

Star Trek: Independence

The Spoils

By Dnoth

*If you would keep your secret from an enemy, tell it not to a friend.
~Benjamin Franklin, Poor Richard's Almanac*

PROLOGUE

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

The only sounds Captain Ethan Winslow could hear was his own labored breathing and the pounding in his chest. He found himself cowering against a building next to what was once the settlement's commons. He didn't even see where the photon grenade had come from. All of the surrounding buildings had at least two stories. Any...or all of them, might shelter snipers.

His away team immediately scattered for cover. That didn't help his Chief Medical Officer, Helen Stuttgart, whom was torn asunder from the blast. Her remains littered the area for several meters. She was not the only one who was so mercifully taken.

The survivors of his two-dozen-strong team now attempted to repel disruptor fire from all directions. He saw his crew start targeting Cardassians...any Cardassian. Whether they were fleeing for their lives or holding a weapon. In his mind, he thought to object; his mouth, however, could not produce the words.

There was no time for him to gather his thoughts. Everything was happening so fast. His sole urge was to get away. He crouched next to Joseph Caplin, his tactical officer. Ethan's ears received the advice Lieutenant Caplin was shouting, but his brain wasn't processing it.

A bright purple stream of energy passed Ethan's head. He could feel the air burn as it flew. He instinctively turned only to see the one remaining eye in

Joe's head stare at him. The upper left portion of his skull had been burnt away. Ethan noticed there were still smoldering, red embers in his tactical officer's hair.

Ethan's conscience mind left him...

Commander Windslow suddenly found himself sitting up in a darkened room. He was on something ... soft...his bed, he finally concluded. His panic abetted as he slowly realized it was a dream. He couldn't decide to be thankful or livid that it was *only* another nightmare.

He remembered he was no longer sleeping alone. Ethan glanced at his still slumbering wife. With an exhale, he lowered himself back down; *At least I didn't wake her this time*, he gratefully thought.

CHAPTER 1

Stardate: 53021.4 (8 January 2376)

USS Independence

Cardassia Prime

The sleek shape of the *Independence* adopted an orbit around the brown and deep green sphere of the Cardassian homeworld.

The space around the planet was a flurry of activity. Many vessels buzzed about: hospital ships, transports, and military cruisers; Federation Alliance and Dominion alike. Several of the orbital weapon platforms were still in place and powered down. What remained of the Dominion fleet was being herded into one of three 'camps.' The victorious powers of the Alpha Quadrant were in the process of splitting up the bounty.

All the senior officers of the *Independence* were on the bridge in anticipation of their arrival. The last time Aurelia saw this planet was less than a month ago. It was the most colossal face off she had ever seen. Then, she was in command of the forty-year old *Midas*. Luckily, to quote a long since dead politician from Earth, "The other guy blinked."

The planet's surface was scarred by the Dominion bombardment in the closing hours of the war. The literal scorched earth was visible even from space. Everyone on the bridge solemnly took in the sight. An audio indicator broke their trance.

Kimula informed the captain from behind the center seat, "Admiral Whatley of the Provisional Governing Council is hailing."

Sintina Aurelia sat up and said, "Put him on."

The nearly bald, African admiral sported a thin mustache. A bland expression did not reflect his words, "Captain Aurelia, good. Welcome to the new Cardassia."

Aurelia gave a coy smile, "It looks better than the last time I was here." She continued after the dry joke, "So what's the situation, sir?"

"The *Independence* was summoned here as a show of force," was the admiral's rejoinder.

Aurelia's brow crinkled, "Who are we supposed to be intimidating here, sir?"

Whatley cleared his throat at the unpolished query, "To answer that question, I think I should beam to your ship."

Deck two housed the *Independence's* windowless conference room. A large wall display adorned one side of the room. The entry hissed open. Walking through first was Admiral Whatley, then the captain, her tactical officer, and Windslow trailing behind. They seated themselves at the utilitarian table.

The admiral began the briefing, "There are three military governors jointly in charge of Cardassian territory: Admiral Goma of the Romulan Empire, General Wo'toth representing the Klingons, and myself. General Wo'toth has recently accused the Romulans of taking Dominion technology that was slated for the Klingons. Admiral Goma, of course, has denied it."

Windslow put his elbows on the transparent table, "Do you believe Wo'toth, sir?"

Whatley thoughtfully responded, "Well, there is no disputing that equipment was beamed away from their locations with out approval. And to be honest, I wouldn't put it past the Romulans."

Bin Nadal chimed in, "It would certainly be easy enough for the Romulans to beam the equipment up to cloaked warbirds."

The Admiral leaned back slightly, "The Governing Council is having a meeting about these claims this afternoon. One would hope we can resolve this issue before it becomes a larger problem."

Aurelia's confusion could no longer go unaddressed, "What exactly are our orders, Admiral?"

The admiral rotated in his chair to face her, "Captain, the only orders you have at the moment are to stay in orbit and look menacing."

She couldn't stop a laugh from escaping, "I think we can do that."

Admiral Whatley pushed himself up from the chair, "I'd like you to attend the meeting, Captain; see diplomacy in action. That's always a good idea for a new captain."

As the rest of the assembled personnel rose, Aurelia unenthusiastically curtsied, "Of course, sir."

Whatley raised an open hand, "No need to see me off, Captain. I'll see you this afternoon."

The collective tension in the room eased as the admiral exited.

The captain turned to her security chief, "Bin Nadal, find out what the latest trick is for detecting cloaked ships and scan the area. Coordinate with Jinal."

The Persian nodded, "Aye, ma'am." He left thereafter.

Windslow made no attempt to vacate the room. Once they were alone, he voiced his concerns, "Why are you starting an investigation?"

She crossed her arms, "Because I don't feel like sitting here on my butt."

"You realize there are several dozen Starfleet ships in orbit. No doubt Admiral Whatley has started his own investigation."

Aurelia sat back down, "No doubt."

The XO rested on the back of the chair, "So you're trying to impress upon the admiral?"

She crossed her legs, "Would you rather twiddle your thumbs?"

Much to Aurelia's disappointment, he didn't perceive the insult. Windslow shrugged his shoulders in concession, "Ok, you want to check this out, fine. Then, we'll check it out."

Aurelia rapped her fingernails on the table, "One more thing, Commander. It seems that you will be in command of the *Independence* this afternoon."

Ethan rolled his head, "And?"

“And I have some anxiety over it.”

Windslow shifted his weight to his feet, “With respect, captain, that’s your problem; not mine.” Before she could rebut, he added, “I had the *Bismarck* for over a year. I know how to take care of a ship.”

“Actually, I’m more concerned about the crew.”

Windslow’s jaw clinched. He assumed the position of ‘at ease.’ “Am I dismissed?”

Aurelia considered pushing the subject, but thought better of it, “Yep.”

Ethan moved with a purpose to the door.

CHAPTER 2

Supplemental Cardassia City Cardassia Prime

The hot breeze hit Captain Sintina Aurelia's face the moment she materialized in the Tarlak Sector of the capitol. The Tarlak Sector mostly consisted of governmental buildings. It was spared the damage the rest of the city sustained since the Founder's command center was near. Despite that fact, the air still smelt of smoke.

It was decided that an ancient building in the sector would be used as the future Diet of the new Cardassian republic. It hadn't been actively used by the Cardassian Union since the military coup d'état took control 60 years ago. The building looked like it was in the clutches of some giant underground monster who grasped it with its talons. No doubt it intended to strike fear and respect.

