull, causing her to release Ro and tumble to her hands and knees. Out of instinct, the captain made a side kick to the Bajoran's abdomen. The attack missed the mark and Ro was able to utilize the foot for her own needs.

Laren latched on to Sintina's boot and began to twist in a very unnatural position. The captain didn't cry out, but slapped the floor instead. 'Slapping out' is a common signal in martial arts practice to quit. It would do her no good here, but it was now an acquired reflex. Sintina quickly yelled, "Computer, lights!"

The darkness ended. Ro was wearing a short, loose robe. She refused to ease her grip until her eyes could readjust and she was sure whose boot she held. Aurelia looked at her in anticipation of that moment. The Bajoran loosened

up but didn't let go of Sintina. "What the hell are you doing?" Laren demanded.

The captain forcefully retrieved her foot from Ro's grip and stood. Her embarrassment at the hands of her old friend served to fuel her fire. "You lied to me, why!"

"What do you mean?" Ro still wasn't entirely awake.

Sintina went toe to toe. "Don't you dare play dumb! The POW's were in the process of being released. Why did you kill them?"

The group had considered what to say if anyone should ask that question. They were to push as much responsibility to Tom Riker as they could. He was the one to instigate the attack. He was the one who pressured them to do it. He was the ring leader.

It was part of the truth, but not all of it. Ro simply couldn't bring herself to dishonor his memory any longer. He deserved better. Besides, she felt no shame for their actions. *'Why should we hide from what we did!'*

Laren's mind returned to Sintina's question. *'Why?'* A ball of hatred formed in Ro's gut. It pushed aside her logical mind. "Why did we kill them!" The Bajoran only got closer to her accuser; their noses nearly touching. "Have you been listening! You know what they did to us!"

"And that justifies murder!"

Each woman's ego would not allow them to back down.

Ro went on, "Had we not acted, none of those Cardassians would have been punished for what they did!"

Aurelia didn't have an immediate comeback.

Laren's rage was so intense, her eyes began to water. "It was the only way to make sure those bastards got what they deserved."

The captain couldn't help but see Ro's point. It would be difficult for the Federation to prosecute every war crime committed by the enemy. She read in a news report that no enemy soldier below Gul or Vorta would go before a tribunal. Yet, the Federation found the resources to bring these former

Maquis to justice. It wasn't fair. The Starfleet officer came to the forefront in Aurelia. It was not her place to decide policy; just implement it. She could only think of one point to rebuke her friend. In a more calm tone, she said, "Over 300 POW's, including Tom, died in the assault. What about them?"

Ro finally broke the deadlock and retreated to the side of her bed. Her hatred subsided at the mention of her lost lover. "Only a few dozen talked about it before hand: Tom, Captain Remoh, me, a few others. Most of them are dead now. The vast majority of people realized what was happening and joined in the melee."

Sintina sat next to her.

"Luckily," continued Laren, "when the surrender orders came, the Jem'hadar killed themselves. When the Cardassians moved us up from the mines, we saw our chance. We rushed them. They killed several of us before we reached them, but they couldn't kill us all."

"Captain Remoh and Starfleet officers participated as well?" asked the captain.

A silent nod came from Ro.

"And then all of you decided to cover it up."

Laren puffed, "Not very well, apparently."

Sintina stood; the reality of the situation sinking in. One of her best friends took part in a slaughter. The more complex facets of her predicament occurred to her. Frustration began to show in her face. "Damn it, all you had to do was sit tight!"

"I don't regret what I did and neither does anyone else."

"Damn it, Laren." Aurelia paced.

"What are you going to do?" asked Ro.

Sintina shot daggers at Laren. Then abruptly went for the exit. Before the door slid shut, Ro could hear her friend repeating, "Damn it!"

CHAPTER 9

Stardate: 53063.6 (24 January 2376) USS Independence, Captain's Quarters En-route to Betazed

Sintina reluctantly ordered the *Independence* to Betazed late last night. At warp 8, the trip would take 26 and one-half days. Starfleet would expect a report well in advance of their arrival.

