

Star Trek: Independence

The Expropriation

By Dnoth

Violence can only be concealed by a lie, and the lie can only be maintained by violence.

~Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

CHAPTER 1

Stardate: 53764.5 (6 October 2376)

USS Independence, "The Game Room"

Alpha Quadrant, Occupied Cardassian Territory

A week ago, long put off plans came to fruition. The new "Game Room" was officially christened. Originally, Captain Aurelia, Tactical Chief bin Nadal, and Counselor Kimula brought their toys over from the *Midas* and put them in a small, unused crew's quarters. Over time, word spread about the "game room." The quarters proved to be woefully inadequate for the foot traffic.

At first, the aforementioned 'toys' were a table used for Dungeons & Dragons and a dart board. Slowly, members of the crew brought more and more: a 3D chess board, a Tellarite strategy game, kal-toh. Larger things began to get replicated, including dom-jot and pool tables. It was time to move to a larger location. None of the crew objected to using the main lounge. Half of the tables and chairs had to be moved, but no one seemed to mind.

Sintina Aurelia casually sat at one of the remaining tables near one of the large windows. She watched with pleasure as her Andorian friend and ship's counselor, taught Jinal, the ship's engineer, and some other junior officers, the finer points of casting defensive spells.

The captain took a sip of some warm spice wine when Karim bin Nadal and Nicole Chase, the operations officer, requested to join her. She accepted.

The Persian security officer started, "Nicole told me something I didn't know, Sintina."

Aurelia took the cup away from her mouth. "Is that supposed to impress me?" she jested.

"Nice," Nicole chuckled. She raised her cup in tribute. The captain returned the gesture.

Karim conceded the good jibe, "No. She told me about a planet called Aurelia."

"Oh, wonderful," said Aurelia as she leaned back, "Here it comes, go ahead. Get it out of your system, Karim."

Chase commented, "I take it, you've heard about it."

She unenthusiastically confirmed, "Uh-uh. My fifth grade teacher thought it was a good idea to announce that fact to the class and then taught us all about it."

Karim shrugged, "What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing," she rejoined, "when you're dealing with people that have some sense of maturity, but not with children."

"What happened?" Nicole asked.

Sintina sat up and took another sip. "You know that Aurelia has a form of sentient life, right?"

"Yeah."

"They're avians," continued Aurelia, "Most of them are yellow and skinny and look like giant canaries."

"So what happened?" egged Karim.

Sintina cleared her throat, "The insults started. At first, it was light-hearted. Some people began calling me 'birdie,' and I was fine with it. But then it got worse and got on my nerves..."

"Imagine that," chided bin Nadal. A mock evil stare forced him to dip his head in submission.

She continued her story, "One boy even called me 'bird-brain' once." She leaned in seriously, "...but just once."

Nicole covered her mouth with her hand, and then dropped it slightly, "Did you beat him up?"

"In my defense," said the captain, "I was a bit of a tom-boy."

Karim slipped in, "Another shocker."

Aurelia looked at bin Nadal. "Speaking of such things," she asked, "don't we have a sparring match in two days?"

Karim laughed, "Actually, we do."

"I hear the crew is pretty evenly divided on their bets," commented Chase.

"Bets?" came from the captain.

Karim gently slapped Nicole's hand, "Shame on you for telling."

Sintina smiled. She looked up to the overhead and recited unemotionally, "As captain, I can not condone such actions, bah, bah, bah." Then she leaned in, "I need to get in on that. Who do I talk to?"

Karim and Nicole both burst out in laughter. After it died down, bin Nadal jested, "I wouldn't bother. I'm planning on throwing the fight."

"Not if I do first!" boosted Aurelia.

In the midst of their mirth, the com activated. "Bridge to Lieutenant Chase."

The noise subsided, "Go ahead, bridge."

"A personal communiqué is coming through for you."

Nicole responded, "Ok, I'll take in my quarters." She kissed Karim on the cheek and said, "I'll see you later." Then, she excused herself.

Once she was gone, Sintina asked, "You've passed the six-month mark. What do you think?" Gesturing to the door Chase had just gone through.

“Not many women would tag along on a dangerous situation blindly like she did,” said bin Nadal, referencing to last month’s incident when he stole the captain’s yacht, recovered Uhura, and helped prevent Norah Satie’s assassination.

“She’s defiantly latched on to you,” observed the captain.

The security chief considered, “Is that a bad thing?”

Sintina shrugged as she took another drink.

The door hissed open. Nicole entered her quarters. She noticed her computer had a flashing icon. She sat and touched it. A dark-skinned human appeared. His short hair had a touch of grey, as did his mustache. He said, “Security protocols active.”

Nicole tapped on her console, “Confirmed.”

The man wore a black suit. He templed his hands, “It’s time to move to contingency plan omicron. The incident with Satie pushed them over the edge.”

“Understood,” said Nicole, somberly.

The man continued, “Interrogate the tactical chief first. I want to know about any other contact he’s had.”

“Yes sir,” she rejoined, “How may I proceed?”

“There is a natural source of hyperonic radiation near your location. It hasn’t been added to the official charts yet. Make sure the ship goes through it, with their shields down. The details, I’ll leave up to you.” He reached to something off screen and the display returned to the United Federation of Planets insignia.

‘Lieutenant’ Chase could see her reflection in it.

CHAPTER 2

Stardate: 53765.7 (7 October 2376)
USS Independence, Tactical Officer's Quarters
Alpha Quadrant, Occupied Cardassian Territory

Karim roused himself awake. The first thing he saw was Nicole's radiant face. Her golden hair was in chaos. He stared at her for a few minutes before she began to rustle.

Lt. Chase stretched and sighed deeply, exposing her bare breasts from the sheet. She rolled on her side and looked at her lover. "Morning sweaty," she said, still waking up.

He offered, "We have a few hours until our duty shift."

Nicole understood the implications. "True," she said, caressing his face, "But I have a project I want to work on. I want to get an early start."

Bin Nadal sighed in half-mock disappointment, "Alright." He kissed her, then rolled away to get up, "I've been slacking on my training anyway. I can't have Sintina embarrassing me too early in the fight."

"I take it," she concluded, "you're going to be in the holodeck."

He nodded, "If one is open."

Kimula sh'Somachanar sat across a small glass table from Jinal. They ate assorted fruit for breakfast. She watched him eat. He was, of course, keenly aware she was looking. Every bite he took seemed rehearsed. Occasionally he glanced up. She found it amusing.

The Andorian had always found Jinal to be an enigma. She served with him for nearly a year on the *Midas*. He was distant and aloof. She, on the other hand, was one of the most outspoken people on the ship. During the war, many people found comfort in the arms of a shipmate, but not Jinal; at least, not as far as she knew. He worked his duty shift, often put in extra hours, and retreated to his cabin.

Once they were both assigned to the *Independence*, she resolved herself to reach out to him. She wasn't sure if her interest was that of a friend, therapist, or more. Her feelings for him had become more intense once Jinal was stabbed at *Starbase 17*. The sudden emotion surprised her. Jinal had been injured before during the war; but this time, something was different.

Kimula decided to be more aggressive, as Andorian females have a reputation for being. It was difficult to get passed his guard. *'Why should two people be alone when they don't have to be?'* she reasoned. She didn't know where this relationship would go, but she wanted to find out.

She started noticing his reactions immediately. At first, she attributed it to his inexperience with intimate relationships due to his Vulcan upbringing. Soon, she suspected something more.

Many Vulcans showed some level of emotion. She wasn't overly concerned with that, itself. It was the emotions he was showing that concerned her. Jinal was almost always tense and jumpy. Kimula diagnosed him with some form of anxiety disorder awhile ago. She hoped to get him to open up about what specifically was causing it, but he never took the bait. The closer she got, the more nervous he seemed. Months passed...he still seemed afraid of talking about anything very personal, especially his family.

Eventually, she backed off. The relationship settled into a predictable pattern: they ate breakfast in the morning, went to the "Game Room" after their shifts, and then he went back to his isolation for the rest of the night; nothing more. It was now more of a habit, and a desire to help, for Kimula than a desire for romance.

Lately, she had done some research on Vulcan culture and a possibility entered her mind. She wanted to bring it up in conversation, but an opportunity never presented itself. She decided it never would, so she would have to create it. The Andorian finally said, in the most casual tone she could muster, "I didn't realize how relatively common *V'tosh ka'tur* were among your people." Kimula cringed immediately for her lack of tact.

Jinal's response was not what she expected. In fact, he seemed to be searching his mind for the term.

She added, "You know, 'Vulcans without logic.'"

“Ah, of course,” he responded. Then, he took a moment to think back and apply the comment to himself. A hint of nervousness broke through, “You think I’m too emotional?”

“Well, no...I mean I’m not complaining,” Kimula backpedaled. “It’s just...I can see how much strain you put yourself under; always reading tech manuals and journals.” She stumbled, “I mean...I know you want to be the best engineer you can be...that’s a good thing. But, you’re already a great engineer. You don’t have to put yourself under all that pressure. I can see it affecting you, Jinal. I’m worried about you.”

His eyes wandered, “I see.”

She found her justification, “As ship’s counselor, I just want you to relax a little.” She reached out her hand and placed it on his, “I don’t know what burden you’re carrying, but I would like to help you with it.”

Jinal’s face became flushed with green. He became very unsettled. “I...I’m needed in engineering.” He left his plate.

“Jinal, please, let’s talk,” pleaded Kimula.

He made a dash for the exit, “Perhaps later.” The hatch closed behind him.

Karim bin Nadal’s hands made a small circle around his chi point, just below the navel. He sat on his lower legs, meditating. A few meters away, another, much smaller, man sat. The tactical officer knew it was a replica of the grandmaster of Isshin-ryu, Tatsuo Shimabuku. The Japanese man was dwarfed by the Persian.

They seemed to be in a dirt courtyard on Earth. Both wore the traditional gi. Karim had been there, motionless, for nearly half an hour. Suddenly, the small man rolled and struck bin Nadal’s throat with a knife hand strike. He was caught totally off guard by the attack and choked. He began to stand but Shimabuku swept his legs out from under him. The dirt puffed up when he landed.

A small, bare foot landed on his chest. Tatsuo then, stepped back. He spoke in English, but with a heavy accent, “You let your guard down, karate-ka.”

Karim finally sat up, "I'm sorry, sensei. I have no excuse."

"It is always good to be relaxed, but never good to be unaware. Do not confuse the two," explained the grandmaster.

Bin Nadal curtsied, "Yes sensei."

"Now," said the Okinawan, "let's practice Seisan Kata."

Lieutenant Chase entered the bridge with a cup of hot coffee. She looked over at the center seat; Captain Aurelia occupied it. She was reading a padd, most likely containing the repair status of the hull. It took damage in their battle against the *Philadelphia* and later when a bomb exploded in the ambassador suite.

Nicole looked over the bridge. Virak, Karim's Vulcan second-in-command, was at tactical. A Denobulan cadet manned the helm. Petty Officer Dorian was at ops. Windslow was off-duty; as was Kimula and Tang. Another officer was doing research at science station one.

Chase walked over to the operations alcove. "Wanna get out of here a little early?" she asked Dorian. He eagerly accepted the offer and left.

She placed her beverage on a safe spot and sat. With a sigh, she began her work. Within a few minutes, her preparations were complete. It was time to begin. Again, she looked over at the captain. Aurelia suspected nothing.

Chase was sympathetic to the captain. She never really bought into the existence of Section 31. Aurelia was simply doing what she thought was best. Just then, Nicole decided to take the unusual step of exposing herself.

Nicole Chase began to make verbal commands to the computer. There was no going back now. "Computer, I'm thinking of a number. It's a prime number." She was talking loud enough to gain the attention of the bridge crew.

Aurelia looked over, "What are you..."

The ops officer returned her gaze but continued, "That number is thirty-one."

Instantly, all of the bridge stations, with the exception of operations, went totally dark. The computer stated, "All ship functions have been transferred to your command."

The captain shot up, "What the hell?"

"Computer," ordered Chase, "erect a level 10 forcefield around my station." A flash of light went around Nicole.

Aurelia stomped closer, "Computer, return bridge functions. Authorization: Aurelia Gamma-Xi-Echo 489."

The familiar feminine voice of the computer was silent.

"Computer, respond!" yelled the captain. She blazed at Nicole, "What the hell have you done with my ship!"

Chase swiveled in her seat to address Aurelia. She seemed calm and collected, "Relax, Captain. If you behave yourself, I'll explain."

'If I behave myself,' fumed Sintina. She strode to the weapons' locker and grabbed a phaser. The captain aimed at the forcefield.

"Captain, that won't do any good," advised Chase.

Aurelia pressed on the trigger...nothing. She lowered her aim. A look of confusion crossed her face.

Chase reached over and took a sip of coffee. She then, offered, "I've remotely deactivated all the phasers on the ship."

Unable to find another use for it, Sintina ripped the phaser at Nicole. It was, of course, ineffective, but it felt good. The phaser bounced off the energy barrier. She spat, "Who are you?"

"If you didn't have such a terrible case of denial," began Nicole, "you would have figured that out already."

Sintina simply shot daggers at her.