Cardassia would hold elections for its new governing body in just over three weeks and a vote for the premiership six weeks later. Aurelia didn't know much about the politics on planet; nor did she care. But if she had to show up to observe a meeting, then that's what she'd do. Besides, she had enough doubting admiral's down her throat, it'd be nice to get one on her side.

The loud commotion of the chamber hit her like a wall as she entered. People were loitering before the council came to order. The large room...no arena...had a raised platform in the center with a conference table. Encircling "the stage" were seats for advisors, military personnel, and observers. It seemed to Aurelia, there were more people than seats. "Damn my procrastination," she scolded to herself.

There were no official seating arrangements. The captain could see, however, four distinct groups forming, starting on her left: Romulans, Klingons, Federation, and finally Cardassians on her right. She hustled to the "Federation section" in an attempt to find an empty space; she found none.

Her frustration level rose. She hated politics. She didn't want to be here in the first place. And now, she would be deprived of a seat!

She scanned the room with her hands on her hips. At last, she spied a vacant chair. It was in the "Cardassian section." It didn't take her long to decide.

She'd rather sit with Cardies than stand for god-knows-how-long. She made her way with the seat firmly in her focus. She prayed she could make it before it was occupied. Triumphantly, she plopped down in the chair. Her victory was diluted by the fact the Cardassians around her gave her an evil eye. She thought, *'At least they are content to just give me the cold shoulder.'* As the thought finished her neighbor to her right spoke.

"Ah, a Starfleet captain has decided to sit among the natives."

Aurelia regarded the Cardassian male. He wasn't in a military uniform. Nothing indicating a function or title. She defended herself with, "I'm no better than anyone else here."

The Cardassian smiled insincerely as he nodded, "Of course, that is what Starfleet trains you to say in situations like this."

She had barely managed the courteous statement and now this arrogant, unappreciative bastard threw it back in her face. Oh, this wouldn't stand, "Well here is something they don't train us to say: this is the only damn seat I could find and I'm not getting up now. So, either find someone else to vent your frustration on, or shut the hell up!"

The Cardassian retreated at the onslaught. Then something happened the captain didn't expect, a glimmer appeared in the man's eyes and a smile cropped up on his lips, "Thank you, Captain."

Aurelia paused as she contemplated the ... gesture of gratitude. "What?"

The man seemed absolutely genial, "Thank you. Ever since the end of the war, all I ever get when I talk to a Starfleet officer is 'I'm so sorry for your loss,' or 'Don't worry, Cardassia will rebuild,' or some other displaced optimistic comment." His smile expanded, "It restores my faith in the universe when I see some people still hate Cardassians. It brings a semblance of order to my life."

Backing off, she exhaled, "I don't hate Cardassians. As far as I'm concerned, your government was responsible for allying yourselves with the Dominion; not the people as a whole."

The Cardassian dipped his head in agreement, "Indeed, our fate was sealed once the Obsidian Order fell. That allowed a civilian government to rise. A

government that was fool-hardy enough to trust an over ambitious Gul named Ducat.”

Her eyes rolled, “I don’t know if I’d blame the fall of the Order for Cardassia’s problems...”

The man cordially offered, “Then, perhaps you are an optimist after all.”

The conversation stalled for several seconds. Aurelia renewed it, “So what’s your role in all this?” She immediately regretted losing the opportunity to stop talking to the man.

“Why what do you mean, my dear captain?”

Sintina blinked at the familiarity of the question, but decided to ignore it, “Well, despite appearances, they don’t let just anyone in here. You must be a relatively important person among your people.”

“My name is Garak.”

Aurelia showed a small grin, “What no title?” Garak had what was probably mock confusion on his face, so she continued. “Cardassians don’t usually introduce themselves with out a title, unless they don’t have one.”

He drew out the sentence, “My dear captain, I’m afraid it’s just plain and simple Garak.”

Perplexed, she asked, “So what do you do?”

Something caught his eye across the room. He casually answered without looking at her, “I’m a tailor.” He then added, “I think they’re about to begin.”

Sintina was dumbfounded by the response. She shook it off. Then, she realized, he said that annoying phrase again. She leaned in closer, “By the way, plain and simple, Garak; if you ever refer to me as ‘my dear captain’ again, I’ll knock your teeth out.”

He faced the captain, she saw a genuine smile for the first time, “Why...captain, I do prefer your brand of diplomacy over what we are about to hear.”

Bells rang out indicating the guests to hush themselves. Soon afterward, eight people took seats at the center table; two delegates from each 'section.' Aurelia recognized Admiral Whatley. He was accompanied by another Starfleet admiral, a human female; though, Aurelia didn't know her. She assumed who Goma and Wo'toth were; each of whom had a comrade with them. The two Cardassians were also unknowns to her. "Who are those two?" she whispered.

Garak responded in hushed tones, "The male is a former Legate named Tarkon and the female is Professor Natima Lang. Both are vying for the premiership."

The captain's "Oh," was drowned out by Admiral Whatley.

"This special session of The Provisional Military Council of Cardassia has been called specifically to address the accusations leveled against the Romulan Star Empire from the Klingon Empire regarding misappropriations of former Dominion equipment..."

Wo'toth spat, "Misappropriations! These Romulan *Qi'yah* stole equipment that was slated for the Empire!"

Both the Romulan and Klingon delegations rose to hurl insults; the larger crowd of spectators soon followed. The Federation and Cardassian areas were more civil.

Garak used the intermission to quip, "Whose idea was it to have the Klingons and Romulans sit next to each other?"

The booming voice of Admiral Whatley began to win the vocal battle, "Order! Order in the council chambers!"

The crowd slowly returned to their seats and quite returned to the room. Wo'toth still stood, glaring at the Romulan Admiral. "How do you answer these charges?"

To his credit, Goma remained seated and, on the surface, remained calm. He didn't immediately respond to the question; obviously wanting to add to the drama.

"Well?" pressed the General.

Goma sat up, "Klingons are notorious for their lack of organization skills. It is more likely you simply misplaced the items in question."

Wo'toth smacked the padd's his aid had brought, causing them to hit a Federation member in the audience. The act instigated another, but shorter, round of taunting.

Again, Whatley attempted to reign in the chaos, "Order! Calm down, everyone!" He then addressed the delegates, though it applied to the whole chamber, "We won't resolve this by insulting each other!"

Goma then rested his intertwined hands on the conference table, "Admiral, General, we have not removed any materiel that has not been slated for us."

Immediately the general blurted, "Lies!"

The admiral probed his Romulan counterpart, "Is that the official response from your government, Admiral?"

Goma attested, "I have investigated the accusations and yes, I can confirm the items listed as missing have not been removed by my government."

"Then where is that Klingon property?" shouted Wo'toth.

The Romulan Admiral leaned back with a sinister smile, "As I tried to tell you earlier, it is probably on one of those derelict ships in orbit."

Wo'toth's leather gloved hands clinched in anticipation to the answer of his next question, "Derelict ships?"

"Yes, otherwise known as the Imperial Klingon Fleet."

It was the last insult the general could bear. For nearly a month, Goma had been goading the Klingon every chance he got. His honor would not allow him to ignore the challenges any longer. Wo'toth's line had finally been crossed.

The hefty Klingon was faster than he looked. In a single motion, he unsheathed his *d'k tahg*, leaped onto the table and slide the blade in just above the small metal emblem of the Romulan Star Empire on the admiral's uniform.