Aurelia's mind could not be turned off. She reviewed Federation law as well as the Starfleet Code of Justice. She found no loophole or legal maneuver to abate her anxiety. The lines of text turned to globs of light long ago; yet she still looked at it.

The captain glanced at the chronometer; 05:15. "Computer, begin recording." A short sound indicated the computer had complied. "Captain's Log, stardate 53063.6." Sintina paused mid-breath. What was she doing? She couldn't put any of this in a log; at least, not yet. "Computer, end recording and delete."

Soon, she and Kimula would meet for their morning exercise session. Hopefully, she'd have some insight.

Sintina's padded fist struck the punching bag with enough force to cause Kimula, who was holding it, to stumble backwards. The Andorian recovered before she fell and quickly returned to her stance. '*No need to ask how she's feeling today,*' mused Kimula. A volley of jabs followed. Kimula was able to maintain her post this time. As Aurelia pummeled the bag, the counselor observed. She knew Sintina enough to allow her to vent before starting a conversation. It would be better for all involved.

The two women had an understanding. Nothing was said. The bag was waylaid for a solid 5 minutes before Aurelia's body could no longer keep pace with her frustration. Her strikes became sloppy; until finally, she hugged the target for balance.

Kimula backed away, and watched her exhausted friend gasp for air. The Andorian saw her opportunity. "Feel better?"

A sweaty clump of hair covered part of Sintina's face. "No."

"You're not responsible for what Ro and the others did," started Kimula.

The captain breathed deeply, "It's not a matter of responsibility, but punishment."

"What do you mean?"

Aurelia found a bench in an empty corner of the gym, grabbed a towel, and sat. Kimula shadowed her. "These people have been through enough."

A nod came from Kimula. "No one will argue that."

The captain ordered a glass of water from a nearby replicator and took a big swig. She avoided looking Kimula in the face as she admitted, "I'm actually thinking about changing the report."

Immediately, the counselor checked to see if anyone heard the comment. No one seemed to. Once she was satisfied no one would overhear them, she thought on her response. Her first reaction was, *'You can't do that! What are you thinking?'* The professional in her restrained the vocalization. It wasn't the time to become confrontational. This was a choice for the captain and no one else. At last, she conceded, "You could do that."

The reply surprised Sintina. She expected, maybe hoped, for a more definite opinion. *'Damn, Kimula's going to play counselor.'* Aurelia had no other choice but to get into the role of client. "I was raised thinking Federation morality was superior. We don't give into revenge, not anymore." She summoned the courage to look at Kimula; expecting to find a judgmental face. She found nothing but the neutral features of a person desperately trying to be open minded. Aurelia went on, "We've all lost some of our humanity in this war."

"Could you really turn a blind eye like that?" questioned Kimula in forgiving tone.

"These people were at war," snapped the captain, "even more than the rest of us. Weren't they justified?"

The Andorian countered, "When the POW's killed those people, their lives were no longer in danger."

Aurelia stood, being a bit too loud than she probably should have been, "It's bullshit." She got a few stares from others working out. The captain leaned closer and spoke under her breath. "One minute you're a hero, then a piece of paper is signed somewhere far away, and then you're a murderer."

Kimula meant the gaze of her friend. There was enough of a pause that Sintina began to speak again, then she interrupted. "And how would you feel if it were reversed?"

"What?"

"What if it was Cardassian and Dominion POW's killing Starfleet guards?"

Sintina lingered as if fashioning a great rebuttal in her mind. Kimula could see her muscles clench. In the end, the captain turned without a word and walked out.

The decision was made when she was in the sonic shower. Aurelia dressed and made her way to the turbolift. "Deck One." The doors parted. Gamma shift was still working. The night shift captain, Lieutenant Virak, stood. "Captain on the bridge." The female Vulcan was second-in-charge of security.