The lieutenant continued, "I'm a Section 31 operative, Captain. I was sent here to observe. We found out about Karim's knowledge of us and wanted to

know how much a threat he was. Unfortunately, you have him to blame for all this. If he hadn't asked so many questions, he wouldn't have caught our attention. I'm sure, he's told you about it as well." She rested her mug, "Now, who did Karim say sent him on the mission to get Uhura?"

Aurelia reflected for a moment. Chase was right about one thing, it was Karim who brought 31 to her attention. About six months ago, D'nas, Tang, and Jinal were arrested. It turned out to be all a ruse to gauge Aurelia's personality. It was then, Karim introduced her to Admiral Nechayev. She was part of a covert group that attempted to undermine Section 31's efforts. Aurelia was dubious about her 'group.'

She didn't want to believe the Federation could have an organization like 31. Even if it did, perhaps it was justified. Maybe Nechayev, Uhura, and bin Nadal were ultimately doing a disservice to Federation security. It was a view Sintina had held...until a few seconds ago.

Aurelia crossed her arms in defiance, "You don't honestly expect me to answer that."

"No," said Nicole, "but it was worth a shot. I'll just get what I need out of Karim."

The captain shot back, "He'd never tell you!"

She smirked, "We'll see."

"Give me my ship back, you bitch!" Sintina blurted.

"Sticks and stones..." rejoined Nicole. "Besides, it's not that easy," she continued, "you've upset some very powerful people. They were willing to overlook your involvement in exposing Admiral Whatley and General Wo'toth's little plot to embarrass the Romulans." She stood up in the containment field, "But then, you helped prevent Satie's assassination. You have no idea how much time and resources went into that plan. Now, the Federation will have an uncontrolled element in its highest office. It will take years for the organization to fully recover from that failure."

Aurelia began to understand how dire the situation was, "Are you going to kill us?"

The agent sighed, "Before I answer that, I want you to know the respect I hold for you. The *Midas* was responsible for 26 enemy kills during the war. That's rather impressive for an *Ambassador*-class." She shook her head, "It's a shame, really. You were chosen for this assignment because of your skills in battle. But then, Karim put a seed of doubt in your mind, and he dragged you down with him. *He* was your undoing."

Again, the captain demanded an answer, "Are you going to kill us?"

"Not really," she stated, "I'm just putting you to sleep." Nicole added, "The radiation I'm taking the ship into will kill you."

Sintina pounded a fist onto the forcefield. It gave her quite a shock, but her rage overrode the pain. "I'll kill you!"

Chase tilted her head, "I'm afraid you won't have the opportunity." She shrugged, "But look on the bright side, you won't feel a thing." She raised her voice slightly, "Computer, isolate holodeck one with a level 10 forcefield and begin pumping the Tal'Shiar compound into the air, 30 parts per million."

By now, all the bridge crew was standing around the operations station. Aurelia moved to within centimeters of the field. She screamed, "I will hunt you down. I swear it!"

Chase frowned, "I was hoping for something a bit more colorful than that, Captain."

Sintina began to get light headed. She felt like she was floating for a moment. The deck felt like a cloud on her face.

CHAPTER 3

Supplemental USS Independence, Main Bridge Alpha Quadrant, Occupied Cardassian Territory

Nicole hummed slightly. She sipped her coffee behind her protective barrier for several minutes; ensuring that all aboard were now unconscious...all but Karim in the holodeck. Finally, she ordered, "Computer, remove all the Tal'Shiar compound from the atmosphere." A hissing sound emanated from the vents.

The computer informed her the air was clean.

"Computer, drop the forcefield," she continued. As the ship responded, she got up and stepped over Aurelia and the others. As she left the operations station, it darkened. "Computer, set a course: 238 mark 117, and engage at warp 6."

Bin Nadal threw a vertical punch at his opponent. It was blocked and grabbed at the same time. The holographic grandmaster put an intense amount of pain on Karim's hand, forcing him to his knees. The Persian tapped out.

Tatsuo released him. "You are too ridged when you throw your punch. You need to be loose until the moment of contact."

"Yes sensei," bin Nadal responded. He got up. He was only slightly relieved when he realized it must be near the time for his duty shift. "Computer, what time is it?"

There was silence.

"Computer, respond."

Again, nothing.

"Computer, exit."

He exchanged a glance with Shimabuku, despite the fact the hologram was programmed to be unaware of such commands. Karim was beginning to regret not bringing his combadge.

The Section 31 agent observed the events taking place in the holodeck, via a monitor on science station one. "Let the games begin," she stated, darkly. "Computer, activate holo-emitters on all decks and disable safety protocols."

Lieutenant Commander bin Nadal searched the dirt courtyard for the hidden control panel. It was a safe guard put in place since before the war. If one found themselves unable to call for the arch, an auxiliary panel was "hidden" by holographic objects, but could still be accessed.

There were only so many places it could be. He moved to a loose brick in a nearby wall, but then he heard the familiar noise of the heavy holodeck hatch opening. A few meters away a seemingly magical doorway appeared. Someone was standing in the threshold. He moved closer.

"Sintina," he called once he recognized the figure, "What's going on? The computer wasn't responding to my commands."

"I don't know," she admitted. "I've been looking for someone...anyone, who wasn't knocked out. You're the only one I've found."

"Knocked out?" Karim repeated.

Aurelia stepped back and ushered him into the corridor, "See for yourself."

The security officer left the holodeck. His unbleached, cotton gi was soiled with dirt on the back, elbows, and knees. He looked about and saw two crew members on the deck immediately. He turned back to his captain, "What happened?"

She shrugged, "I know as much as you do. I was in holodeck two. When I came out, I saw this."

"So the holodecks protected us somehow." conjectured bin Nadal.

"It seems that way," Sintina said. "The computer isn't responding to me, either. And I've been locked out of the bridge."

"I know you don't want to hear this," he began, "but it sounds like sabotage."

Her face was cold, "I know. But who could pull it off?"

Karim sighed, "I've heard of the Maquis and some other groups using a cascade virus to wipe the memory core of computers before." He added, "But if that were the case, how could the holodecks still be working?"

"I don't think the core's been wiped. The computer is still up and running. It's just we've been denied access somehow," Aurelia responded.

"This could be Section 31's move against us," ventured the tactical chief.

She rolled her eyes, "Ah yes, your boogie-man, Section 31."

"Do you have a better theory?" he countered.

Aurelia rested against the bulkhead. She conceded, "No." The captain propped herself back up, "If it really is Section 31, just sending out a distress call won't be enough. We need to contact your little opposition group."

"I don't see what the admiral could do to help us in this situation." He continued, "In my opinion, we should find some way to get to the bridge and regain control of the ship."

"Don't you think I've tried that!" Sintina snapped. "I've tried every route I could think of to get access to the bridge and the computer. I finally got disgusted and came looking for help."

Karim put his hands out in concession. Then, he asked, "So you haven't tried to send a distress call?"

She cocked her head, "How could I, without access to the computer?"

Bin Nadal smiled. He was something of a communications specialist, at least when it came to covert means. He spent two years in Starfleet Intelligence. It wasn't a long stint, but it was long enough for him to pick up some tricks of the trade. Once he learned of Section 31, he had done some reprogramming of an auxiliary communications terminal on deck six. It served as his access

to Admiral Nechayev and any other discreet communiqués he wanted to make. A sudden feeling of shame washed over him when he realized he now had to admit its existence. “I ah...I have a way to get a message out,” he offered.

The captain crossed her arms and put on a small smirk, “I figured you might.”

“It still runs through the main computer,” he explained, “but its access protocols are totally different from normal means.”

“I’ll write you up later,” Sintina commented. She added, “Lead the way.”

Jinal became aware of the carpet under his cheek. His eyes opened. Some saliva had escaped his mouth and now formed a small puddle. He wasn’t the only one on the deck. The Romulan pushed himself up. He was in engineering. Out of instinct, he jumped up to check a readout of the warp core containment field...it was stable.

“Engineering to bridge,” he requested.

Nothing.

He sat on a stool, overlooking the M/AM reactor. “Computer, what’s the status of internal communications?”

Silence was his response.

Jinal moved to a consol to get some answers when he realized he couldn’t get the computer out of standby mode. He was effectively locked out. He looked around again at all the bodies on the deck.

His mind was in chaos. What had happened? Why was he the only one? Why did it have to be him? Was he supposed to save the ship? Why was the computer not responding? Was everyone else dead? He realized he could find out the answer to the last question.

Jinal went to his knees and checked the pulse of the nearest crewmate. She was alive. He moved to the next...again, alive. He rested back against some panels. At least they weren’t dead.

'What can I do?' he questioned. *'Alright, calm down...calm down.'* Jinal had only just realized he was hyperventilating. He caught himself and relaxed slightly.

The engineer returned to the stool. He exhaled, ran his fingers through his black hair, and rested his head on the useless controls. He was ashamed of himself...of his panic. It was just further proof of his complete failure to live up to Vulcan standards.

CHAPTER 4

Supplemental USS Independence, Deck 3 Alpha Quadrant, Occupied Cardassian Space

After catching his breath and regaining some composure, Jinal began moving to the bridge. Besides engineering, it would be the next logical place to find out what was going on. He grabbed a small tool case and emergency door handle on his way out. The non-functioning lifts deterred him very little. He was now in a cramped Jefferies tube under deck two. Truth be told, he was rather comfortable in the small access tunnels. On particularly tough days, he sometimes hid out in the tubes to get away...he feigned that repair work needed to be done, of course.

The mock-Vulcan reached the overhead hatch. He would come up just outside of the first officer's office. Then, he could take one of the twin stair cases up to the bridge.

Nicole observed Karim and the Aurelia recreation move to the lower decks on the main viewer. The operative sat triumphantly in the center seat.

The computer alerted her, "Approaching designated coordinates."

"Very well," she said, "Slow to one-fourth impulse."

"Acknowledged," the ship responded.

"At current speed and heading, how long until the hyperonic radiation becomes fatal to the crew?" she casually inquired.

"Three hours, twenty-nine minutes."

She began to say, "Plenty of time..." when she noticed movement out of the corner of her eye. Her head swished around. It was the chief engineer, Jinal. His jaw slacked and his eyes were wide open. He stared into her face. *'How long had he been there?'* Too long, she concluded.

Nicole got up slowly and began backing up, in the direction of the ops station. "Now... why are you awake?" she asked. It was more thinking aloud.

“Why are you doing this?” Jinal asked in a quiet shock.

She ignored his question, “I chose a very specific compound to disable the crew.” She continued to move back, “It was developed by the Tal’Shiar. They liked it for a simple reason. It affects nearly every Federation species, including Vulcans.” She quickly knelt down, grabbed the phaser off the deck, and pointed it at Jinal. “Computer, reactive the phaser I’m holding.”

A confirmation tone sounded.

Jinal froze. His best shot for cover was back down the staircase. He got the sense she wasn’t going to fire yet, so he forced back his flight response.

The thirty-one agent continued, “It renders them unconscious for several hours.” She stepped closer; more confident with the weapon. “But it only affects Romulans for a few minutes.”

Jinal felt nauseous. This was it. He could no longer hide. His lie was over.

Chase examined him. Most Tal’Shiar operatives would have killed themselves by now. Jinal didn’t have the demeanor of someone in their ranks. She came to another conclusion about him, “I suppose you’re a political refugee and you lied on your Starfleet application.”

The engineer was amazed at her powers of deduction, but he said nothing.

“That’s too bad,” she commented, “Had you been Tal’Shiar, I would probably get you off this ship alive.” She adjusted the setting on the phaser.

There was no more reason to stall, Jinal decided.

Nicole re-aimed and fired, but the Romulan had thrown himself down the stairs in time to avoid the discharge. She ran after him and looked down the stairs. He was gone. *‘No matter,’* she thought. *‘The entire ship is my weapon.’*

Jinal had never moved so quickly on his hands and knees. Before he knew it, he was already on deck 4. He came to a junction and paused. His lips quivered and he breathed heavily. *‘She knows...she knows...what am I going to do?’*

The engineer had only just begun to calm himself, when the com activated. The voice was a taunting one, "Jinal...Jinal. I know where you are, Jinal."

His mind was able to form rational thoughts again, *'She has control of the computer. She's playing with me...How can I stop her?'*

The torment continued as he moved, "I'll make sure word gets out about you, Jinal. Anyone you know from the academy or from other postings will know you're a...will know you *were* a Romulan. I promise you that."

He finally began to find some confidence, or perhaps it was a new found freedom to express himself. He responded, "I didn't want to say anything before, but I always suspected you were a *veruul*."

Nicole scowled at the comment. She was about to block Jinal with a forcefield, but the conversation on the main screen caught her attention. It seemed Karim was having his doubts. She had a moment of inspiration. The Romulan would have to wait.

Bin Nadal sat at the small, out of the way terminal. "The last fleet movement report I read indicated there were Starfleet vessels in this sector, a few frigates and escorts. Some could be here within a few hours."

"Forget them," rejoined the Latina captain, "we need to contact the admiral, so the group knows about our situation."

He chuckled despite himself, "You have the wrong impression about them, Captain. They can't just swoop in from nowhere and save us."

"Still," she persisted, "we should give them a heads up."