All jumped to their feet: the Cardassians and Feds in shock; the Romulans and Klingons in vengeance. The two factions lunged at each other in the aisles. The Romulans fought valiantly despite the fact the Klingons had the advantage of blades. Whatley made the effort to stop the madness, but it fell on deaf ears. Lang and Tarkon retreated to the relative safety of their kin. Green and red blood mixed together on the floor. Finally, what Starfleet officers were armed began stunning the brawlers. When that proved ineffective; the female admiral, Rear Admiral Covey, Aurelia would later learn, shouted, "Wide beams!" Large arcs of red energy began appearing; rendering belligerents unconscious by the dozens until there were no more.

A hush descended upon the chamber. All in the room were still; some by choice, others not. Wo'toth had joined the melee and was somewhere in the mass of bodies. Goma had only recently stopped spurting copper-based blood; a thick stream of it covered him.

Admirals Whatley and Covey still stood at the center of the room. Like everyone else still conscience in the room, they could only examine the aftermath. After what seemed like too long, Covey ordered, "Evacuate this building!"

As the lumbering mass of people began to comply, Garak turned to Aurelia, "That proved to be much more interesting than I thought."

Aurelia knew better than to respond, but thought, '*What a great lesson in diplomacy.*'

CHAPTER 3

Supplemental USS Independence, Main Bridge In Orbit of Cardassia Prime

The way parted for the captain, revealing the bridge. Windslow, *whom had been sitting in her chair*, and Kimula stood; both regarding her with concern. Aurelia attempted to relive their tension, "I am so glad I was invited to that."

Windslow's reaction indicated he thought she was making light of the situation, but he still inquired, "Are you ok?"

She made her way to the center seat, "I'm fine. I didn't get involved."

The captain sat, her first officer and counselor flanked her.

Kimula added, "The media is reporting that seven people died in the brawl: five Romulans, including Goma and two Klingons."

The captain stated the obvious, "This is going to complicate things."

"Well, in regards to the original problem, we can't find any evidence that Romulan vessels are running cloaked," reported Ethan.

Aurelia rested her elbows on her knees, "Well ... Admiral Goma said they weren't responsible."

Kimula quickly criticized, "And you believed him?"

Aurelia simply shrugged her shoulders; though, Kimula could tell she had real doubts about Wo'toth's claims. His credibility could have been lowered due to the fact she had just witnessed him killing someone.

Kimula's eyes caught something, she quickly strode to the comm. station, "Captain, Admiral Whatley is on the line."

She sat up, "On screen."

Windslow raised a finger, but it was too late. Whatley's image was already looking at them.

Worry and anger were written on his face. The admiral began with the point, "The death of Goma has created a whole new problem, Captain. Ever since Martok appointed him here, there have been complaints, but nothing this bad. Goma's replacement, a Sub-Admiral Danclus, is on a rampage."

Aurelia stepped up, "What can we do to help?"

"Wo'toth is going to have to be dealt with in the political arena," explained Whatley. "There is, however, something we can do to try to defuse the situation a little." He paused for a breath as if second guessing what he was about to say, "I have decided to take a preventative measure. I'm ordering the Starfleet ships in orbit, including you, to establish a tachyon detection grid outside of transporter range of the planet to end any possibility of unauthorized movement of materiel."

The captain uttered, "Are you sure that's a good idea, Admiral?"

Windslow noticeably grimaced after the words left her mouth.

Whatley slowly blinked, his head cocked to the right. He calmly suggested, "Why don't you transfer this conversation to your ready room, Captain."

"Alright sir, one moment," promptly returned Sintina.

The main viewer on the bridge dissolved to show the bulkhead behind. Aurelia stole a sympathetic glance from Windslow. See continued to her ready room, only now realizing her mistake.

Sintina sat in her chair with a dull thud. She entertained the idea for just a moment to not reconnect her comm-line. *'Maybe he'd close the channel and move on to talk to another captain in the fleet. Maybe he'd get distracted and forget about it.'* Then, she tapped on the activation control.

'At least he doesn't look overtly mad,' thought Aurelia.

He continued as if there was no pause, "It is customary, captain, to speak to your superior in your ready room and not on the bridge for the very reason you just demonstrated."

Aurelia more bowed than nodded, "I disagreed with you in front of my bridge crew."

"Exactly. If you disagree with me, fine but not in front of anyone below the rank of captain."

The captain gained some of her confidence now that she realized he hadn't taken it personally, "I'm sorry, sir. ...but with respect, there is no evidence the Romulans are behind this?"

He again tilted his head in disbelief, "Who else could it be?"

Aurelia thought of the alternative. The Klingons could have stolen their own equipment to frame the Romulans, but it doesn't really seem their style. She forced herself to answer before Whatley brought up the same points she had been thinking about, "I don't know, sir." She stumbled through the next sentence. "I just don't think we should act solely on suspensions. Isn't it possible, by taking this action, that we could spur the diplomatic incident that we are trying to avoid?"

The admiral leaned back far in his chair, Aurelia saw the beginnings of sarcastic smile, "We're already in a diplomatic incident. This is just damage control." He leaned back in, "And Captain, has it ever occurred to you that your superiors have information that you do not and might just know what is best?"

Sintina put her hands in her lap. *'Damn it! Why can't I stop pissing off admirals!'*

Whatley allowed the captain to reflect on his words a moment before he concluded. "I'm ordering you to orbit the planet at the following coordinates and send out the tachyons. Hold position until you get orders from me."

Sintina could only eat crow and respond, "Yes, sir."

"Whatley, out."

Aurelia flopped back. Her chair wasn't tall enough to support her head, so it turned up to the ceiling. She stayed like that for a second as she collected her thoughts. Without moving, she called, "Windslow to my ready room."

She made her neck support her head only as she heard the familiar sound of the portal opening. Ethan had no look of hubris. She admitted, "You tried to warn me, thanks."

Windslow consoled, "Even veteran captains make that mistake sometimes."

Aurelia shook off the feeling of inadequacy she felt all too often. Naturally, she dared not express it. Next, she scanned the text order. "Coordinate with the *Bellerophon*, she'll be the lead ship."

"Yes, ma'am."

As Ethan left, Sintina wondered if she'd ever get it right.

CHAPTER 4

Stardate: 53022.8 (9 January 2376) USS Independence, Sickbay In Orbit of Cardassia Prime

Jinal had considered not installing the upgrade himself, but he ultimately decided he couldn't avoid sickbay. It's not like Zo'Kama was his enemy. If anything she was, in effect, an ally. She gave no indication she would go back on her word. It was ... bizarre to be in the presence of a person who knew his secret.

He wasn't sure how to act around her. Should he drop his Vulcan persona? He had been playing the role of a Vulcan for so long; he couldn't really remember who *he* was. Only alone, in his quarters, had he ever dared to get out of character.

She hadn't noticed him, until now, "Is there a reason why my brand new sick bay needs maintenance?"

Jinal pushed himself out from underneath a console. He regarded the scaled face of the doctor, "Starfleet sent us an update to the EMH mark IV."

"Don't bother, I'll never use it."

Jinal still lay on the deck, "You do not care for the program?"

Zo'Kama sat on a stool while Jinal propped himself up, "It's a good idea in theory." The Arkonian continued when the Romulan didn't respond. "Think of all the computer resources and the energy required to run that program. If the ship is really in trouble, what are the chances of the program going off-line? Even if it doesn't go off-line, that power could probably be better used in other areas of the ship." She obviously had thought a great deal about this. Jinal could only sit there as she went on. "And where does it end? Holographic engineers? Holographic captains?"

Jinal didn't immediately respond for several reasons: *'Was she done? Did she even expect an answer? If he disagreed with her, would she expose him?'* He finally summoned his courage, "Have you heard of the USS Voyager?"