"At ease," rejoined the captain as she strode directly to her office aft of the bridge. She moved with a purpose. As she sat behind her desk, she activated the computer. "Recall file: Lazon II Prison Camp Report. Authorization: Aurelia-Iota-Chi-6-1-8." The final version of Windslow's investigation appeared before her. "Prepare to edit."

A communication line opened, "Bridge to captain."

Aurelia sighed. It was Lieutenant Virak. "What?"

"Captain, you have a message from Cardassia Prime."

'You've got to be kidding me,' thought the captain; of all the times for Admiral Whatley to start talking to her again. Why would he be contacting her anyway? She really did hate all this captain crap. "Patch Admiral Whatley through."

"It's not Admiral Whatley, ma'am. The sender only identifies himself as 'The Tailor.'"

"The Tailor," repeated Sintina. She remembered a reference to a tailor was brought up at some point during her visit to Cardassia Prime. It seemed like a long time ago. Her curiosity was peaked. "Patch it through."

A familiar Cardassian face was now on the screen. It took Aurelia longer than she expected to place the man.

The Cardassian was obviously disappointed; or feigned it. "The name you're looking for is Garak, Captain Aurelia."

Her eyebrows crunched up, "Can I help you?"

"Not yet, but I can help you."

She laughed out loud at his boast. It was rather refreshing considering the last day. "Oh, and how do you intend to do that?"

Garak only smiled, "I couldn't help but notice that you are heading for Betazed to drop off those POW's, but you haven't yet forwarded the conclusions from your investigation to Starfleet."

Her smile ceased. The captain couldn't stop her jaw from dropping. Her confusion increased exponentially. "How the hell..."

"The 'how' is not important. The important part is you are being set up."

"Set up for what?" inquired Sintina.

"Set up for a fall."

Aurelia threw up her arms, "That doesn't tell me crap. What the hell are you talking about?"

Garak cocked his head, again despondent. "You're not much for subtleties are you, Captain?"

The captain only blinked with a dull stare, unamused.

"How disappointing," Garak continued with a sigh. "You have managed to make some powerful enemies in your short tenure as captain."

"Who?"

"I don't feel comfortable giving you names over subspace." He wagged a finger, "But I can tell you that you must follow your regulations to the letter on this mission."

"Why the hell should I trust you?"

The Cardassian quietly contemplated for several seconds. "I honestly can't think of one good reason."

Aurelia felt she was in the presence of a con artist. "Why are you doing this?"

"Consider it an act of good will," Garak grinned as he mildly bobbed his head, "and a favor."

'*Scam!*' screamed Aurelia internally. "Sorry, I don't like being in debt to anyone." She began to reach over to close the channel.

"The only thing you have to lose is your ignorance." spurted Garak.

The captain paused.

He smirked as he added, "Besides Captain, we're all in debt to someone."

Aurelia's hand hovered as she ruminated. '*What does this guy want from me? Is he manipulating me? What if he's right? Damn it!*' Her hand withdrew. Despite her better judgment, the captain found herself saying, "Tell me what you know."

CHAPTER 10

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

Captain Aurelia felt a second wind. She was so wound up about the new information; she didn't yet have time to process it. Once the conversation ended with Garak, she had Windslow escort Ro to her ready room. The captain was in the process of explaining the last several minutes to them. "Ok, this Garak guy talks in riddles and is anything but direct. But here is the gist of the conversation: he claims that the guards sent a distress call before they were killed."

The Bajoran leaned down and rested her elbows on her knees with a sigh. "That's what we worried about. The Cardassians did get to the communications center before us. They sent a message and then destroyed it."

"I don't understand," began the first officer, "If that's the case, why haven't the Cardassians made a big issue out of it yet?"

The captain crossed her legs. "I asked the same question. Then Garak told me, by the time the message was sent, the Dominion command center on Cardassia Prime was already in the hands of the Alliance."

"How could he be so sure?" questioned Windslow.

"Because he was there. The transmission was just coming in when top Starfleet, Romulan, and Klingon brass forced him out."