Karim regarded Sintina. She was often headstrong and impulsive, but not like this. It wasn't like her to so completely change her mind. It was even less like her to ask help from a group of people she essentially considered rogues. *'Maybe this incident has changed her mind,'* he considered. A much more disturbing thought occurred to him, *'Did she really try to go to the bridge?'* The security chief decided to gamble, "I'm going to send out a distress

message first. Then, I can contact Admiral..." He caught himself, "...the admiral." He might be worrying for nothing, he realized, but he always considered borderline paranoia to be a positive attribute.

"Wait!" she grabbed his hand from initiating the communication.

Immediately, bin Nadal logged out of the station, stood up, and backed off. "Why wait...*Sintina*?"

She seemed at a loss. The doppelgänger began to mumble something, but was interrupted.

"Commander, that's not the captain!" yelled Jinal from a nearby junction.

Karim nodded, "I'm beginning to figure that out."

The two men cornered Aurelia, she backed off in submission, and suddenly dissolved. It was immediately clear, she was a hologram. Less than a second later, a two meter tall ogre replaced her. He recognized it from one of his *D&D* figures.

"Oh, cute," Karim commented, right before the creature lunged at him with a massive club. The security officer managed to roll away from the cumbersome attack.

Jinal reached into his kit and retrieved a laser cutter. He'd have to get close to use it.

The wooden club smacked into the deck, but once again missed its target. Bin Nadal kicked behind the monster's knee. Its thick skin scratched his bare instep. The ogre buckled but stayed on its feet.

It was the opportunity the engineer was waiting for. He ran up to the beast and plunged the laser into its neck.

The creature bellowed in simulated pain and collapsed. It lay there motionless for several seconds before anyone talked.

Karim finally stood and tightened the belt on his gi. He looked at the ogre, "Someone has a sick sense of humor."

"It's Lieutenant Chase, she's the one in control of the ship," Jinal offered. "The real captain is unconscious on the bridge. I saw her myself."

"Nicole?" the Persian questioned in disbelief. "How do you know?"

"She was awake and on the bridge," he explained.

Karim looked skeptical.

Jinal added, "She tried to shoot me."

Bin Nadal returned to the communications terminal only to discover the power to it had been cut; halting their best shot at rescue. He dipped his head and mourned before turning to the engineer. "Then why are you conscious?" he asked.

The engineer backed up to the bulkhead and slid down to sit on the deck. He looked up, "Nicole, she's a section 31 operative."

"Impossible," huffed the security chief.

Jinal continued, "She told me the compound she used on the rest of the crew didn't affect me the same because..." He drifted off for a moment. Then, he admitted, "well, because I'm Romulan."

Karim held his head. He could feel a headache coming on, "Is anyone who they say they are on this ship?"

The Romulan got up and placed a hand on his fellow officer, "I'm sorry about Nicole."

The Persian shrugged it off. "Are you part of the military or Tal'Shiar?"

Jinal pleaded with his response, "Neither, I'm the same person you've served with all this time. I just lied about being Vulcan." He went on with veracity, "I swear it."

Karim took a moment for himself. He contemplated his failure...on many issues. Jinal had deceived him, Nicole had deceived him...and he was supposed to be the security chief. He used to pride himself in seeing things that others didn't. It seemed he was just as blind as everyone else.

Not knowing where else to lead the conversation, he looked up from beneath his hand, "Are you sure about Nicole?"

Jinal nodded, and asked, "What do you want to do?"

He and Nicole had been intimate for months. He didn't want to believe Jinal, but something told him it was true. It was all a lie. Was he so gullible? Could Section 31 get so close and he not even suspect it? Or did he just ignore the signs? They got the best of him...*she* got the best of him.

Over several seconds, bin Nadal's disbelief mutated into fury. He straightened up and looked right into the Romulan's eyes, "We're going to the bridge and we're going armed." The security chief began to stride down the corridor.

Jinal countered, "But she has the only active phaser."

He paused. The revelation took some wind out of his sails. Then, a wicked grin emerged on his face, "There's one firearm on this ship she can't deactivate."

CHAPTER 5

Supplemental USS Independence, Deck 5 Alpha Quadrant, Occupied Cardassian Territory

Commander Karim bin Nadal moved with a purpose. His mind set on a single immediate goal: get to Sintina's quarters on deck three and grab her gun. The newly revealed Romulan engineer was abreast of him; sometimes breaking into a run to keep up with bin Nadal's pace. They walked in silence for several seconds.

Jinal asked cautiously, "So what was that Captain Aurelia hologram doing?"

"She was trying to get the name of my contact," he said, without looking over.

The engineer followed up with, "Contact for what?"

"A type of resistance..." Karim slowed, "...group." He stopped and seemed to be looking for something.

"What is it?"

The Persian paced slightly, "Why no forcefields?"

"What?"

Bin Nadal elaborated, "You said Nicole has complete control of the ship...so why hasn't she stopped us?"

The Romulan considered, "I don't know. You think she's leading us into a trap?"

"Why would she have to?" he countered, "She could turn any part of the ship into a trap."

Jinal shrugged in bewilderment.

Karim examined the Romulan for a tense moment. He put more distance between himself and Jinal. "Unless," he started, "She's still tricking me."

The engineer didn't respond.

"Damn," commented Agent Chase. Via security monitors, she watched Karim and her 'inspiration.' The results were not what she had hoped for. She said to no one, "He's too suspicious now. I'll have to take a more direct approach."

The Section 31 operative walked up behind the command chairs. She couldn't forget her other problem, "Computer, where is Lieutenant Jinal?"

"Lieutenant Jinal is in Jefferies tube 3-C."

She dismissed the report, "No computer, search for his bio-signature, not combadge."

The correction came, "Lieutenant Jinal is in the computer core access room."

The response caught her off guard, "What!" She should've killed him first, then deal with Karim. It was a foolish mistake. She underestimated the passive Romulan. "Computer isolate that area with a forcefield and create holodeck characters to kill him."

"Specify hologram parameters."

Nicole thought for a moment. She grinned and ordered, "Tal'Shiar officers."

"I don't know how to convince you; I'm not a hologram," pleaded Jinal's duplicate.

"How did Captain Camar die on the *Midas*?" inquired bin Nadal.

Before the hologram could respond, it dematerialized.

Karim wasn't as shocked as he thought he'd be. He knew he was in trouble now. Lacking a better plan, he ran down the corridor. The security chief didn't get far. In mid-step, the deck 'pulled' him violently down. He was pinned to the carpet.

A com line opened, "*The gravity plating on deck five is now set at 15 G's.*"

He instantly recognized the voice...it was Nicole. Speaking was a struggle, but he managed, "Going to...torture me now?"

"I tried to do it the easy way," she coyly responded, "but you weren't cooperative."

The Persian only grunted.

"And here is negative 15 G's."

Karim was flung from the deck to the overhead. He crashed into the lighting.

"Positive 15."

He slammed into the deck once again. He was sure his nose had been broken, and he felt the crack of a rib.

"Should I even bother asking you anything yet?" thought Nicole aloud. *"No,"* she concluded, *"I'm sure you haven't been broken yet."*

The very bulkheads were a combination of isolinear chips, optics, and bio-neural gel packs. Jinal was amazed he made it this far. His mind was now focused on bringing down the main computer. The Romulan was glad to have something else to think of other than Nicole's discovery. He thought of initiating a cascade failure, but that would take hours to do any real damage to the computer. He needed to crash the computer now. Maybe he could disconnect the ODN matrix to isolate the core from the rest of the ship. He opened his tool kit to start the sabotage.

Before he could begin, he heard the distinctive sound of forcefields going up. He spun around. Jinal saw two Romulans materialize in front of him. They were armed with disruptors.

Karim looked at a bloody tooth on the deck, next to his face. It was the only thing he *could* look at. His body was battered. The pain had become so widespread that he felt numb. Nicole must have anticipated the mercy of endorphins, because she changed the nature of her smiting.

He felt the gravity return to normal for a moment. The security officer could breath easily again. It was like heaven compared to the last few minutes.

"Ready to tell me who this admiral is?" an omnipresent voice asked.

When bin Nadal tried to talk, he merely coughed up some blood.

"I guess not."

Instantly and without warning, Karim found himself under water. He swallowed quite a bit before he realized what was happening. She was going to water torture him with holograms. Out of instinct, he swam up...only to find no air. The water went all the way to the overhead.

The water vanished as quickly as it appeared. Again, he fell to the deck. Karim struggled to catch his breath. Before he could, the process started again.

CHAPTER 6

Supplemental USS Independence, Computer Core Alpha Quadrant, Occupied Cardassian Territory

Lieutenant Jinal quickly ducked behind the only cover he had, a free standing station, as the green disruptor beams began to burn through the air. There were two Tal'Shiar officers firing at him, a male and a female. No doubt, Chase thought it would cause additional fear...she was right. The last time he saw people in those uniforms, they were murdering his parents.

He was pinned down. It wouldn't be long before the Romulans would advance and shoot him. He struggled to force back his panic. He looked around for something...anything that could help him. There was nothing. He couldn't disable the holograms via software, since he lacked access to it. Only a hardware malfunction could eliminate them. He noticed some circuitry burning as the blasts hit them. *'Obviously, the safety protocols are off,'* he noted.

Jinal knew what his best shot for survival was. He didn't have time to be an engineer anymore. But he was scared. The last time he attempted to fight off an attacker, he got stabbed. A dreadful thought occurred to him, *'I sure hope these are standard response holograms. If they're not, I'd pass right through them.'* Even if he succeeded, Chase could just send more holograms. He had to quickly destroy the core. *...'Would that work?'* he wondered to himself, as he thought of a possible solution. There was only one way to find out. The time for hiding was over. He could sense his attackers rounding the corner.

The engineer picked a side and lunged at one the holograms. It was the female. She seemed solid enough. Quickly, he found her weapon hand and pointed the disruptor at the other Tal'Shiar. Jinal was in front of her. *'Next time get behind the attacker!'* he chided himself. He pulled the trigger, even though it was still in her hand. The male Romulan fell. *'Standard response, thank gods,'* Jinal thought.

The female Tal'Shiar violently pushed him away. Jinal rolled on the deck. She aimed. He jumped for the fallen disruptor of the male hologram. He got it and brought it around. She fired. He fired.

Jinal flinched. Was he hit? Reluctantly, he opened his eyes. There was a scorch mark centimeters from his head. *'Did I get her?'* He looked over and

saw the bottom of her boots. He swallowed and remembered to breath. *'Get over it! No time!'* he reminded himself.

The Lieutenant scrambled to his feet and took the other disruptor. He then, slid on his knees to the computerized bulkhead. After manipulating the small control panel of each weapon, he placed them at strategic points within the circuitry. A hum emitted from both disruptors.

He couldn't escape the blast, due to the forcefields. If he was right, he wouldn't have to. The Romulan moved back to the doorway as the noise became louder and higher pitched. The sound was overwhelming; he covered his ears.

Less than a meter before him, the very air began to digitize. A huge Gorn formed. The reptile moved to mangle Jinal's neck with its massive jaw.

Karim gasped for air. While technically, any water in his lungs had dematerialized; his body could've been fooled. He was able to take three...four uninterrupted breaths. Had Nicole shown him some mercy? The approaching footfalls gave him his answer.

He felt a rough, strong hand pull at his collar. A Jem'hadar slammed him against the bulkhead. The facsimile demanded, "Tell me the name of the admiral!"

The Gorn turned back once he heard the overloading disruptors explode. The fireball wreaked havoc with the computer hardware. Panel after panel burst into flames. The reptile disappeared, as did the fireball and scorch marks from the initial explosion. Secondary fires still burned. The forcefields went down and the lights went out for a moment. Emergency lighting engaged.

The room was eerie. Small fires and red lights now illuminated the entire area. It was quiet, with the exception of the flames.

Jinal steadied himself with the bulkhead. He was in shock, *'It worked...I did it.'*

Bin Nadal fell to the deck once again. Had the Jem'hadar thrown him down? The security chief was limp. He tried to move under his own power but he couldn't. He lacked the will and the physical strength. He was so ashamed. He just wanted the pain to end. He coughed and whimpered the word, "Nechayev." Then, his consciousness faded away.

CHAPTER 7

Supplemental USS Independence, Main Bridge Alpha Quadrant, Occupied Cardassian Territory

Nicole watched as Jinal subdued the holograms. She was amazed at his luck. She walked closer to the main screen, which was split between the events in the core and deck five. Jinal was doing something with the disruptors. *'He's going to overload them!'* "Computer," she ordered, "create a...a Gorn to kill Jinal!"

The machine responded with a confirmation tone.

"And delete the Romulan disrupt..." The feed ended and the lights failed. She was left in the darkness for several seconds before the emergency lighting initiated. She was silent for several seconds; cursing herself, again, for her priorities. She expected no response, but attempted it anyway. "Computer, report damage."

There was nothing; no tones, no consol illumination, only the constant red light from overhead.

Despite herself she screamed, as if it would intimidate the ship, "Computer, respond!"

The thirty-one agent stepped around slowly. She examined her surroundings. A feeling of vulnerability swept over her. She could no longer operate from the safety of the bridge. The operative centered herself, *'Come on, it's you against an engineer and a man half beaten to death.'*

She couldn't let up. She couldn't let Jinal turn this into a victory. His moral had to be tempered. Nicole tapped her compin, "Broadcast to all units in range. Jinal...Jinal...answer me you Romulan son of a bitch!"