The reptilian shifted her focus off him as she considered, "Voyager ...yeah, the ship stranded in the Delta Quadrant, right?"

Jinal nodded, "I was reading a report that *Voyager's* EMH reestablished contact with the Alpha Quadrant. In addition, the EMH also prevented the USS *Prometheus* from being stolen by the Romulans." Too late, he chastised himself for even bring up Romulans. He hoped she would not divert the conversation.

Instead, she only inquired, "It did that all by itself?"

He managed a smile. More because he could see a somewhat normal relationship developing with the doctor than what he added, "No, it had assistance from the *Prometheus'* EMH mark II."

The doctor tilted her head, "Really?"

"Really."

Zo'Kama bobbed, "I suppose I should at least say 'hi' to my new EMH."

Jinal returned to the console and offered, "The way these things are updated, we'll probably have a LMH in a few months."

"LMH?"

"Long-term medical hologram," came from under the controls, "most hospital ships already have them."

The Arkonian jestingly stated, "Once upon a time, I thought doctors would always have job security." She began to move off the stool when the entry to sickbay separated.

A smaller version of Zo'Kama entered. Jinal speculated the child was about 12 Terran years old. He had heard Zo'Kama had a daughter. She had a lighter tan coloring than Zo'Kama. *'Maybe their scales darken with age, or maybe the child recently shed her skin.'* Jinal's Romulan upbringing allowed for little non-Romulan experience. All the other species in the Star Empire were considered second-rate citizens and were to be avoided. Only when he was smuggled into the Federation, did he receive any lessons on other sentient life forms. The Arkonians, for example, were a mystery to him. He could only guess about their physiology.

“Go’chama, one of the humans asked for some of my drink, so I gave it to him. Now he is mad.”

Zo’Kama stood, bearing down on her daughter, “Zo’Kala, you know better than to allow humans to drink *ta’rat’ush*!”

“But he asked what it tasted like.”

Zo’Kama knelt down to address Zo’Kala. “Their bodies can’t process *ta’rat’ush*. They’re bodies are water based. The human didn’t know better, but you did.”

The child looked down without responding. Zo’Kama stood again, “Who was the human?”

“Jeff Windslow,” her answer was barely audible.

“I will inform his parents that there will be no permanent damage. He just needs to drink at least a liter of water in the next day.” She gazed at her offspring, “But you must apologize to Jeff Windslow.”

“But he asked...”

“Enough! Do as I say.”

Zo’Kala stopped her defense. “Yes, Go’chama,” her shoulders sagged as she made her way to the exit. The door soon slid closed behind her.

Jinal’s head sheepishly appeared from under the console once again, “I’m sorry for ease dropping, but I’m confused.”

“About what?”

He lifted up onto his elbow, “Your daughter called you Go’chama, but that is not your name.”

“No, it’s my title. ‘Go’chama’ is roughly translated to ‘female life giver.’”

“Why didn’t the universal translator just use the word ‘mother?’”

“There is a difference. Traditionally, the life givers are not responsible for the upbringing of the child. That is the purpose of the elders of the community.”

Jinal then came to obvious question, "So why is Zo'Kala aboard ship instead of on Arkonia?"

The doctor returned to her perch, "I sent my older son to homeworld. When I hatched Zo'Kala, I was in Starfleet. I saw how children are raised on ship and decided to try it."

"It must be difficult being the only Arkonian on the ship."

Zo'Kama admitted, "It was easier on Vulcan. There is a small Arkonian community there. I did consider sending her to Arkonia when I was assigned to the ship, but she is near the age of independence anyway."

"Age of independence?"

"When she must leave her community and choose a mate. Like Vulcans, Arkonians are compelled to mate on regular intervals. We mate every fifteen years instead of seven." Zo'Kama saw the mention of the *pon faar* had agitated the Romulan. She decided now was as good a time as any to discuss it. "Since we are on the subject, I'll send you all the information I have on the *pon faar*."

The offer startled Jinal. '*Was she setting him up?*' "Why?"

"So you can more fully understand the role you have chosen for yourself." She crouched down to Jinal in a similar fashion she had done to her daughter moments before. "I don't recommend you try to fake it, however." Jinal's eyes shifted from left to right and back again. Zo'Kama's best chance to convince him was to continue, "If I were you, I'd just take some leave. The other Vulcans on the ship would be none the wiser."

Jinal hesitated. He desperately tried to decide if he should trust her or not. He had to say something, so he uttered, "Sounds like a good idea."

She glanced down for only a second and added, "I also have another bit of information that might interest you."

The Romulan's nose crunched up, "What?"

"Former Admiral Norah Satie is running for president."

“Humph!” came from the engineer. He considered asking if it was a joke, but knew it wasn’t. He shook his head, “The Federation really is declining, isn’t it?”

CHAPTER 5

Supplemental USS Independence, Main Bridge In Orbit of Cardassia Prime

D'nas, along with everyone else on the bridge, silently studied the main viewer. The image of a sphere, representing Cardassia Prime, had slowly been surrounded by several small, Starfleet icons. The Tamarian was confused about taking this action, but said nothing...at least not to the captain. It was not his place to question orders. Before Captain Aurelia and Commander Windslow emerged from the ready room, he had inquired about the orders to bin Nadal.

D'nas had come to consider the tactical officer a mentor. Lieutenant Commander bin Nadal had been the most helpful in incorporating him into the crew and went out of his way to make him feel more comfortable. D'nas, however, was far from feeling 'at home.'

On the helm control, D'nas' indicators showed the ship had reached the input coordinates and the impulse engines had shut down. Now the maneuvering thrusters made minute adjustments to their orientation. He looked over his left shoulder, "We're in position, captain."

The captain uncrossed her legs, "Alright ... bridge to engineering."

"Jinal here, captain," the voice from comm. system.

"You ready to send out the grid?"

"At your command, ma'am."

Aurelia clasped her hands, "Stand-by, we're waiting for the command from the *Bellerophon*."

"Understood."

Bin Nadal had been egging on the exchange officer in hushed tones, but now that the captain was no longer speaking to the chief engineer, his voice carried, "Go ahead, ask her."

“Ask her what?” The two officers in the ‘pit’ both turned their heads in surprise and embarrassment.

Karim bowed his head to the Tamarian in encouragement. D’nas saw he now had little choice. He only hoped no offence would be taken. In the Tamarian Space Force, such an action would be highly disrespectful. To question an officer, except one’s immediate supervisor, simply isn’t done, but bin Nadal had assured him he would not be punished. In fact, the security officer said something like ‘she needs to hear this,’ to him. So, he turned his chair and asked, “Ma’am, may I speak?”

Aurelia crossed her legs again, rested her chin in her hand and casually said, “Sure.”

The young Tamarian sat as straight as he could, “I am confused about our orders, ma’am.”

At that, Commander Windslow keenly observed and was ready to pounce.

Her eyebrows rose. Regardless of what was going to come out of the exchange officer’s mouth, she knew Karim was behind it. “Oh, how so?”

The Tamarian elaborated, “In your system of justice, innocence is presumed. Correct?”

Sintina now knew where the conversation was heading. She coolly responded, “Yes.”

“If that is the case, why are we taking this action of creating a grid to detect cloaked ships when the Romulans’ guilt has not yet been established?”

Windslow jumped in, almost out of habit from his 1st officer days on the *Mendez*. “Because those are our orders, ensign.”