Laren questioned, "Then why didn't he do anything about it?"

"He was told that it would be taken care of," defended Aurelia.

Windslow shook his head as he stood, "So Command sits on it for month and sends us out here without that information? Why?"

"Garak claims," said Sintina, "this mission was designed to get me out of the captain's chair."

"Why?" interjected Ro.

"He says I managed to tick someone off when we exposed the missing equipment was on that Starfleet ship," elaborated the captain.

Laren looked confused, "Missing equipment?"

"I'll explain later."

"I can't believe any Starfleet brass would do that." Windslow contested, "They wouldn't let those POW's rot just to set you up."

"I agree," came from the captain. "It is entirely possible there were simply no transport ships available until the *Starry Night* was chartered. It was a coincidence that I ticked someone off in the interim."

"So says, Garak," surmised Ethan.

"Actually," rebuffed Aurelia, "He said he didn't trust coincidences."

Windslow said, "If they wanted to take the *Indy* away from you; they'd just order it."

"They'd have to have some sort of reason to relieve me of command," rebuked the captain.

Ro offered, "Like you sending a falsified report."

"Exactly," stated Aurelia.

The first officer paced for a moment. He placed a hand on the bulkhead for a second before rounding back on the captain. "What makes you think you can believe this Garak?"

Aurelia uncrossed her legs and leaned back in her seat. She admitted candidly, "I don't trust him."

Ro didn't like the idea of coming to the aid of a Cardassian, but she felt she had to point out, "But all he's asking you to do is to follow the rules. In this case, it's sound advice."

With a puff from her mouth, the captain swung her chair away from Laren.

Windslow folded his arms and put his left hand over his mouth. His forehead became wrinkled after a few seconds of silence. He removed his hand, "Didn't you say you and Ro were at the academy together?"

"They used me," said Ro as her eyes grew wide. A look of epiphany became one of disdain. "Someone was hoping that you'd look the other way for me." She was unable to remain in the chair. "Someone was hoping you wouldn't turn us in because of our friendship!"

The captain bit her bottom lip, looked at her former roommate and nodded.

The one-time Maquis strode around the cramped room. She desperately wanted to pick a fight with someone; anyone. The impulse was soaked into her body, adding to her contempt. "I will not be manipulated, Sintina. And I will not allow you to be manipulated."

Aurelia slowly realized, despite all that Garak had told her, she was still in the same position. All she wanted during her career was to get her own ship. Now that she was here, she no longer wanted the job, or the responsibility.

She began to fabricate reasons for her decision. The very same reasons she came up with earlier in the day. Most of the admirals around didn't like her anyway. Hell, if Garak is to be believed, at least one wants her out of the center seat. Maybe it was for the best. Being a captain during peace wasn't like being a captain during war. In war, you were one ship in a fleet of ships. Not on your own. She was meant to follow orders; not make them. Then there was Ro. The weight of the world actually eased somewhat as she renewed her decision. "Even assuming he's right, my command is a small price to pay for all your futures."

Ro burst, "I can't believe you're even considering this, Sintina!"

The captain pushed herself up with her desk and said in a booming voice, "That's my call, Laren."

"I won't let you to take a fall like this!" defied Ro.

Commander Windslow sensed that it would be a mistake to join the fray. He stepped back and observed instead.

Aurelia continued, "Are you willing to make that decision for everybody else?"

The Bajoran rejoined, "If they knew the situation, they'd agree in a heartbeat."

"Well you don't have our investigation report," snapped the captain. "That's what the Federation will listen to; not former Maquis."

Ethan decided to venture, "Captain, as first officer, I..."

"I don't want to hear your opinion," sneered Sintina.

Ro and Windslow looked at each other. Both were in amazement of the sheer stubbornness of the woman. Ro had seen it many times before, however. The next statement ended all hope for dissuading the captain.

As she sat down, Aurelia said, "Until I can edit the report, I'm restricting outgoing communications; except authorized by me. Meeting adjourned."