The lieutenant was still catching his breath when he heard a distant voice. It was calling his name. Cautiously, he ventured into the corridor. It seemed to have multiple points of origin. He rounded a corner to discover a crewman on the deck. Chase was hailing him through everyone's combadge. He knelt down, smiled at the insult, and picked the insignia off the victim. He

answered in his practiced Vulcan tone, "There appears to be a technical issue with the ship's computer. I estimate it will require eight weeks to repair."

"Oh you're a funny man now, huh?" came the reply. "The only thing you've done is to guarantee your death and the deaths of everyone else on board. You've saved no one."

"What do you mean?"

"I've set a course for a field of hyperonic radiation. Are you familiar with it?"

Jinal enthusiasm dimmed, "I know it renders transporters inoperable and used to randomize the discharge of old phasers."

"It's also lethal," she added. "Even though the impulse engines are off-line, we're still drifting toward it. With the shields down, the exterior of the ship will reach over 56,000 rads."

The engineer's heart sank.

"But don't worry," Nicole continued, "You'll be dead long before that happens. It's lethal at only 1,000 rads...give or take. We're already entered the very perimeter of the radiation."

"You're lying," responded Jinal, "Your profession requires deceit and you're just trying to unnerve me."

Her voice was too convincing, "Get a tricorder and check the radiation levels for yourself."

Jinal paused.

"Go ahead. I'll wait," chided the agent.

After some hesitation, he got the tricorder from his tool kit and did as she suggested. He closed his eyes in rejection of the display.

Chase continued, "According to my readings, you have two hours and forty-three minutes until the levels become fatal. In a few minutes, you'll develop a headache; nausea will kick in, then fatigue, and finally death from cell disintegration."

He squatted against the bulkhead and put his head in his hands.

"...And thanks to you, there is no way I, or anyone else, can stop the ship...Look on the bright side, thanks to the sacrifice of your crew, the radiation will be charted and no one else will have to suffer the same fate." She slipped in, "I hope that doesn't give you too much comfort."

A thought came to him, "How are you going to get away?"

"Now why would I tell you that?"

'...Talking...who's talking?' Someone...Nicole and...and Jinal were talking. Karim's eyes opened. His eyes began to focus. *'Where was the Jem'hadar? Did he hear his moment of weakness? Did Nicole get what she wanted and now ignoring him?'* A faint hope entered into him. *'Emergency lighting? Why would that be on?'* The Persian cried out as he summoned his body to roll on to his stomach. The pain was unbearable, but something had changed and he wanted to find out what. He crawled in agony toward the voices.

Nearby was an engineer on the deck. The officer didn't seem to be merely sleeping. Karim reached out for a pulse...there was none. It was then when he reclaimed his rage. It violently pushed aside any feelings of regret or self-pity. Nicole had not only tortured him, but everyone on deck five. How many had not survived the torment?

A goal...a single overriding thought...no, instinct...entered his mind. *'This has to stop!'* He forced himself to his knees and took the fallen shipmate's combadge. He was careful not to activate it, but continued to listen to the conversation. Karim attached it to his blood soaked gi and put one hand on the bulkhead, then another. With a suffering so intense, it brought him to tears, he stood. His sobs flowed freely, but bin Nadal continued to hobble down the corridor.

It had been a few seconds since Jinal last heard anything out of Lieutenant Chase. She must have closed the channel. *'A shuttle...that's the only way she can leave.'* His next thought was to go to the shuttle bay...but then what? Chase was armed; he wasn't. He needed help....He needed to see if bin Nadal was alright. The Romulan manipulated his tricorder. It registered two other

moving humanoids; one on the bridge, the other just entering sick-bay. *'At least he was still alive,'* thought Jinal before he headed out.

Bin Nadal's pain eased almost instantly after the anetrizine was injected. Next, he reached for some polyadrenaline. Normally, he frowned on taking stimulants; but this time, he didn't hesitate. He wondered if he would push his body too far without the gauge of discomfort. The thought was quickly pushed out of his mind.

Karim noticed the conversation had stopped over the compin. No doubt, Nicole was now on the move. He didn't have much time.

He exited sick-bay with an artificial swiftness. His next objective was still one deck up, in the captain's quarters.

Agent Chase left the bridge. She tracked Karim with a tricorder in one hand and wielded a phaser in the other. She preferred to not get her hands dirty, but the circumstances left her little choice. Besides, she still had time to get a name out of her former lover.

CHAPTER 8

Supplemental

USS Independence, Captain's Quarters

Alpha Quadrant, Occupied Cardassian Territory

Bin Nadal quickly found Aurelia's .45 Springfield pistol on a display stand. The projectiles and magazine were kept in a drawer underneath it. Aurelia once told him that it wasn't really a genuine from the 21st century, but rather a replica forged by one of the few gunsmiths left on Earth. She prided herself in the fact that it was hand made, not replicated. The bullets were also specially created for the gun. He had been surprised how heavy it was compared to a phaser. She showed him how to use it about a year ago in an impromptu firing range on the *Midas*. He filled the six round magazine and slapped it into place. Then, he removed the safety. *'It should be ready,'* he thought.

Karim exited the already open door. He didn't get one step before he saw Jinal with a tricorder in his hand. "Stop!" the security officer demanded as he brought the weapon to bear.

The Romulan raised his hands, "Commander?"

"I heard your little conversation with Nicole over the comline. Was that for my benefit? More psych ops?"

"You heard?" Jinal's face became pale. "Then you know." He dipped his head. Then it went up again, when he realized what Karim was implying, "I swear I'm not working with her."

A phaser beam came from behind Karim.

Instantly, he sought cover back in Aurelia's quarters. Jinal joined him. They stood on opposite sides of the hatch. The tactical chief eyed the Romulan with suspicion. He was done being deceived. Nicole had been with him for half a year. Jinal served on the *Midas* with him for a year, plus nine months on the *Indy*. If Nicole could trick him for that long, so could Jinal. Another phaser blast hit near the threshold. *'Why would Jinal be assigned to the Midas? It was possible the Tal'Shiar or 31 put him there?'*

Karim wanted to return fire but feared turning his back to the Romulan. He looked into Jinal's eyes. He was either a very good actor, or he was terrified.

The engineer didn't seem as concerned about the firefight, as he was about something else. Bin Nadal could see it in his face. Jinal's fear was of disappointment, not death.

The Persian took the chance. He swung his arm out the corridor and pulled the trigger...It clicked, but nothing more. He quickly retreated back. "What the...?"

Jinal offered, "Does it have a safety?"

"Yes, I turned it off!"

They heard footsteps and more phaser fire. Nicole was advancing.

"Does it work?"

"I've fired it before!" shouted bin Nadal. He tried to calm himself. Not an easy task; not only considering the situation, but the drugs flowing in his system. *'Ok, insert the magazine, take the safety off,...and...and something...damn it!'* Then it came to him, *'...pull the top of the gun back to chamber the first round!'* He did so, flung himself to the corridor deck, and fired.

Karim didn't hit Nicole, but the deafening sound of the weapon horrified everyone, including bin Nadal. Chase visibly jumped in panic and withdrew back around a corner.

Jinal covered his ears, "Are you sure that's not a sonic weapon?"

Bin Nadal ignored the comment and pointed at the corner of the wall. This thing had no stun setting. Was he ready to kill Nicole? Recent events entered his mind. This is the woman that tricked and tortured not only him, but others. He took her into his bed and his heart. To top it off, she was 31. How much information had she got from him? How many lives had his naivety put in danger?

"Karim," she called out, "it's Jinal! I was shooting at Jinal! He's Tal'Shiar! He's been manipulating both of us! ...Remember, his hologram told you I was Section 31 to get you to mistrust me. The Tal'Shiar wants the ship. They're going to steal it!"

"She's lying!" the engineer spat.

"You're the liar!" she countered. "You admit you were lying about being Vulcan. What else were you lying about?"

Bin Nadal looked back at Jinal. He stood up. The gun was pointed in Nicole's direction, but he kept the Romulan in his sights.

"Karim, trust me," Nicole pleaded. "I'm going to come out now. We can get Jinal to give us access to the ship." Slowly, and with the phaser pointed to the deck, she rounded the corner.

The security officer's mind was in chaos. He didn't shoot Nicole as she approached. Instead he backed himself against the bulkhead and did his best to cover both of them.

Jinal's eyes began to water. He said in a defeated voice, "She's lying."

Lieutenant Chase raised the phaser to the Romulan, "Tell us how to get out of here!"

The engineer tried to pull back the tears, "If you're going to kill me. Do it. I don't care anymore."

Karim examined both of them. His gut told him one thing and then his mind confirmed it. He had to be careful to not overplay his hand. He continued to cover both of them. "Why didn't you tell us you were Romulan, Jinal?"

"I...I should have," he stumbled, "It's just, I was young...and scared and...I was raised to distrust humans...I..."

Chase injected, "He's just giving you a sob story, so you'll believe him!"

The Romulan shot her daggers with his red and swollen eyes.

"Where you always Tal'Shiar or were you recruited later?" asked Karim.

"Commander! You can't believe her!" he barked.

The security chief pointed the antiquated weapon at Jinal. "This ends, now," he said with resolve. Then, he swung around to Nicole and brought the .45 caliber to bear. He fired. The bullet tore through her lower abdomen. She released her grip on the phaser and stumbled back to the bulkhead. Her hands covered her wound and she slid down to the deck.

"No...I don't believe her, Jinal," answered Karim. Then the security officer pointed at Nicole's head. "I cared for you...I loved you!"

She looked up, "It...was never personal."

"You cold-hearted bitch!" tears rolled down his cheeks. He aimed, "You won't be able to hurt anyone anymore!"

A phaser blast subdued the injured woman. She had been stunned. Karim spun around. Jinal now held the phaser.

Bin Nadal pointed the gun at Jinal and said in a fury, "What'd you do that for!"

The Romulan raised his hands and loosely held the phaser in a non-threatening manner. He responded genuinely, "I didn't want you to become a murder."

CHAPTER 9

Supplemental USS Independence, Deck 3 Occupied Cardassian Territory

After some debate, bin Nadal had allowed Jinal to perform a minimal amount of first aid to “Lieutenant” Chase’s wound. The bleeding, at least, was stopped. In addition, however, the security chief insisted that a sedative be administered to the Section 31 agent. She would no longer be a threat.

Once Jinal finished, he asked, “How did you know she was lying about me?”

Now that Nicole was unconscious, Karim allowed himself to relax a little. He took one large breath in an attempt to center himself. “First off,” he finally responded, “How would she know what your hologram said? ...Unless she was watching.”

The Romulan nodded.

“And second,” he looked at Jinal, “I saw how fearful you were...are of what I and others will think of you now.”

Jinal was surprised at how quickly bin Nadal cut to the core of his concerns. He looked at the carpet, “I don’t know how tell you how...regretful I am about deceiving you...all of you.” Again, his eyes watered, “I suppose no one will trust me again, even if I don’t get discharged from the fleet.”

Karim inhaled deeply and avoided eye contact.

Jinal noticed his distinct lack of reassurance. The Romulan continued, “I’ve seen first hand how the crew shuns Commander Windslow. They don’t do it to his face, of course, but I hear them talk behind his back...They’ll do the same to me.”

Out of necessity, and desire, the security chief changed the subject, “How much time do we have?”

After a grimace, the engineer took out his tricorder, “Two hours, twelve minutes.”

“We need to get a message out.”

The Romulan composed himself slightly and said, "The shuttles. That's how she was probably planning to leave. I bet their computers are operational."

"It's a plan," said the Persian. They began to walk toward the shuttle bay. After a few tense moments, Karim offered, "If you were out to break any records, I'm afraid you're too late."

"Sir?"

"You're not the first Romulan in Starfleet. I've heard of at least two others."

It was a slight attempt to put the engineer at ease. Jinal would take what comfort he could get.

The heavy door of the shuttle bay cracked; then, a hand came through...and another. The two men grunted as they forced the hatch open. It wasn't open all the way, but enough for them to enter.

Jinal strode to the nearest *Javelin* class fighter. Bin Nadal came behind him with a slight limp, though he still couldn't feel much by the way of pain. The engineer manually opened the cockpit and sat in the pilot's seat. He tapped a control...then again. He held his head in annoyance.

"What's wrong?" questioned Karim.

"Whatever lock-out protocol she used, it affected the fighter's computer as well." He spun around in the seat, "I can't do anything."

Karim rested an arm against the starfighter.

"And I doubt she'd be willing to release control," Jinal added.

Bin Nadal shook his head, "We're not even going to try that. I don't want that woman awake, let alone have access to a small craft. She's too dangerous. God knows what she could do." He thought for a moment and headed for the aft of the fighter. "What about the emergency transceivers. They're self contained." He reached the storage alcove and opened it. It was empty. "Where is it?"

"I'll check the other fighters," offered Jinal. A few minutes later, he came back and reported, "They're gone. All of them."

"Where they being worked on or something?"

"No."

Karim looked away, "She could have transported them somewhere so we couldn't find them."

"We don't have time to search the whole ship," the engineer observed.

"Assuming they're not floating in space."

Jinal threw up his arms in frustration, "Then, I don't see how we can get a message out."