All eyes on the bridge shifted from Windslow to D’nas to Aurelia. The captain broke the silence, but she seemed to be talking more to herself than anyone else. “It’s a preventative measure.”

D’nas didn’t quite understand yet, that ‘because those are our orders’ meant ‘shut up.’ So he continued, “But I have read that Starfleet officers have an obligation to refuse an order that goes against the laws or principals of the Federation. Do they not?”

This time, no one responded. Many in earshot began to dwell on their own actions over the last two years. The laws and principals of the Federation hadn't been on most of their minds as of late.

An alert beeped from the comm. station. The sound put almost everyone back to work. Kimula solemnly informed the captain, "The order to bring the grid on-line has been issued, ma'am."

D'nas still waited for a response. Karim wondered if pushing D'nas was the best thing to do. It was, of course, now too late. Aurelia sat in the center seat, momentarily impotent.

Windslow leaned closer to Aurelia, "Captain, the grid is going up. The fleet is waiting on us."

She took a deep, slow, deliberate breath, "Aurelia to Jinal."

"Jinal, here."

The order came, "Send out the tachyons."

Only at that point, did bin Nadal face forward. Reluctantly, and obviously confused, D'nas followed suit.

The Antican ops officer, Ensign Barad N'D'V, confirmed, "The tachyons have reached the adjacent vessels."

Kimula, who now stood behind the command chair, ready to jump in to the now defused confrontation, asked, "What do you think the Romulans' reaction will be?"

Aurelia felt numb, since she didn't have the luxury of feeling anything else at the moment. "I don't know, but I doubt we'll have to wait long to find out."

It was early morning in the Tarlak Sector. The area around the Diet building had been made off limits to unauthorized personnel. For the moment, only Federation security forces guarded the complex. Security officers surrounded the building; each wielding a sheathed type II phaser on the hip and a phaser rifle.

After the debacle in the previous session, the military governors and the Cardassian representatives agreed this meeting be a closed one. With the exception of a very few advisors, the chamber's seats were vacant. The voices echoed in the cavernous room.

"This is outrageous!" Sub-Admiral Danclus usually walked tall and talked respectfully, but today was not a good day. His civil demeanor slid away to show justifiable anger.

The Klingon General, Wo'toth, stood across the table with his arms crossed. He was obviously in a jubilant mood despite, or because of, the fact he had murdered Goma about sixteen hours earlier. "If you have no cloaked ships here as you claim, then it shouldn't be an issue."

Danclus pointed an accusing finger and spat, "You should be executed! Not representing your government!"

Pinute Tarkon, chimed in, "Agreed. You have been a blight upon Cardassia."

The burly Klingon laughed out loud, "It's not my fault some Cardassians aren't smart enough to realize when they've been defeated." He looked to Whatley and then Danclus, "Until Chancellor Martok relieves me, you will have to deal with me."

Danclus was unable to even look at the murder and so addressed Admiral Whatley. "The Romulan Star Empire will not stand by and be insulted by our so called allies!" He gestured with open arms, "In this very room five Romulans died yesterday! And today you blockade the planet!"

Whatley raised a hand, "We've done no such thing. Your ships can still pick up any equipment that has been slated for your government."

The Romulan calmed himself only slightly, "I must inform you, I've already sent out the order for additional warbirds to Cardassia to protect our interests here."

Admiral Whatley sympathetically inquired, "Is that really necessary, Sub-Admiral?"

Unfortunately, before a response could come, Wo'toth boasted, "Good, send all the ships you want! It will make it more interesting for our warriors!"

Tarkon and Lang shared a common look of disgust. They had little choice but to watch as the three victorious powers carved up their resources. It was Dominion equipment, granted, but it could still be better served to help rebuild Cardassia.

Danclus knew better than to get drawn into the Klingon's ploy. He continued without regarding the general's comment. "Not only that, but the Romulans Star Empire demands General Wo'toth be extradited to Romulas on charges of murder."

Wo'toth slammed his fist down and made several grand gestures as he roared, "I was well within my rights to kill the man!" A cynical grin crossed the Klingon's face, "I can't help it if he failed to defend himself."

"*Veruul!*" snapped the sub-admiral.

The general only smiled at the insult.

Whatley saw there was little point to continue the meeting. He quickly interjected, "Let's dismiss, we have to talk to our respective governments."

"Agreed," seconded Danclus. He spun around immediately and headed off, his small entourage in tow.

Whatley spoke only once the sub-admiral was out of ear shot. "Damn it Wo'toth, all you had to do was hold your tongue." He left not wanting or expecting an answer.

Wo'toth, still in a farcical mood, gave him one anyway. Speaking to the admiral's back, in a raised voice, "At least I held my *d'k tahg* this time!" Whatley only waved a dismissive hand. The general then spoke to himself with a gnarly smirk, "It was well worth it."

CHAPTER 6

Supplemental USS Independence, Captain's Ready Room Holding Station near Cardassia Prime

The fish had grown on Aurelia. When she first saw the tank in her ready room, she intended to remove it. The tank was populated by a beautiful array of several species, though; Sintina had no idea what species they were. Only now, did she see the wisdom of the relaxing distraction in a captain's office. She was lost in the fluid ballet.

Her thoughts began to wonder. During the war, she commanded a ship. She believed she was the captain. Aurelia came to the slow realization that she was not. For her short tenure as commanding officer of the *Midas*, she simply followed the instructions of the 2nd fleet commander. There was little initiative or decision making to be done on her part. She was just expected to fight; nothing more. She found herself to be rather comfortable with that arrangement.

Now though, she had to contend with other issues. She had heard older captains say the younger generation of Starfleet officers were little more than automatons. That this new wave of officers lacked a healthy cynicism and a questioning mind set. Aurelia had always dismissed that claim.

She had never been uncertain about her abilities, until now. Aurelia didn't want to admit that she wasn't *real* captain yet. In her mind, however, she knew was little more than a contract killer.

A series of tones roused her. "Come in." Her first officer entered.

"Romulan reinforcements have appeared in system and they're beginning to cloak at random to hide their numbers."

Aurelia acknowledged the report, but her mind was not on it. "D'nas is right, you know."

Windslow regarded the carpet for less than a second. If this captain couldn't be a rock, then he would have to be. He said, "It's more complicated than that, captain."

"Is it?"

The commander didn't have a prompt rejoinder.

The captain continued, "We can't do anything about Goma's death, but I want you and Jinal to take a smallcraft and use whatever resources you can to try to find that equipment."

Ethan thought for a moment, then replied, "Alright, ma'am."

As he turned to leave, Aurelia spoke up again, despite herself, "What...no complaining about how others have already tried to do that and it's a waste of time?"

"No, ma'am."

Sintina still hadn't figured this man out. In truth, she knew she had made her relationship with Windslow more difficult than it had to be. Her respect for him had risen each day. Then again, he had nowhere to go but up. "Why not? I would've brought it up if I were you."

Ethan solemnly and genuinely said, "Because you're the captain, and you gave me an order."

Sintina meagerly smiled, "Dismissed."

Pinute Tarkon looked to his benefactor on the screen. "I have quite a following in Lakat. It could be done easily."

"Good," he responded, "There is deception afoot. You may have to act with little notice."

The former Legate assured him, "It won't be a problem."

Windslow managed to maintain a sense of denial. He could function only if he pushed the events of Pentath III out of his mind. So, he was grateful to be occupied with this new mission; besides the investigative committee would conclude soon. He would be back in the captain's chair in a month or so.

The XO rounded the corner into main engineering. He spotted the Vulcan chief engineer, "Lieutenant."