Neither appeared ready to leave. Sintina looked up from her computer, "Get out. Both of you."

Ethan ever so slightly shook his head. Laren stormed out quickly. Windslow moved slower. The door hissed closed.

Aurelia watched as they exited. Once they were gone, she placed her head in her hands.

CHAPTER 11

Supplemental USS Independence, Captain's Ready Room En route to Betazed Less than an hour later...

Captain Aurelia wasn't much for writing reports; or altering them, in this case. She deleted one paragraph then realized she had to go back and alter something else referring to what she just deleted. It was a more taxing effort than she first anticipated. Sintina finally came to the conclusion that it would be necessary to re-write nearly the entire report. She cursed more than once out of frustration.

Aurelia began to imagine what the next month would be like. The Starfleet personnel would be debriefed. Ro and the others would probably get probation. Sintina would be court-martialed and most likely demoted.

A realization came to her. *'If whoever set me up knows I'll send a false report, they'd have to prove Ro's guilt first to prove that I sent a false report. This won't protect anyone. No matter what I do, Ro's going to back to prison.'* Sintina violently pushed herself away from the desk, "Son of a bitch!"

As she uttered the profanity, a comline opened, "Kimula to the captain."

"What!"

There was a slight pause as the Andorian assessed the captain's mood. "Captain, incoming message from Betazed's JAG office."

'They're wondering when I'm going to send the report,' thought Aurelia. She wasn't sure what to say, other than to stall. She dipped her head and said in a near whisper, "Put it through."

A Starfleet commander in red blinked onto the screen. He had a wide smile. Sintina supposed he was the type to always have a smile on. It was a sharp contrast to her own scowl, which she was currently wearing.

"Captain Aurelia," started the man, "I'm Commander Shaw from the Judge Advocate General's Office here on Betazed." He talked the same way he looked ... chipper.

Aurelia somberly questioned, "How can I help you, Commander?"

The captain's melancholy demeanor had no effect on "Mr. Sunshine." "Well sir, considering the findings in your report, the JAG office has ordered the transport ship be put on lockdown and all the former POW's are to be restricted to their quarters until they arrive."

Sintina's blood turned cold as she dully asked, "What do you mean, 'considering the findings in my report?'"

Only for a moment did Shaw look confused. He quickly returned to his sunny disposition, "You must not have had your coffee yet, sir. You know, your investigation report on Lazon II. Anyway, I just wanted to inform you, the luxury liner needs to be on lockdown. I wouldn't want you to get in trouble. Betazed JAG out."

The screen went blank. Her reflection on the monitor caused her to become aware that her jaw was open. It took a bit of effort to close it. Deliberately, she stood. There she paused only for a moment before jetting to the bridge. She was going almost too fast for the door to respond in time.

In hindsight, she probably should have told Commander Windslow to join her in her ready room, but she wasn't thinking clearly. As soon as she entered the bridge, she blurted, "The transport ship."

Windslow rose from the XO's chair, "Captain?"

"You sent it via the transport, didn't you? It doesn't have the strict security protocols as we do."

The commander lied. He was getting better and better at it. "I don't know what you're talking about, ma'am." He added, with a barely hidden smirk, "I was about ready to talk to you regarding an unauthorized access of the computer that bin Nadal noticed."

Aurelia managed an angry sarcasm as she made her way to the turbolift, "Don't tell me, accessing your report. How convenient."

With Sintina's recent revelation, she would've come around to Windslow and Ro's point of view, but to have an end-run around her...They had no right! Laren had no right!

When she arrived at Ro's suite, she didn't bother using the chime and went right for the command override. She walked in and blasted, even before she saw the Bajoran, "How dare you circumvent my authority!"

Ro came out from around a corner; "I wouldn't have to if you didn't have your head so deep up your ass!"

The captain ignored the insult, "You just added the charge of manslaughter, maybe even murder, to everyone at that camp!"