Karim was taken back slightly as Jinal shed his Vulcan persona. *'I can't believe I never suspected him. I'm I that bad of a security officer?'* He brought himself to focus on the problem at hand. While he was in the academy, he heard a story about a Starfleet officer that was kidnapped by Ferengi a few years earlier. That officer was able to get a message out with limited access to the *Marauder's* computer. *'How did he do it again?'* The answer came. He looked at Jinal, "Does the subspace interference suppressor still have juice running threw it?"

"Juice?"

"Power."

"Oh...well, even if it doesn't, I could connect it to a battery," replied the Romulan. He continued, "Even if I get it running, the Section 31 program would prevent me from accessing..."

Bin Nadal cut him off, "You don't need to change anything. I just need to know if you can turn it on and off."

"I suppose, but what can you do with a warp field phase adjustment sub-system?"

"You're about to find out. Let's go."

In the bowels of ship, Jinal finished his jury rigging. "It's operational. Now what do you want me to do?"

Karim shifted his weight in the small crawl space. "Now we use Morse Code to send a distress signal." He sighed, "...and hope someone pays attention to their sensors."

"I'm not familiar with that type of communication."

"It's called an SOS. It's based on long and short tones, in this case, subspace background noise," explained bin Nadal. "Turn it on three times quickly, then three longer times, then three times quickly again." He bit his lip, "Or is it...three long, three short, three long?"

Jinal looked away from the machine and toward the commander, "You don't remember the sequence?"

"Hey!" started the security officer, in a half-earnest voice, "I've been through a lot today. Give me a break."

A slight smile came to the Romulan's face, "It shouldn't matter. It just needs to be a repeating pattern. *If* anyone notices it, they'll know something is odd." He disconnected and connected the power supply from the device several times. When it was done, he said, "I've repeated the long-short-long pattern three times."

Bin Nadal understood the chance was slim that anyone would even notice the signal, but at least the attempt was made. Jinal looked at him as if expecting further orders. He had no more to give. After several seconds, he thought of an obvious course of action. "Couldn't we get the crew to the escape pods and manually launch them?"

Jinal took out his tricorder and entered some data. He frowned, "No, we're too deep into the radiation field. Without being able to control the thrusters and the minimal armor; they would die just as fast."

Karim brainstormed again, "Well, can you fire up one of the impulse engines and turn the ship about?"

"Yes, but I'd need at least twelve hours to do it without the computer," was his disheartening response.

The security officer was persistent, "Thrusters?"

"Five hours."

Bin Nadal sighed, "Could we manually eject a torpedo or mine and rig it to explode to divert us?"

Jinal shook his head again, "It'd have to be close to push us. Without shields or the structural integrity field, that would be suicide."

"And if we eject the warp core and detonate it?"

"Same problem."

Karim was getting agitated, "Ok, *chief engineer*, do you have any ideas?"

The Romulan stared blankly at a random gel pack for a full minute, before responding, "There's no way we can stop the ship from going deeper into the radiation."

"I didn't live through the last few hours just to die anyway!" burst the tactical officer.

"The nacelles," said Jinal, almost oblivious to bin Nadal's outburst.

"What about them?"

"They're the most heavily shielded part of the ship. If we could get the crew into them, they *might* survive," the last part was rather unconvincing.

Karim nodded, "The anti-grav carts in the cargo bays should still be working, right?"

"Yes, they're independent units."

"We only have about an hour and a half. Let's get started."

The two began crawling out of the access area, when Jinal suddenly stopped.

“What’s the matter?” inquired the Persian.

The engineer looked up, “How do we pick who we get first?”

It was a disturbing question. In all practicality, they wouldn’t have time to move all ninety-five people. The reality set in...They would have to decide who would live and who would die. It was an overwhelming burden. Finally, Karim said, feigning confidence he didn’t feel, “We’ll get the children and their parents first. Then, start on deck one and work our way down.”

Luckily, Jinal didn’t add to bin Nadal’s contrition by objecting. The two silently press on. In the back of their minds, both knew their efforts were merely an exercise in futility, but it gave them the illusion of hope.

CHAPTER 10

Supplemental USS Independence, Port Nacelle Occupied Cardassian Territory

Karim suddenly dropped to his hands and knees. He felt the vomit flowing. There was no stopping it. It was the second time in the last 30 minutes. His stomach had been emptied the first time, now it was only bile. He waved off Jinal's assistance and recovered. "I'll be fine."

It was the radiation, Jinal realized. The Romulan was fairing a bit better, though, blisters began to develop on his hands. He looked back at the bodies on the "catwalk." Only thirteen people: The six children on the ship, Windslow and his wife, Zo'Kama, and four others lay motionless on the deck. "That's all of the children and their parents."

"Good," bin Nadal spat out some of the remaining acid. The security chief looked down at his gi. It was soiled with blood; gun grease, from tucking the weapon into his belt; and now vomit. *'I feel sorry for the person that has to put me in a body bag,'* he morbidly jibed. "Let's get the bridge."

"We have just under an hour, Commander," Jinal offered as they moved.

The bridge of the upgraded *Constitution*-class ship was rather quiet. Captain Sandhurst was in his ready room. Commander Ramirez silently read a new activity report for the sector in the center seat.

For the last two months, the *Gibraltar* had been tasked to escort humanitarian relief convoys to various Cardassian colonies. Despite the ever present threat of insurgents, the missions had been relatively uneventful.

Donald Sandhurst, however, didn't let down his guard. He knew all too well how quickly things can change for the worse. To that end, he ordered Chief Science Officer Kuenre Shanthi to monitor subspace chatter.

Shanthi programmed a search algorithm that constantly searched for unusual transmissions using a variety of parameters. The ebony skinned officer had nearly forgotten the program was still running when an indicator beeped. It wasn't an uncommon occurrence. There had been several 'hits' during the

last few weeks. After further investigation, most turned out to be natural phenomenon or otherwise non-threatening. The ensign, however, wasn't complacent. He brought up the information on what the computer had detected. After a moment's examination, he turned toward the center of the bridge, "Commander, would you mind taking a look at this?"

Liana Ramirez walked over with a smirk on her face, "Pick up another pulsar, Ensign?" referring to his mistake of last week.

'It was a weird pulsar, ok?' Kuenre thought to himself. He vocalized, "Not this time, sir."

Ramirez looked over his shoulder. She examined the data. "That can't be natural."

"No sir," Shanthi concurred.

"Run it through the UT and see if anything comes up."

"Aye." He read the results. "Several possibilities...one is Terran." He looked back at her, "Morse Code."

"Well, what's it say?" she asked eagerly.

"O-S-O."

Ramirez couldn't help but let out a chuckle, "Sounds like somebody needs to brush up on their Morse code." She raised her voice, "Captain to the bridge."

Seconds later, the slightly graying captain entered, "Something interesting, Exec?"

"We've got a possible distress signal."

"Possible?" Sandhurst repeated.

She gestured for him to look at the display at the science station, "I think someone meant to send out an SOS."

He hovered over Shanthi, "Using subspace interference?"

The first officer concluded, "Either someone is really in a bad way to resort to that technique, or someone wants us to *think* they're in a bad way."

The captain rubbed his chin, "Have you traced it to its origin, Ensign?"

"It's close, sir," he responded, "0.256 light years away...at 94 mark 85."

Sandhurst followed up with, "Perform a long-range scan of that area."

"Aye sir," rejoined the ensign. He manipulated the controls for several seconds before the results came back. "There's an intense pocket of hyperonic radiation in that area...it's limiting the scan."

"It could be a trap," began Ramirez. "An insurgent group might be trying to lure us into the radiation."

Sandhurst crossed his arms, "Maybe, but if there is a ship in that mess; they won't survive long. Besides, we don't turn a blind eye to distress calls...even if they are traps." He looked over to the helm, "Mr. Lightner, make your course 94 mark 85, maximum warp."

"Aye sir. Altering course," the ensign confirmed.

Next, the captain turned aft to the free standing tactical station, "Pava, advise the *Tomcat* and the *Xi'an* that we'll be taking a detour for a few hours." He added, "And run a tactical drill."

Lieutenant Jinal used the remote control to guide the anti-grav unit down the lift shaft; then, on to deck six. The cart was loaded down with several people. It was very...disturbing to see his shipmates in such a state.

Walking next to the cart in silence was Karim. Their pace was restricted to the speed of the carrier. It was extremely frustrating. Both felt like every second lost was another life gone. It was the most efficient way, however, due to the amount of people they could transport at once. This particular load carried Aurelia, Virak, Dorian, and the other bridge crew. Most of the slumbering people were developing boils. The cart reminded him of illustrations he saw in school about Earth's medieval period, specifically during a global wide plague. He felt more like an undertaker than a savior.

Jinal began to talk as they followed the floating platform. The Romulan started, "Actually, my parents were killed by the Tal'Shiar."

The conversation, if not the subject, was welcomed by the human, "Why?"

"My father was an aid to a liberal senator," he continued. "The senator wanted to warn the Federation of the Empire's decision to end their isolation after the Borg...or what was later found out to be the Borg...were detected on the outskirts of Romulan space."

"I take it," commented Karim, while he loaded a crew member they passed over his shoulders, "the powers that be didn't approve."

The Romulan shook his head, "They boarded the transport we were on...and murdered them."

Bin Nadal looked over. It was yet another tragedy of the day, "I'm sorry."

"I made it to an escape pod. I would have been killed as well, but a Starfleet vessel came and the Romulan ship was forced to flee."

Karim decided to ask, "Why did you join Starfleet in the first place if you were so weary of humans?"

He looked down, "I was a very angry young man, even though I couldn't show it. I just wanted to exact revenge against the Tal'Shiar. It was my goal for several years. Starfleet seemed to give that opportunity. I managed to get a nomination to the academy from one of the officers that saved my life. He felt I deserved the chance to serve."

"Did he know you were Romulan?"

"I never told him," rejoined the engineer, "but in hindsight, I think it was...an ignored truth."

Bin Nadal examined the pile of bodies before him, "Did you get over your desire for vengeance?"

Jinal stared off, "I suppose I did. As I focused on my studies and made new goals, the feeling just...faded."

The security officer paused and regarded Jinal, "If you had a chance, today, to kill those same Tal'Shiar that killed your parents, would you?"

He blinked several times and weighed what he probably should say and the truth. Finally, he realized they were one and the same. He answered, "I don't think so."

Karim huffed, "You're a better person than I am, Jinal."

CHAPTER 11

Supplemental USS Independence, Deck 3 Occupied Cardassian Territory

They reached deck three with the anti-grav lift.

Karim observed, "Most people will still be in their quarters. Nicole started this hell during breakfast."

The Romulan was ashamed for bring it up, but he couldn't stop himself, "Could we get Kimula first?"

If bin Nadal felt any disappointment in Jinal's request, he didn't show it. After only a second of consideration, he placed his hand on the engineer's shoulder. "Let's get her."

The entrance to the Andorian's quarters was forced open by both men. Then, Karim said, "You get her. I'll check the next room." He walked away.

Jinal found himself alone with Kimula. She was on the deck. It looked like she was putting the platter of fruit away when she fell. He knelt down next to her and placed his forehead on hers. "I've been so foolish. I'm so sorry." A tear fell, "I'll do anything to regain your trust and respect again. I promise, Kimula." With that, he took her into his arms and on to the awaiting platform in the corridor.

The cart was filling rapidly. Karim and Jinal became less discriminate about how the crewmembers were arranged on the unit. Not out of lack of respect, but because the clock was running down. They yelled a conversation from various rooms as they went about their task.

"So the doctor knew you were a Romulan?" pressed bin Nadal.

The engineer lumbered and placed a male Bolian on the platform. "I shouldn't have said anything about her. She was only doing what she thought was best.

I don't want her to get into trouble," he called out. In mid-sentence, he heard the human getting sick again. "Are you alright, Commander?"

After some other unpleasant sounds, the response came, "Yes...but D'nas isn't going to be happy about what I did to his uniform." He walked out of the room with the Tamarian, "As far as Zo'Kama is concerned, she should've known better than to lie for you."

"But just because I'm a Romulan doesn't mean..." Jinal began.

Bin Nadal cut him off, "This isn't about you being Romulan! You lied. You lied to Starfleet and you lied to everyone else that counts on you. Zo'Kama lied...and Winslow lied...and Nicole lied! Winslow got his punishment. Nicole, sure as hell, is going to get hers. You and the doctor are going to have to fess up and be punished as well!"

The tactical officer might as well of punched him in the gut.

Karim eased up a little once he saw Jinal's reaction, "Look, I'm not saying you should be cashiered out of the fleet...but there's an old Earth expression: You made your bed, now you have to lay in it."

The response was a mumble. "You're right. I deserve what's coming to me." He turned, and moved to the next nearest crewmember.

Bin Nadal wanted to console him, but now wasn't the time. *'Time.'* He yelled out, "Hey Jinal, how much time do we have?" Only after he said it, did he realize how casually had just asked how much time he had to live.

The rejoinder was despondent in tone, "Twenty-eight minutes."

Karim felt ill, again. *'We'll be lucky to get half the crew,'* he soberly surmised. A dark, but somehow comforting thought came to him. *'At least most of the people on deck five are dead already.'* He shook off the unsettling assessment and forced himself to move faster.