Jinal was making adjustments to the rate of tachyon dispersal when he heard his commander, "Yes, sir."

"What exactly are the Klingons claiming they're missing?"

Jinal moved to another console and worked the controls for several seconds before responding. "The Klingons are missing: two Dominion industrial replicators, a long-range tachyon scanner, and three phased poleron beam emitters."

"Pretty high-profile items, whoever stole all that certainly didn't mind all the attention that it would attract."

Jinal saw no need to comment.

Windslow asked, "Could we track the individual items themselves somehow?"

It was times like this that made Jinal's lack of a social life justifiable. He read *The Starfleet Engineering Journal* religiously during the war. He remembered an article that Starfleet Intelligence captured a Dominion attack ship. There were detailed reports on how phased poleron beam emitters worked. "Well, the easiest items to track would be the beam emitters. They have components containing pergium, a radioactive element."

"Could it be tracked even if it was beamed away?"

The engineer nodded, "Yes, sir. Traces of the radiation would remain where a transporter containment beam existed."

"How close would we have to be to detect it?"

Jinal consulted his terminal again. "It would be weak. We'd have to distinguish it from ordinary background radiation ... within 20 kilometers." He then faced Windslow, "But with respect, this is something that the original investigation team would have looked into."

In Windslow's mind, question began cropping up, '*if it was this easy...*' "Come on. Can we use a fighter's sensors to do this?"

Following the already moving commander, Jinal answered, "Yes, sir."

"Well, let's go."

The very aft section of the ship contained the one shuttle bay. The outer door slid apart. Only the forcefield separated the atmosphere in the bay from space. Two small, one-person *Javelin* starfighters -- the *Hastati* and the *Velite* -- penetrated the energy field and headed into the void.

CHAPTER 7

Supplemental Cardassia City, Cardassia Prime Headquarters of the Klingon Imperial Forces

Wo'toth had been hard pressed to find supporters lately. Three weeks ago, Chancellor Martok had assigned him to be the Klingon representative on Cardassia Prime. At the time, Wo'toth thought it an honor.

So, when he was posted here, Wo'toth did his duty. The protests started shortly afterwards. Just after the war, in the city of Lakat, some armed Cardassians were assaulting a group of Breen. Neither side cared the Founder had surrendered; both sides were simply attempting to survive each other.

Lakat was in the Klingon sector, so Wo'toth did not hesitate. He sent a full battalion into the city. His warriors killed Cardassian and Breen alike. The general didn't see the problem; he made the fighting stop, after all.

A grass-roots effort on part of the Cardassians constantly put pressure on the Federation and Romulans to reign in his forces. Whatley tried to reason Wo'toth in to relaxing the strict discipline the KDF was imposing on the Cardassians; an argument the general thought was overstated.

Then there was Goma. His first words to Wo'toth were, "Your stench over powers the room. I suggest you bathe before the next meeting." Wo'toth wanted to strike him from that point on. Goma's antagonization was nothing if not consistent. The Romulan never missed a chance to insult Wo'toth personally, or worse, the Empire as a whole. The Klingon's patience and discipline had been chipped away over the last three weeks. His intense hatred for Goma grew and formed a raging fire in his gullet.

He had found a way to do something worse to the Romulan admiral than kill him; he had found a way to discredit him and all of the Romulan Star Empire. Wo'toth thought he could hold his anger in check for just a bit longer. Unfortunately, he didn't. Now the plans were falling in around him, but there was still hope for the situation.

The general had never thought much of the new leader of the High Council. *'Martok was born to a farming family in the Ketha Province, for Kahless' sake. Kor was right; Martok never should have even been an officer in the KDF.'*

Wo'toth, himself, descended from noble blood. His house had had a seat on the council for nearly a thousand years. He hated the fact that a commoner from the lowlands now had the power to take all that away from him. *'Martok hadn't even earned the position; it was given to him! At least the Son of Mogh was of good breeding.'* But Worf bypassed the leadership; the general would never understand why. Despite his wariness for Martok, Wo'toth was a loyal officer who, at the end of the day, would give his life for his Chancellor and Emperor.

He now faced the commoner turned chancellor over subspace. Martok may not have been noble, but at least he seemed reasonable. "I know the last month has been difficult, general."

The military governor honestly admitted, "That *tohzah* Goma, has been insulting the honor of the empire every opportunity he got. I simply could not tolerate any more."

"I understand your reasoning for killing the Romulan, but it hasn't helped matters," grumbled the chancellor. Martok saw no reply forthcoming, so he continued, "You must realize the complaints I have heard about your administration of Cardassia." The general shifted in his seat. "First, it came for the Cardassians themselves, they whined we were mistreating them." Martok's voice began to rise, "Then, President Santiago requested that I more actively control my troops. Now, the Romulans are making demands!"

Wo'toth felt he had to respond in like tones, "We should not apologize! The Cardassians are defeated and we can treat them as we choose!"

"We must respect our allies as well!" barked the chancellor.

Wo'toth's riposte left his lips before his brain could catch it, "You disappoint me, Martok."

Martok's good eye grew large. He slowly leaned into the monitor, calculating every word, "In that case, it makes two of us, Wo'toth."

The general knew what Martok meant when he very deliberately didn't use his title. Wo'toth backed away as if a large *targ* had snapped at him and he was a mere pup. "Am I to be handed over to the Romulans?"

The chancellor indolently rested in his chair before answering. "No, but you will no longer serve as military governor."

Wo'toth found his head began to nod, "I understand." Then, he remembered the plans had not yet been completed. "What of the missing equipment?"

Martok's gestures mirrored his words, "It does not concern me." He sat up again, "Your house has lost much honor this day."

The general's eyes could not meet his superiors, "I regret I have failed you, Chancellor."

The Leader of the High Council lighted up slightly, "Not to worry, your house will recover."

Wo'toth now saw his opportunity. The plan must now move forward, it was the only way to return home with honor. "I pledge to you, Chancellor, I will return with our missing items and show the quadrant what devious vermin those Romulans are!"

Martok knew Wo'toth wouldn't want to fade quietly into the night. He decided not to vocalize his concerns, mostly because he tired of dealing with the man. Instead, the chancellor simply reached up and closed the channel.

The IRW *Chairo* held position well outside the Federation's detection grid. Not that it mattered; the *D'derix* class ship ran uncloaked and was awaiting orders.

Commander Terrick was a micro-manager. He reviewed the status of some minor upgrades on the bridge when the voice of this combat officer gained his attention.

"Sir, Klingon vessels decloaking!" The officer manipulated his console, "At 10 mark 2, 158 mark 6, and 272 mark 354!"

Terrick only thought to ask, "What do they think they're doing?"

At his station on the bridge, bin Nadal read a padd with the information Dr. Bashir had sent him. Dr. Bashir basically had three encounters with “Section 31”: the initial contact on 51668 when they put him in a holographic simulation; then in July of last year, when he unwittingly helped them on Romulas; and lastly, when he was forced to kill “Sloan” almost two months later. No one had ever claimed “Sloan’s” body. It still sat in the morgue at *Deep Space Nine*.

An alert caught his attention. He put the padd down. He had a double take to make sure he read his display correctly. The tactical officer looked over his shoulder, “Ma’am, a *K’vort*, a *B’rel*, and a *Vorcha* class have assumed an attack formation around a Romulan warbird.”

“What?” came for the captain’s chair. Before any further explanation could be given, Kimula informed Aurelia, “A broadcast transmission is coming in.”

“On screen.”