Laren stepped closer, "Maybe, but don't bullshit me. You didn't do this for any of them. You did it for me."

Aurelia turned her head to avoid the truth in the statement.

"You know what your problem is?" began Ro.

Aurelia injected, "This ought to be good."

"You are slow to make friends; but when you do, you are loyal to them to a fault." Ro pointed a finger; "Your loyalty blinds you to everything else. Whoever set this up knew that and you fell right into it, even after you knew it was a trap!"

She didn't have a response. She was getting tired of being humbled all the time. She made her way to the overstuffed couch and plopped on it. "It's not right. People shouldn't be able to abuse their power like this to manipulate situations!"

"No, it's not right," offered Ro. After joining the captain on the couch, she concluded with, "Maybe now you understand why I joined the Maquis."

Aurelia regarded her friend and respectfully nodded.

EPILOGUE

Stardate: 53176.2 (5 March 2376)
Federation Superior Court, Betazed Sector
Beta Veldonna V (Betazed), City of Rixx

Captain's Log. Stardate: 53176.2. I've been able to keep the Indy here for two weeks; long enough to hear the outcome some trials. The courts were more lenient than I expected. In most cases, the charges of manslaughter were either dropped or severely reduced due to extenuating circumstances. Some Starfleet personnel got reprimands; one exception being Captain Remoh. He's going to the brig for a while for lying to an investigator. Most of the former Maquis are on probation. There is only one more verdict I want to hear...

Captain Aurelia sat on the stairs leading up to the courthouse. This section of the city was spared any damage from the Dominion occupation. It was a beautiful day. A light breeze was blowing. The sky was clear with only a few wisps of pink cloud. People were out walking but very few were talking. It was odd to Sintina until she realized where she was.

The heavy exterior doors swung open. Aurelia looked back to see Laren with her hands behind her back; two Federation security guards abreast of her. The three stepped down to Aurelia. The captain gestured for the guards to pause, which they did.

"I take it you're not free to go," quipped the captain.

"Afraid not," said Ro. "Besides perjury, Starfleet hasn't quite forgiven me for what I did at the Hugora Nebula."

Aurelia frowned, "I suppose that's to be expected."

"It's funny," smiled the Bajoran, "I thought charges of accessing restricted files would be added as well."

The captain put her hands behind her back, rocked on her toes, and looked into the sky. She got a few condescending looks from the security guards, but they said nothing.

Ro continued, "It's only four months. Apparently an old captain of mine pulled some strings for me."

The mock nonchalance stopped. "I'm sorry," offered Sintina.

The Bajoran laughed out loud, causing the guards to jerk a bit, "It will be like a vacation compared to what I just came from."

Aurelia reflected for a moment, "I doubt the Cardassians will be happy about the results of the trials. They'll probably view it as more Federation discrimination."

"Well, I sure hope they do something about it," taunted Ro.

One of the guards finally spoke up, "We have to take her to the transporter center, sir."

"Understood," said the captain. She looked at Laren, "I'm still pissed at you."

"I know," responded Ro with a slight grin.

Sintina watched, as Ro was lead away by the guards. She stayed there until they turned around a corner, nearly a block away. Only then, did she call for transport.

The trip to Betazed seemed to take forever. For nearly a month, Lieutenant Jason Wells had been looking forward to this moment. Once they entered the office, he offered the closest seat to Petty Officer Nola, now holding a cane to compensate for her biosynthetic leg. Wells then sat opposite of the JAG officer's desk.

The dark-skinned, female Vulcan then took her seat. "I read your message, Mr. Wells," said the JAG officer. "It is fortunate you contacted me when you did. Starfleet was ready to close the investigation. What information do you have regarding the incident with Captain Windslow on Pentath III?"

Lt. Wells' voice was filled with excitement, anxiety, and hate as he began. "I was a security officer and she was a medic from the *Bismarck*; both of us where on the scene."

The Vulcan steepled her hands and leaned in, "Tell me everything you remember."

END