The duo had made a total of four trips to the port nacelle. Nearly 40 people now lined the floor of the compartment. Both had grown fatigued very quickly. Jinal had coughed up blood a few minutes ago and the lingering

polyadrenaline was the only thing keeping Karim on his feet. They were now on their fifth run.

They had passed Nicole Chase the last two trips. Jinal didn't want to press the issue; but this time, he stopped the cart.

"What are you doing?" asked bin Nadal, already knowing the answer.

The Romulan's response was succinct, "I'm putting her on the cart."

"It's bad enough we wasted time treating her gun shot wound. Now you have to waste more time by rescuing her?" He stormed closer, "She is trying to kill us all! I'm all for being humane, but she no longer deserves it!"

Jinal just couldn't bear to pass her up yet again, but he knew the commander wouldn't accept that. So, he employed his mock Vulcan logic. "She could be an invaluable source of information on Section 31."

As much as he wanted to, the security officer couldn't fault him. He snapped, "Fine, throw her on. I don't want to waste any more time."

Their bodies were now barely able to function, but Commander bin Nadal and Lieutenant Jinal managed to remove the people from their fifth load onto the catwalk. Green, bloody blisters now covered the Romulan and Karim didn't look any better. The tactical chief began to exit the nacelle's heavy hatch again when Jinal stopped him.

"Commander, times up." He said deadpan, "We need to seal up the nacelle, now. If we don't; we die."

Bin Nadal looked dazed, "But we didn't even finish deck four. We have to..."

"Sir," pleaded the engineer, "we can't get them."

Karim stood there for several long seconds. He was just rational enough to stumble back into the chamber. The hatch was sealed; and with it, the fate of over half the crew.

CHAPTER 12

Supplemental USS Independence, Port Nacelle Occupied Cardassian Territory

Karim looked down the long chamber and asked, "Be honest, Jinal. Will being in here really save us?"

The Romulan sucked in a painful breath, "At the levels of radiation Lieutenant Chase was talking about..." He slightly shook his head, "It will buy us time; that's all."

"How much time?"

He took out the tricorder, tapped on the controls, "About half an hour."

With a groan, the tactical chief glanced over, "Did we do everything we could?"

Jinal nodded silently. He then, said, "What I don't understand is, if Section 31 wanted us dead, why not just blow up the ship. I could think of all kinds of ways to make it look like an accident."

Karim hadn't had time to think about it until now. He reasoned, "Section 31 still wants the ship. It's a powerful battle cruiser...they just don't want us." He thought for a moment and grabbed the engineer's arm, "Jinal, let's deny them their prize."

"You mean destroy the ship?"

He elaborated, "You said it yourself; we're already dead. We might as well stick it to 'em in the process."

Jinal looked down at his waist. The phaser was in its holster. "A sustained phaser blast to either the warp core or one of the anti-matter containment pods would do it." He added in a much more excited voice, "That's it!"

"What's it?"

"A study was done a few years ago. It found, that in most cases, if a starship suffered a warp core breach, the nacelles survived the blast and were pushed away...sometimes very far away."

Karim caught on, "So we could get these people out of the radiation and destroy the rest of the ship at the same time!"

"Possibly," began Jinal. He continued on a down beat, "But it can't be done remotely; not without the computer."

Bin Nadal forced himself back to his feet, Jinal helped him.

"I'll do it," said the security chief, "I'm the senior officer here."

Jinal considered. What would his life be like, even if he did survive? He would be an outcast. *'...Besides, who cares if a lying, Romulan coward dies?'* On the more practical side, Karim could barely walk. He could die before he even reached the reactor. The Romulan didn't seem as afflicted. Perhaps this was his chance to redeem some honor. The choice was...logical. "You're forgetting something, Commander."

"What's that?"

The Romulan aimed the sidearm at bin Nadal, "I'm the one with the phaser." He stunned bin Nadal.

Karim fell to the floor.

Jinal took one last look at his assembled crewmates. They had been the closest thing to family he had for years. He only wished he had the courage to get to know them better, while he had the chance. It was too late for that now. "Good-bye," he stated. Then, he exited the nacelle and resealed it.

Captain Donald Sandhurst sat in the command chair on the USS *Gibraltar*. Since the ship was closer, their scans proved more effective. They had detected an *Interceptor* class vessel, the USS *Independence*, in the radiation.

Normally, a ship's shields would protect the crew from such radiation. Obviously, something had gone wrong on the *Independence*. He hoped the

Gibraltar could tow the gunship out of the radiation and then render aid to her crew.

If that proved insufficient, Issara Taiee, the CMO, was preparing inoculations for the rescue team. Transporters wouldn't work, but the shuttle's shielding, in combination with Hyronalin and hardened EVA suits, should allow at least a few minutes for a recovery attempt.

"ETA," inquired the captain.

Ensign Lightner answered, "Forty-seven minutes, sir."

Sandhurt spoke in a hushed tone to the *Indy's* beleaguered crew, "Hold on just a bit longer, people."

The matter/anti-matter reactor had initiated an emergency shut down once the computer was disabled, but there was still plenty of anti-matter in the system. Once containment failed, the anti-matter would make contact with normal matter and that would be the end of the ship.

Jinal adjusted the phaser setting. It would take about five or six seconds to cause a breach. He aimed for one of the anti-matter injectors. A survival instinct kicked in. *'What the hell am I thinking?'* The Romulan lowered the phaser for a moment. Then, he reasoned, *'If I do this, nearly 50 people might live on.'* He re-aimed...and fired.

The USS *Independence* glided gracefully through the invisible radiation. Its rounded hull reflected the light from a distant star.

Suddenly, a fireball erupted from her ventral side...then the dorsal. Several secondary explosions ripped out of the ship. Finally, the rest of the anti-matter left the confines of its magnetic isolation. A massive sphere of light was born and glowed like a small sun. When it faded, the assault cruiser was gone...with the exception of two, nearly intact, warp nacelles hurtling away from the blast.

Karim woke only to find himself pinned against the bulkhead by centrifugal force. His eyes barely opened when the massive G-forces pushed him back into unconsciousness.

"Sir," called out Lieutenant Pava Lar'ragos from tactical, "there's been a massive anti-matter explosion at the *Independence's* location."

A hush fell over the bridge crew. They all knew what it meant.

Sandhurst stood, "Bridge to engineering."

"Ashok, here."

"Push the engine to 120 percent over standard," he ordered. "And don't tell you can't do it; I know better. I want to get to the *Independence*, now."

The Bolian engineer's tone echoed the determination in his captain's voice, "You'll have it, sir."

CHAPTER 13

Stardate: 53770.0 (8 October 2376)
USS Gibraltar, Sick-bay
Occupied Cardassian Territory

The light was bright to Sintina's eyes. She covered them with her arm. She shot up, as the memories returned to her. She was wearing a patient's gown. She was...in a sick-bay. She recognized members of her crew in the adjacent bio-beds; all still asleep.

A bald man...no...an EMH soon found her.

"What happened?" Sintina questioned.

"Lay back down, Captain," was the response from the hologram.

She didn't comply.

He huffed in annoyance and looked over to someone, "Lieutenant Taiee, Captain Aurelia has regained consciousness."

A woman, about the same build as Sintina with short, brown hair, approached. "Captain Aurelia, you're aboard the USS *Gibraltar*. You'll be fine."

"What happened?" she repeated, in a more urgent tone.

The nurse practitioner bit her lip and responded, "I'd better let the captain explain that, sir. He wanted to be contacted when you woke any..."

The Latina grabbed the medical officer's wrist, "Tell me!"

She examined the offending hand. It wasn't a violent clutch, but it did have force behind it. Taiee sighed, if she were in Aurelia's shoes, she wouldn't want to wait either. She explained only after the hand was withdrawn. "We're not sure exactly what happened. I do know, your ship entered a field of hyperonic radiation with the shields down. The surviving members of your crew are being treated for radiation sickness. One officer is being treated for several broken bones and organ trauma. Another had a gun shot wound."

Aurelia had several questions, but her immediate thought turned out to be, “A gun shot wound? Who had a gun shot wound?”

The lieutenant pointed to a bed across the rather large sick-bay. “That officer...I believe she was listed as Lieutenant Chase.”

Sintina’s eyes grew wide. She used Taiee’s shoulder to pull herself out of the bio-bed. The captain made a beeline for the still unconscious Chase.

“Captain? Captain Aurelia,” Taiee said, “you’re still recovering, you need to...”

The former commander of the *Independence* reached the, still unconscious, Section 31 agent and clamped both hands around her throat. She cursed as she squeezed her airway, “I told you...I’d kill you!”

Taiee tapped on her compin, “Security to Sick-bay.” She moved closer, “Captain, let go of her!”

Sintina was in a fury, “She tried to kill us! She tried to kill us all!”

One of the EMH mark I’s offered, “I believe I can take care of this.” He took a hypo off a table as he walked over to the assault. The doctor was easily able to close the gap, while the captain was focused on her victim, and pressed the device on her neck. With a hiss, the sedative was injected. Aurelia collapsed on top of Chase; her hands still locked around Nicole’s neck.

This time, the lights weren’t nearly as bright as Aurelia’s eyes opened. Two people stood over her, Lieutenant Taiee, and a light-skinned human male. His black and gray hair was cut very close to his head. He bore the rank of captain.

Sandhurst looked over to the nurse, “Thank you, dismissed.”

She turned and exited, what Sintina now realized was, a crew’s quarters.

The man then regarded his counterpart, “I’m Donald Sandhurst, captain of the *Gibraltar*.”

“Where’s Chase?” she demanded.

Sandhurst was tempted to say *'Nice to meet you too,'* but decided against it. Instead, he answered, "Still in sick-bay, under guard; unless you can give me a damn good reason to put her in the brig." He added, "If you can't give me a good reason, I do have a good reason to put you there, Captain. Assault is not something I take lightly."

Sintina grinded her teeth, but was able to temper her rage...barely. "She overrode the computer somehow and drugged us with...something."

Gibraltar's commander looked unconvinced.

"She did it in front of my face! Search the ship, there might be traces of that chemical...or examine the computer. For that matter, ask the other bridge officers. They'll back up everything I've said."

He grimaced and became more sympathetic in his tone. Donald wasn't looking forward to this moment. He could only imagine what it was like to lose a ship. He knew of other captains that had done so: Awokou lost the Phoenix and Glover lost the Cuffe. He even had to break the news to Awokou. The second time around wasn't any easier. He decided it was best not to sugar coat it, "Your ship...it's been destroyed."

Sintina sat up, "What?"

"There was a core breach. We're not sure how, yet."

Captain Aurelia's heart sank. Her breathing became heavy and her head felt like it was spinning. She managed, "How...how many didn't make it?"

He felt for her. "Not everyone survived in the nacelle. We recovered 46 of your crew. Thirty-eight are still alive," Sandhurst somberly stated.

She blankly stared, "Thirty-eight...Thirty-eight of ninety-five." Sintina stood only to find her legs failed her.

Sandhurst was able to support her. She shook him off. Seemingly from nowhere, she found new strength. She headed for the exit. He blocked her.

"Where do you think you're going, Captain?" he rhetorically asked.

"Let me see her."

“Not a chance. Not like this.”

Sintina got in the taller man’s face, “She killed them!” Her fury was so complete that her eyes watered.

He maintained a diplomatic voice, “I believe you; but I have a feeling, you’re not going to help the situation.”

She attempted to keep her wrath. In her mind, it was better to be angry than in sorrow, especially in front of someone who hadn’t gained her trust. For several seconds, she stared right back at him. He wasn’t going to back down. Her jaw began to tremble, despite her best efforts to stop it. She felt drops forming. Her defenses against herself broke. Sintina burst into tears and started sobbing uncontrollably.

Her reaction took Donald off guard. The small, but formidable woman that was before him had transformed into a fragile and vulnerable human being. His first impulse was to hug her. He wasn’t sure if his attempts at comfort would be welcome or not. He decided to take the chance. He enveloped her in his arms. Luckily, she didn’t resist it.

Sintina continued to gasp for air between her cries. Sandhurst’s uniform became damp. He knew she would need more help than he could offer. The *Gibraltar* lacked a formal counselor, but he knew who helped him through times like this. After several seconds, he looked up and said to the computer, “Commander Pell, would you report to Captain Aurelia’s quarters, please.”

An hour later, after Pell and Sandhurst had talked Aurelia down, the *Gibraltar* captain decided to hold a meeting in the conference room. There was something more going on here and he wanted all the information he could get.

Bin Nadal was still sore, but he was a crucial witness, and Taiee allowed him to attend. Beside Captain Sandhurst sat Captain Aurelia, in proper attire; then, Commander Ramirez; Diplomatic Officer Pell; and Junior Lieutenant Juneau, the ship’s operations officer. On the other side of the table, Shanthi, Lar’ragos, Taiee, and bin Nadal sat.

Aurelia and then bin Nadal recalled their experiences to the *Gibraltar*’s senior staff. Everyone listened as they recounted the events of yesterday.

The mention of "Section 31" caught the attention of Olivia Juneau, or rather, a part of her. *'Talk about a sloppy job,'* Juneau's hidden persona commented. *'I hate cleaning up after other peoples' messes.'*

Bin Nadal only made one minor omission to his testimony. He ended with, "We owe our lives to Lieutenant Jinal."