The main viewer hummed to life, the image of General Wo’toth adoring it. “The *So’taj* has been informed that the Romulan ship currently surrounded by Klingon vessels is the ship that now contains our stolen items. We will board that vessel and inspect it. Do not attempt to interfere with the inspection. Wo’toth out.”

As the screen dissipated, Aurelia commented, “Ah, hell.”

D’nas leaned over to bin Nadal, “I’m not familiar with the *So’taj*.”

“The Klingon’s covert intelligence agency; it translates to ‘hidden dagger.’”

Aurelia stood, “*Independence* to fighters.”

“Hastati *here*,” came the voice of her first officer.

“What’s your status?”

“*We’re following the radiation, but we don’t know where we’re going yet.*”

“Step it up, commander. Things just got more interesting.”

CHAPTER 8

Supplemental USS Independence, Main Bridge Holding Station near Cardassia Prime

Aurelia had to fight back her first instinct: to set a course for those ships. Almost immediately after Wo'toth message, Admiral Whatley ordered the fleet to maintain their positions.

She had given up sitting. It required more repose than she could muster at the moment, so Aurelia paced the bridge. She looked over the shoulders of her crew as she went.

Kimula observed Sintina for several minutes, before she came to the conclusion that Aurelia wouldn't stop anytime soon. When the captain's circuit made it past the communication's station, Kimula waved her close. "You're making the bridge crew nervous."

Sintina let out an annoyed gasp, "What, I can't walk around now?"

"If you're nervous; they're nervous."

Aurelia resigned to her counselor as she often did. "I've only been a captain for 4 months and I already hate it."

With a small sigh, Aurelia moved to the center seat and begrudgingly sat. She then looked back to Kimula as if to say, 'Happy now?'

A grin pulled at the Andorian's lips as she rotated her chair back to her station.

The cockpit of the *Javilin* class fighter reminded Windslow of the old aerial warplanes' of the 20th and 21st centuries.

Their journey started in geosynchronous orbit of the storage facility where the emitters were located. It was on the far side of the planet in relationship to the *Independence*. The two fighters relied on one of the ships in the fleet to bounce their transmission to their ship. Now they, again, had line of sight to their mothership.

"So now we're on the trail of the emitters after they were beamed up?" asked Windslow.

Jinal replied from the other craft, "Yes, sir. The radiation is arching, containment beams are straight."

"Who ever took it is still in orbit?"

"Not necessarily, we'll have to continue to follow the trail. If it ends abruptly, then the ship warped out."

The commander looked up, "For some reason, I don't think that's the case."

Before Jinal could look out, an indicator sounded. "Sir, it leads directly to a vessel..."

"I know."

Jinal continued, "This can't be right."

On the *Chairo*, Commander Terrick faced his accusers via his main screen. "Captain Draxon, under no circumstances will I allow Klingon troops to board my vessel!"

The relatively young Klingon displayed his jagged teeth, "You seem to be under the impression that I am giving you a choice, commander." He then motioned to someone off screen.

Terrick's combat officer answered the commander's unasked question, "They're powering weapons, sir."

The Romulan officer fixed his focus on his foe, "Do you have any idea the course you are setting us on?"

Draxon only scowled, "General Wo'toth will contact me shortly, then we shall see what your fate is." The image of the Klingon changed to one of the emblem of the Romulan Star Empire.

“Combat stations.” Terrick turned to his communications officer, “Any response from Sub-Admiral Danclcus?”

“No, sir. His adjutant says he’s occupied.”

Terrick roared, “Occupied!”

Wo’toth sat at his desk, a piece of half-eaten flesh on a plate adoring it. He had to change the plans and get that equipment back. It was the only way he could regain the honor he had lost. For that to happen, however, he had to contact Admiral Whatley. Whatley’s aid informed the general he would return momentarily and suggested he hold ... *‘hold!’*

The second Whatley entered the reception area, his assistant informed him of the incoming communiqué. The admiral simply acknowledged with a shake of the head as he continued into his office. Charles still couldn’t believe how Wo’toth could have done something so foolish. *‘All he had to do was control himself for a few more days!’* The general had made the plan all but unworkable. Whatley was ready to cut his losses.

‘Kevin wouldn’t be proud of this either,’ thought the admiral. Charlie sat behind his desk and reached over to open the channel.

A display of green colored energy emerged in the center of his office. His hand froze. Once it was over, Sub-Admiral Danclcus smirked casually at Whatley.

The admiral came to his feet, “What the hell!”

Danclcus ignored his outrage, “Where did the *So’Taj* get this supposed information, admiral?”

“Don’t you beam in here and start demanding...”

Again, the Romulan acted as if Whatley hadn’t even spoke, “You and I both know where those items are.”

Charles’ animosity ended at the accusation. “I don’t follow.”

The sub-admiral took a few nonchalant steps to consider his words. "You know I actually believed the Federation would conduct an impartial investigation." He gazed down a moment, "I don't know if you realize what a huge leap of faith that is for a Romulan." A small laugh escaped him, "I convinced Goma not to start our own investigation as a show of goodwill."

Whatley could only wait to see how this played out.

Danclcus continued, "But you have squandered our goodwill, haven't you? It was a good ploy. You and Wo'toth could tarnish the reputation of the Star Empire in the eyes of the quadrant. Who knows what you could do with public opinion against us? I can only guess at your end game. Wo'toth is still following your plot as we speak. But alas, your plan was poorly executed."

The admiral said nothing and attempted to maintain his poker face.

"We've detected two small Starfleet craft taking a very interesting trajectory; no doubt attempting to cover up the evidence. Did you really think such a sloppy job would go unnoticed?"

An authentic look of confusion took shape in Whatley's demeanor, "What are you talking about?"

"Two small fighters are following a trail of some very unique radiation." The sub-admiral had made his point clear and saw no further use to toy with the admiral. He walked up to the desk and rested his hands on it. "I only have one question, was the murder of Goma part of your plans?"

For only an instant, Whatley's face betrayed him. Obviously it was enough of an answer for Danclcus.

The Romulan commented, "I see. Very well." He retreated a few paces then spun around, "I'm not interested about you, admiral. Nothing good can come from exposing your little plot. I would rather not make it public."

The state of anxiety Whatley had been experiencing subsided a bit.

Danclcus returned to just opposite of Charles and gave him a commanding stare, "Here is what I want done."

His fist impacted on the desk, the plate on Wo'toth's desk clanked and rattled. "Damn it, Whatley!" cried the general. The Starfleet admiral still had not contacted him.

The KDF couldn't actually board the Romulan ship. That would only serve to embarrass him further. He needed Whatley!

The general began to formulate another option. He couldn't back down; not without the supplies back in his hands. How long could he maintain the stand-off? *'If only the Romulans would fire first... Damn it, Whatley!'* He saw only one alternative. Wo'toth mumbled to himself, "Besides, history can always be rewritten."

CHAPTER 9

Supplemental Fightercraft Hastati In Orbit of Cardassia Prime

The former captain now stared at the end of his journey around Cardassia Prime. Windslow had to push the questions out of his mind; there was no time now. He opened a channel, *"Hastati to Independence."*

Aurelia's voice came, *"Yes, what have you found?"*

"You're not gonna believe this captain, but the missing equipment is on a Starfleet vessel."

On the bridge, Aurelia instinctively looked back at bin Nadal as if he could confirm Windslow's assertion. "What?"

"Yes, ma'am. The troop transport Würzburg."

The captain rubbed her temples in disbelief. She asked the question hoping, but not expecting an answer, "Why is it there?"