Sandhurst nodded respectfully, but he had another question on his mind. He turned to his tactical chief. If anyone on his ship could confirm bin Nadal's story about a covert agency, it would be the El-Aurian. He fought with the Starfleet Special Missions Teams during the Dominion War. "Have you ever heard of this 'Section 31', Pava?"

"I've heard the name," he rejoined, "but not much beyond that."

"Whoever Lieutenant Chase is," Sandhurst declared, "She's obviously committed crimes against the crew of the *Independence*." Again, he looked at Pava, "Get her into the brig. I want her questioned." He concluded, "Dismissed."

Most everyone exited without comment. Only Sandhurst and Aurelia lingered.

Once the captains were alone, *Gibraltar's* skipper spoke. "I understand how...delicate this situation is, Captain. But I'm obligated to bring it up..."

"You want to know if I'll retaliate," she finished for him.

He regarded her with a sigh, "Restraint doesn't seem to be a characteristic you have in abundance."

Sintina huffed. She got up from the chair and rounded the conference table. She gazed out into the void. Finally, she said, "I'll make it very clear to my crew that Chase is off limits."

"What about you?" he pressed.

She paused. Then, turned and said sincerely, "If I kill her, you'll be the first person I tell."

CHAPTER 14

Supplemental USS Gibraltar, Deck 2 Occupied Cardassian Territory

Karim caught the attention of his counterpart on the old *Connie*, after the meeting ended. A terrible possibility entered his mind, and he needed to know the answer. He asked, "Lieutenant, tell me honestly, one tactical chief to another. If we hadn't blown the core, would you've gotten to us in time?"

Lar'ragos didn't like the question. 'What if's' were not something he liked to dwell on. He responded, "It's hard to say."

Bin Nadal didn't seem satisfied.

"Sir," continued Pava, "You did everything you could with the information you had. You can either accept that, or you can go on blaming yourself for something that you're not responsible for."

He began to nod, "You're right."

"Now if you'll excuse me," Lar'ragos added, "I have to put your ops officer behind bars." He walked away.

Karim called out, "It'd be a shame if she decided to resist."

Pava looked back over his shoulder and smiled.

Outwardly, Olivia Juneau was her usual, insecure self. She smiled uncomfortably at acquaintances as she passed them in the corridor.

Her mind, however, had now been hijacked. It was a rare occasion that her alternate personality needed to take over. Most times, it sat in the back seat, watching, listening, but not interfering.

The total incompetence of one of her fellow agents forced her into the driver's seat. She could not allow the directorate to be compromised. Chase made the fatal error of exposing herself. Now, she was a liability. The section didn't like liabilities.

She came to a junction and removed one of the bulkhead panels. It was done in full view of passersby. Juneau was the operations officer, after all. It wasn't an uncommon sight.

She took out a small probe from her pocket and looked for her objective. *'There it is,'* she thought. 'It' was an optic cable that ran all the way down to the brig, which was four decks down. The operative placed the probe into the cord, sending a small surge down the power supply. It wasn't much. But it would be enough to disable a simple, but vital part of the forcefield safety system in the containment cells.

The agent placed the cover back, walked away, and returned to the back seat.

Nicole Chase entered the detention center. Pava Lar'ragos a few steps behind her.

"I get shot and you're putting *me* in the brig," she griped.

He responded quickly, "Commander bin Nadal's only mistake was not hitting a vital organ." Pava gestured to the holding cell, "Now, get in."

Seeing no alternative, she crossed the threshold.

Lar'ragos backed up to the security console and nodded to the guard on duty. He activated the electromagnetic barrier.

Instead of a continuous field of energy, bolts extended out of the perimeter of the cell door. The tendrils of energy instantly found the nearest ground...Lieutenant Chase. The miniature lightning bolts coursed through her body as she spasmed and cried out.

After a moment of confusion, Pava moved to the controls and turned off the power. The storm of energy stopped. The smell of burnt flesh already told him it was too late. He looked up and confirmed it. His prisoner was dead.

Captain Sandhurst strode around the table. "How the hell did this happen?" he demanded.

Members of his command crew were once again in the conference room.

Ashok, his Bolian engineer fielded the question, "I traced the problem to a failed electrostatic regulator."

Captain Aurelia absorbed the information in silence. She was the only *Independence* crew member present.

Ramirez asked the question everyone else was thinking, "Was it sabotage?"

The Bolian shrugged, "There's no way to tell. It could've been like this for weeks without us knowing about it." He added, in his defense, "The last PMCS on the system was done last month, just like the regs require."

"That's one hell of a coincidence," observed Lar'ragos.

Sintina was well aware that eyes were lingering on her. She finally offered, "Don't look at me. I'm just pissed I get a chance to do the job myself."

"What about your crew?" the captain asked.

She was getting annoyed at the accusations. Sintina made eye contact with Sandhurst, "How could anyone *that's left of my crew* run to the brig, alter the forcefield, and not be seen by any of *your crew*?"

Donald conceded the point.

"Still," the XO added, "it's awfully convenient."

Aurelia shrugged, leaned back and crossed her arms.

Pava chimed in, "Sir, we have no evidence a crime has even been committed."

Now, it was Sandhurst's turn to look out at the stars. After a few seconds, he did an about face, "Lar'ragos, interview the *Independence* survivors again. If nothing comes of it, then we'll have no choice but to accept it as a freak accident. Dismissed."

Aurelia didn't hesitate to leave this time, but Pava did.

Lar'ragos had known Sandhurst since their academy days. The only reason Pava was his junior in rank was because the security chief refused promotion.

"She didn't seem too concerned about Lieutenant Chase's death," Donald commented.

Pava nodded, "To be fair, Aurelia seems to be the type of person who sees any real, deep emotion as weakness. I'm still amazed she broke down in front of you."

"You know that from your years of experience?" questioned the captain.

Lar'ragos cocked his head. "Centuries," he corrected.

Donald rubbed his chin, "I'd just hate to think, I'm letting a murder off the hook."

Pava raised an eyebrow, "Let's be honest. You and I have both done things that could be considered...excessive."

The captain exhaled, "True."

"Put yourself in her shoes," the El-Aurian continued, "You've lost over half your crew and your ship. The person responsible for all that dies under mysterious circumstances. What would you do?"

Sandhurst took a deep breath in contemplation and said, "I'd probably dance a jig."

Karim found himself in sick-bay. Many of the survivors had been assigned temporary quarters, but some still rested in the medical facilities. Doctor Zo'Kama was now up and aiding Lieutenant Taiee and her holograms.

The reptilian saw him as he entered. "Commander bin Nadal," she called out, "you of all people should be laying down in one of these beds."

He raised his hands in submission, found an empty bio-bed and laid down. The Arkonian doctor came to his bedside, "We're rather lucky," she commented, "did you know that *Gibraltar* was once a hospital ship?"

"I didn't," he stated.

She looked at him with caring eyes, "I should let you rest." She began to walk away when Karim spoke.

"Doctor."

Zo'Kama returned, "Yes."

The security chief examined the overhead, "Jinal told me that you knew he was...well, that you knew his secret."

She stood up straight. "Yes, I did. I found out from his first examination."

"And you thought it best not to tell the rest of us?" he inquired.

"I will not apologize for it, Commander," she began. "If your duty requires you to report me, I understand."

Karim ignored her comment, "He was so scared that we wouldn't respect him anymore. He never wanted anything more than our approval." He looked over at the reptilian, "Nicole deceived me. So did you and Jinal."

Zo'Kama only stood there, stoically.

"I realize," he continued, "not all deception is inherently evil. Especially, when you work in the confines of an...unjust system." He sighed, "As far as I'm concerned, Jinal's actions trump his duplicity. ...And since Jinal was *not* a Romulan, I can't hold anything against you, now can I?"

The Arkonian smiled and rested a scaled hand on his chest, "You're a good man, Commander."

The compliment felt hollow. He was ready to shoot Nicole point blank in the face. He was going to murder for revenge. Karim had always been taught that humans were above such primitive feelings. He should've at least felt guilt or remorse...he didn't. Had he the opportunity again; he would still pull the trigger. Bin Nadal took her hand, "I don't know if I'd go that far."

CHAPTER 15

Stardate: 53774.3 (10 October 2376) **USS Gibraltar, Recreation Deck** **En-route to Starbase 371**

The thirty-eight remaining crew members of the USS *Independence* and a few crewmembers of the *Gibraltar* loitered before the official ceremony began.

The ship had dropped to impulse. The McAllister Nebula could be seen in the distance through the large plates of transparent aluminum.

The Bajoran diplomatic officer found Aurelia and moved to talk to her. Donald knew what the topic of conversation was going to be and he had advised her against it. But Pell couldn't restrain herself, "Captain, you don't have to do this. Let Captain Sandhurst or me do the roll call."

Sintina wasn't offended by the offer. She understood the commander's motivation. "No," she calmly responded. "I was their captain. I'm the one to do it." She walked to the podium overlooking the vista.

"But, ma'am..." Pell started. Sandhurst caught up to her and rested a firm hand on her shoulder. She looked back. He simply shook his head.

Captain Aurelia reached her position. She nodded at Sandhurst.

Gibraltar's CO tapped on his compin, "Funeral detail to bridge."

"Bridge, here," replied Ramirez.

"We're ready to begin."

"Understood."

Captain Sandhurst then made eye contact with Master Chief Tark and nodded.

The Tellarite came to attention, raised a boatswain's whistle and blew into it. Everyone immediately fell into formation.

Sintina noticed Kimula was already...or still...crying. She closed her eyes for a moment and hoped she could make it through the list with out breaking down. She addressed the survivors. "At ease..."

Independence was a ship of war. I expected her to go down in a blaze of glory; not taken from us by a hidden hand. She deserved a longer life than she got, as did the fifty-seven crew members that died with her.

During the war, death somehow seemed...honorable...justified." She swallowed and clenched her teeth. "Our friends didn't die in battle, but make no mistake, they are casualties of war." A tear escaped and ran down her cheek, "Never forget that."

The captain attempted to recompose herself and continued with the mass funeral. "The following are the souls lost on the USS *Independence*. They served their ship..." She bit her lip and fought back more tears. "...and their captain admirably. They died in service to Starfleet and the United Federation of Planets: ...Petty Officer Yuhjijad Befinsioan..."

The *Gibraltar* fired a single plasma flare into the darkness. It burst and then faded against the backdrop of eternity.

"...Ensign Jani Birhanu..."

Another star shell fired.

Sobs were heard among the gathered. Aurelia continued the roster and the bursts repeated.

For each and every person, D'nas observed the Tamarian tradition of touching his knife with his fingers and then touching his forehead.

"...Lieutenant Jinal of Vulcan..."

At the mention of the name, bin Nadal and Dr. Zo'Kama reverently curtsied to each other in the formation.

After the ceremony, Karim went to find Kimula. She was flushed a dark blue from her mourning and her antennae slumped. She embraced him as he approached. They stood there, amidst the other survivors, for several seconds.

Karim offered, "He wanted to make sure you were saved."

The Andorian sniffled, "I knew he cared for me...I just wished I would've done more to...to open him up." She added, "I wish I knew what he was so scared of."

Bin Nadal stepped back, but still held her arms. He dipped his head. After a moment, he looked at her again, "It's best not to dwell on questions that can't be answered."

Stardate: 53804.9 (21 October 2376)
Starbase 371, Rear Admiral Kyle Raymond's Office
Near the Former Cardassian Border

Sintina and the survivors of the *Independence* had left the *Gibraltar* behind over a week ago.

Then, came the official inquiry. It was closed to the public. Only the official findings would be de-classified. A panel of admirals interviewed nearly every remaining member of her crew. Scans from Sandhurst's ship were reviewed. Bin Nadal and Aurelia were especially criticized by the board. For the most part, the admirals found their version of events utterly implausible. They scoffed at the notion that an organization within the Federation was responsible. One inquisitor even accused them of fabricating their story to cover up for her own mistakes. The captain and the security chief, however, stood by their testimony. Needless to say, it was a very combative hearing.

One of the board members was Rear Admiral Raymond. He was formally the skipper of the *Tecumseh*. Sintina had heard only good things about the man. He was promoted near the end of the Dominion War.

Now, he summoned her to his office. Aurelia wasn't sure why, but he had treated her fairly during her interviews. Most of the other admirals seemed to want to put the blame squarely at her feet. The doors slid shut behind her.

Raymond, a very pale human, stood from behind his desk and offered her a chair. His hair was full, but totally white. He was clean shaven and had striking blue eyes. He started, "Captain Aurelia, the commission is ready to present their conclusions."

"Oh, I think I have a good idea who you and your peers are going to blame," Sintina commented.

He tipped his head, "I seriously doubt that." Rear Admiral Raymond tossed her a padd.

She read it for a moment. Her jaw dropped as she examined it. Finally, she looked up, "...a catastrophic design flaw? That's bullshit!" She laughed humorlessly, "Yeah, the design flaw was when my engineer, and friend, was forced to destroy the core with a phaser to save our lives!"

The admiral, obviously not wishing to provoke her, made a submissive gesture. He elaborated, "I'm not your enemy, Captain." He strolled around his desk, "No one wants to hear your Section 31 story. None of the admirals on the panel believe it...they *can't*." He put his hands behind his back, "I managed to sway enough opinions so they wouldn't blame you either."

"So what makes you different?" she questioned.

He grinned slightly, "I've already heard of Section 31."

Sintina didn't like where this was going. She scanned the room for a potential weapon.

"Someone contacted me during the hearing," the admiral continued. "She told me to tell you, 'Even James Kirk changed his mind about the Klingons,' and to ask you, 'Are you ready for some allies, yet?'"

Captain Aurelia began to feel hopeful for the first time in a long while. She humbly answered, "Yes."

Raymond smiled. "Then, I have a present for you." He handed her another padd.

It was schematics for a *Steamrunner*-class ship, the USS *Jaap Penraat*. She gazed up at the man.

"She's yours if you want it," he confirmed.

Surprisingly, Aurelia was hesitant. She began to return the padd, "Sir, thank you, but I don't know."

Raymond jibed, "What, not enough guns on her?"

She grinned for a moment and shook her head. "It's not that, sir."

"Then what?"

Sintina sighed before responding. She hated admitting it to herself, let alone anyone else. She swallowed her pride, she seemed to be doing it a lot lately. "With respect sir...I don't know if I'm fit for command."

He was taken back, "Oh?"

Her shoulders slumped. "Sir...I've...I've come to realize that I was assigned to a ship because I was...a fighter, not a thinker."

Kyle Raymond crossed his arms and leaned against his desk, "Go on."

She swore he was enjoying her self-consciousness. Aurelia continued, "I was so sure about myself. I thought I knew what a good captain was...and that I was it."

"And now?"

Sintina bit her lower lip, "Now, I'm not so sure."

The admiral nodded in understanding. He paced, "Did you have any feelings like this when you took command of the *Independence*?"

She shook her head. "No sir. Not like this."

"You know that that tells me?" he asked.

"No sir."

Raymond answered, "That you're willing to accept you have shortcomings."

"Yes sir," she said meekly.

"You don't get it, Captain. That's a good thing," he explained. "If you don't even recognize your own failings; you'll never overcome them. You'll never become better than you are."

"But sir," she protested, "how can I effectively command a ship when the very same people I take orders from could be out to kill me and my crew?"

"That is something to consider, but it's overstated," he replied. "Section 31 knows when to back off." Kyle walked to his chair and sat. "They can't afford to be as bold and overconfident...and they know it." He sighed, "Don't lose your faith in Starfleet or the Federation, Captain. Both are still worth saving. Only a small group of people are causing problems."

She puffed, "They just happen to be the ones in power."

"That's something we'll have to change," he retorted. "But we can't do that with out people like you and Commander bin Nadal."

Sintina considered for nearly a minute. "I really do hate this cloak and dagger crap, sir."

He smiled, "So do I." Raymond got up, "So are you in?"

Her features became cold, "If it means I get to help stop these bastards; then yes sir, I'm in."

The admiral gestured to the padd, still in Aurelia's hand. "I've routed those orders through enough people to not rouse suspicions. There's also something there from fleet operations."

She scrolled down, and smiled, "...to be renamed the *Independence*," but then it faded, "I don't deserve this, sir."

He walked next to her and knelt down. He locked eyes with her, "Did you deserve that *Interceptor* class? ...Probably not."

She looked down.

Raymond found her eyes again, "But everything from here on out, you've earned. Understood, *Captain*?"

Sintina blinked, found some of her confidence again, and silently acknowledged.

EPILOGUE

Stardate: 53808.2 (22 October 2376)
USS Thunderchild, Admiral Ross' Office
Alpha Quadrant

"So they neutralized their own agent?" questioned the bulky Admiral Boral.

Ross nodded somberly, "That's what my contact in the organization told me."

"I don't know about this, Bill," the Andorian commented. "I understand drastic times call for drastic measures...but attempting to kill an entire crew." He shook his head, "They're getting out of hand."

"They know what their doing," the human reassured his peer, though he didn't feel the confidence that his voice indicated.

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," Boral countered, "Satie is now a shoe in. The failed assassination only served to get her more supporters."

William Ross averted his eyes for a moment.

Boral continued over sub-space. "Satie is talking about stopping starship production for gods' sake."

Ross felt obligated to defend Section 31. "They've treated us right, Boral. Just think of what shape the Federation would be in without 31? They forced the Founder's hand when they infected the changelings. That alone saved countless lives." He continued, "We wouldn't have the interphasing cloak, we wouldn't have the wormhole in the Molari Badlands...hell, if Praxis hadn't exploded, the Klingons wouldn't have been subordinate to us for the last century." He leaned closer to the monitor, "We owe 31 a lot. Let's not abandon them so easy."

The Andorian's antennae fidgeted. He leaned back, "Alright, Bill. Point taken, but what are they going to do now?"

Ross sighed, "They're going to prepare, slowly and methodically; so next time they don't fail."

Stardate: 53818.6 (26 October 2376)
Steamrunner Class, USS Independence (Formerly the USS Jaap Penraat)
Docked with Starbase 371

The *Steamrunner* class ship had been out of commission for months. It was being repaired from an encounter with Lethean raiders in the Hekaras Corridor. Most of her former crew were transferred off to serve on active vessels. Starfleet's ranks were still too thin to have an entire crew sitting at dry dock.

She was now orbiting *Starbase 371*. A crew worked on her hull in preparation for the re-christening.

Captain Aurelia sat in her new ready room. She was pleased to see it was larger than her last one. She read the history of the *Jaap Penraat*. The ship's first engagement was back in 2353, when Sintina was 13. The *Steamrunner* unsuccessfully defended a Starbase against the Tholians. She made first contact with the Mordanites and the Kressari. Then, she served in the Cardassian-Federation War, the 2nd Federation-Tzenkethi War, and patrolled along the Tzenkethi boarder during the Dominion War. The more she read, the more she regretted renaming the vessel.

A chime interrupted her research, "Come."

Lieutenant Commander Ethan Windslow entered.

"What do you need, XO?" Aurelia questioned.

He laid a padd on her desk, adding to the pile. The captain read it and then, lowered it in disbelief, "You're requesting a transfer back to the engineering division?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Why?" she asked. Aurelia was immediately amazed by her response. A few months ago, she would've packed his bags for him.

He sucked up some air in preparation for his answer, "I'm an engineer, Captain. I'm good at it. ...I'm not so good at command. Everyone knows that." He took a seat and continued, "And beyond that, I've nearly lost my

family...twice now. Once it was my fault. I still haven't been able to spend as much time with them as I'd like. In fact, we are just now beginning to feel like a family again."

She tilted her head, "Well, gotta respect that." Sintina grinned suddenly and rummaged around the various padds on her desk. She found the one she was looking for and tossed it at Ethan. "I'll need a good engineer. Interested?"

"You're kidding?" Windslow blurted. "This is your big chance to get rid of me."

Once more, Aurelia ate crow. "I ah...I've recently realized that I'm not as good of a captain as I try to portray myself as." She made eye contact, "I think I'd be wise to have someone else with command experience on board."

Ethan was astonished. He had never seen Aurelia so...so humble. Windslow considered. He probably wouldn't be getting any better offers. He had already talked to his former CO at Utopia Planitia. There were no current openings. Ethan rubbed his red and silver goatee and said, "I'd have to talk to my family first, ma'am."

She curtsied, "I understand."

"You'll have my answer first thing tomorrow."

"Good," she gestured to the pile of data cards. "If there's nothing more, I need to get back to work."

Ethan smiled, "Well officially, I'm still your exec and I have a recommendation for promotion..." he handed her yet another document. "...to first officer."

She read it, leaned back and grinned, "We're totally in agreement."

Stardate: 53824.2 (28 October 2376)
USS Independence, Captain's Ready Room
Docked with Starbase 371

Lieutenant Commander Karim bin Nadal entered the office, sporting a red, command division undershirt. He stopped short of the desk, "You wanted to see me, ma'am?"

“Sorry, I couldn’t get you your third pip,” Aurelia started.

Karim dismissed it, “I’m not worried about it.”

She moved on to the real reason she sent for him, “I’ve got our new marching orders. We’re taking D’nas home to Tama.”

“Us personally?” he questioned. “It will take us three months just to get there.”

“Yeap,” she confirmed.

“Why us?”

“The orders don’t explain exactly,” she coolly stated. “But I can only guess that our friends want us out of the core systems for awhile.”

Bin Nadal began to nod, “I guess that makes sense. Get the spotlight off us.”

Sintina only grumbled.

He decided to change the subject slightly, “I’d like to put Jinal in for the Starfleet Medal of Honor.”

“I don’t know if it’ll go through, considering the official findings.” She crossed her arms, “but I’ll put it in anyway.”

The new XO curtsied, began to exit, but then turned back, “I’m glad to hear that you’re on board with Uhura’s group, Sintina.”

Captain Aurelia’s demeanor instantly changed. She became stone. She looked up with fierce resolve. “I really don’t care about this little covert war of hers. Uhura and Nechayev could prove to be just as bad as 31. The only difference I can see is, Uhura’s group never tried to kill us.” She leaned back, “In fact, they could be playing me right now, just like Section 31 was.” She finished with, “But right now, I don’t give a damn, because their enemy happens to be my enemy.”

Nothing more needed to be said. Bin Nadal silently gave a look of acknowledgement, and exited the ready room.

Captain Aurelia entered the large doors to upper engineering on deck 6. She walked around unnoticed for sometime as engineers scurried about. Eventually, she found Commander Windslow. Even, when he was her first officer, he often found excuses to be in engineering. Most of the crew were new and didn't know about his history. A part of her hoped the handful of people that came over from the *Interceptor* class would keep their mouths shut.

Windslow seemed to be at home. This truly was his calling, she accepted. Sintina couldn't help but be a little jealous.

Finally, the new chief engineer saw her, walked over, and asked, "What can I do for you, Captain?"

She jumped right in, "I want the Section 31 override program eliminated."

Ethan's eyes widened, "Well, that might take awhile." He added, "Assuming, it can be done at all."

His answer didn't deter her, "As chief engineer, make it your top priority."

"Yes ma'am," he responded. He knew better than to argue further.

Sintina got a bit closer, "And see if you can disable the prefix code while you're at it."

A grin formed on his face. Aurelia was not a fan of the safety measure. He said satirically, "You know that's against the regs."

Aurelia raised an eyebrow in mock surprise. As she turned to leave, she offered, "I'd like to be the master of my own vessel from now on."

Windslow turned to gaze at his new engine. He mused to himself, "What the hell...maybe I could be the oldest ensign in the fleet."

Stardate: 53838.1 (2 November 2376)
USS Independence, Deck 5
In the Betazed Sector (En-route to Tama)

The unique 'single-hull' of the *Steamrunner* class *Independence* glided through subspace. They had been underway for a couple of days now.

It was somewhat of a tradition aboard Starfleet vessels to name the main lounge area. Some ships referred to it according to its location, like "Ten-forward"; others preferred a more original name, like the "Afterburner." It had taken Sintina nine months to officially label the lounge on her last ship. And it was simply "The Game Room." Besides, she thought it best to let the crew come up with a designation. It was not something the captain had any business deciding. To that end, she made a ship wide announcement once they launched to have the crew present her with the name once it was decided. She hoped it would give the new crew a chance to get to know each other better. The actual name of the lounge was irrelevant to her.

The chief of the ship, Senior Chief Petty Officer Hatora of J'bel, informed her that the crew was ready. He requested her and the other senior officers to come to the lounge at 1800 hours.

Sintina had been in the lounge before they left starbase. It was quite large for a ship this size. It was situated one deck higher than the forward torpedo launchers, just above the 'notch' of the leading edge of the ship. She made a mental note of being in the lounge at least once while they fired one off. It would be quite a sight.

She meant up with bin Nadal, and Kimula along the way. Both said they didn't offer any suggestions and weren't involved in the decision. As a trio, they entered the large room. It was packed with people. Chief Hatora called out, "Captain on deck," as she walked in. Everyone came to attention.

Captain Aurelia immediately ordered, "At ease." She smiled as she noticed a table in one of the corners with a miniature landscape on it. She looked at her companions, "Did you guys have anything to do with this?"

Kimula replied, "Not me."

Karim shook his head.

Sintina spoke up with a grin on her face, "I never want to hear 'captain on deck' being called out in this room again. From now on, when we're in this room, the ranks are dropped, understood?"

A roaring, "Yes ma'am," came from the crowd.

Again, she looked at bin Nadal, "I see you've already told them how I don't like being called 'sir.'"

He smirked.

The captain noticed a large black cloth over something hanging off the bulkhead. She assumed it was the new name. She gestured to it and said, "Speaking of this room, what's it called?"

The Illyrian noncom's skin was a light gray and he had two ridges on his forehead creating a "V" pattern. The chief walked over to the shroud. "Captain Aurelia, it is my honor to inform you of the crew's decision." He grabbed the edge of the cloth, "Henceforth, the main lounge on the USS *Independence* is to be called..." He pulled at the covering and it fell to the floor.

Kimula gasped and covered her mouth and nose.

Bin Nadal stood a bit taller and nodded.

Aurelia bit her lips in an attempt to hold back an unexpected tear.

The shroud revealed a large wooden plaque. Engraved in it was some vertical Vulcan script and next to that, in Federation standard, it read "Jinal's."

END