"With respect ma'am, we can speculate later."

Sintina began to nod her head in agreement, despite the fact Windslow couldn't see it. After what seemed to be several moments of internal confusion, she thought of a question that could be answered. "Is all the equipment on that ship?"

This time, Jinal's more familiar voice answered, *"It appears so, Captain."*

Rational thoughts eluded Sintina. She simply didn't know what to do. Aurelia berated herself; she was lost. She began to feel a mild vertigo.

After a few seconds, the security chief looked back. He was unaccustomed to see Sintina at a loss. She had told him earlier what Ross and Boral had said about their reservations of her captaincy. At the time, he consoled her with 'It was just an opinion of some tight-assed admiral.' Now, it made him wonder if the criticism she received was justified. Bin Nadal decided to pick up the

slack, "I don't advise we just announce to everyone that the missing items are on Starfleet ships until we know what's going on."

Windslow jumped in over the comline, *"Agreed."*

Once again, Jinal offered a solution, *"Captain, we could beam the equipment back to their original location, since the Würzburg's shields are down."*

Bin Nadal challenged, "Yeah but Jinal, if we do that everyone could trace the transporter signal straight to us."

Aurelia was focusing again. She simultaneously felt embarrassed, gratitude for Karim, and shame for thinking about how she had lost face. She managed to add the obvious, "We certainly don't want that attention."

A moment of silence followed, which only served to emphasize how simplistic Sintina's last statement was. Aurelia began to realize the others were not as concerned about it as she was.

Commander Windslow finally spoke, *"Captain, we could try a remote interface with one of the automated Cardassian transporter relay stations in orbit. I noticed one a few minutes ago that should have the proper alignment to the targets."*

Aurelia considered the suggestion and began to see a light at the end of the tunnel. She at last found her second wind. "That sounds like a..."

An alarm sounded at bin Nadal's station. He didn't wait for the captain to finish her sentence, "Captain, the three Klingon vessels have opened fire on the warbird."

Aurelia's light faded, but she kept her wits this time. Fighting...she knew fighting, "Windslow, do it."

"Aye, Rota out."

Green pulses of disruptor energy left the bow of the *Vorcha* class cruiser. Next, more fire came from the two smaller Klingon ships. The onslaught was halted by the shields of the warbird.

The large *D'derix* class lumbered to starboard slightly and unleashed its own volley of fire, landing squarely on the protective field of the *K'vort* ship.

"Captain Draxon, alter your sensor records to indicate the *Chairo* launched several cloaked gravitic mines that you detected and that is why you opened fire, understood?"

The Klingon captain promptly nodded, "*It shall be done, general.*"

Wo'toth's mass filled his metal chair as he enthusiastically said, "*Qapla', captain.*"

"*Success!*" boasted Draxon seconds before the Klingon tri-foil replaced his image.

"*This will work. It must,*" thought Wo'toth. A sharp tone soon followed indicating someone at his office door. "*naDev ghoS.*"

The general's aid, Matar, swiftly entered.

"Ah, Matar, have you been able to raise Whatley?" inquired Wo'toth.

Matar was out of breath and nearly in a frenzy. He ignored the general's question, "Milord, dissent in Lakat has turned into an armed uprising!"

It was not the first time Lakat had been a thorn in his side. Since the KDF went in to stop the fighting, the residence of that damn town had been vocal critics of his administration. Since they were non-violent, the Federation wouldn't allow the unrest to be dealt with. Lately, there had been reports of Cardassian colonies resisting the Alliance Forces. The general always advocated that being soft on their homeworld would only encourage the dissidents. '*Now was the time to stop the half-hearted efforts.*' Wo'toth pushed himself up and roared, "Damn those spoonheads! Not now!" He fumed for a moment, then continued, "Send in our warriors from the Second Division."

The *Hastati* and *Velite* sped around Cardassia Prime. The huge globe filled the upper part of Windslow's vision. He was currently passing over a deep green

ocean. There was no need to take it slow now. They would be close enough to access the station in mere seconds.

Windslow, as an afterthought, asked, "Now you *can* do what I said, right?"

The Romulan was thankful the commander couldn't see the grin that escaped him, "Yes, the station has line of sight to the *Würzburg* and the storage facility."

"Moving into position."

Lieutenant Commander bin Nadal's eyes were fixed on his display. Before him, he witnessed not only the battle but readouts indicating respective shield strength, hull integrity, and several other factors at play. It was odd to watch as an uninvolved third party. He was used to being in the thick of it. Karim gave an update, "The *Chairo's* shields are at 72%, and the *B'rel's* shields are failing."

Aurelia was like a child on Christmas whom had been forbidden to open her presents. All this power at her finger tips and all she could do was watch. She straddled the division of the helm and tactical stations. She darkly mused, '*At least I'm not pacing.*' She said, more to herself than anyone else, "Come on, guys."

Karim added to the already grim situation, "Most of the other Klingon and Romulan ships are converging on the battle."

"Great," Sintina followed with a more constructive, "ETA until they get into weapon's range."

D'nas anticipated the question, "About 15 seconds, ma'am."

The captain put her right hand on the back of D'nas' chair; the other on Karim's. She wanted to be patient, though it was futile, "*Independence to Hastati*, report."

"*Energizing now*," came her XO.

Sintina continued to see the exchange of fire on the main screen and wondered why they hadn't stopped yet. It didn't take her long to figure it out. "Ok people, notice that the equipment is back."

Still the firefight continued.

D'nas added, "Six seconds until..."

Bin Nadal cut him off, "The *B'rel* won't take another hit."

A familiar sensation of disorientation began to reappear in Sintina, her legs began to feel numb. '*No, damn it!*' The captain recovered, "Alright we'll do it." She turned aft, "Kimula send out a broadcast message..."

The Andorian turned to her station and paused. She swiveled back around, "Ma'am, a message is already going out from the USS *Geronimo* saying the items are back."

Bin Nadal manipulated his console, "Several vessels are scanning to confirm." The seconds seemed to drag on. Then finally, he added, "The Klingons and Romulans are standing down."

Sintina made her way to the center seat and plopped down. With a sigh, she said, "Finally."

CHAPTER 10

Stardate: 53025.5 (10 January 2376)
Cardassia City, Cardassia Prime
Tarlak Sector, Federation Embassy

Wo'toth read the status report from Lakat. The insurgents were being routed. Nearly 20 warriors had been killed. Though, four times as many Cardassians lay dead. The crackdown would not be popular, but Wo'toth couldn't afford this blemish right before his reassignment. The general knew Whatley would have to make a show of protest.

It seemed the admiral came through after all. The "stolen" items were returned before the KDF could destroy the *D'derix*; which was Wo'toth's preferred plan anyway. *'Clever man, that Charles; he knew exactly what I needed even though I never contacted him directly.'* It would now seem to everyone that the Empire forced the thieves to return the goods. General Wo'toth could now leave his post with some measure of dignity.

A tone, more of a subdued shriek, echoed in the general's office, *"Milord, incoming transmission from Chancellor Martok."*

"Excellent! Route it though." Wo'toth smiled in anticipation of Martok's praise.

The second Martok set eyes on Wo'toth, the barrage commenced, "Halt your forces in Lakat! And how could you order an attack on a Romulan ship! What in *Gre'thor* were you thinking!"

Wo'toth only returned a dull stare; his mouth hung open.

The Leader of the High Council didn't pause long, "Your most recent follies have tipped the balance! ... The Starfleet governor is no longer supporting us. I have no choice but accede to their demands!"

"Demands, what demands?"

Martok yelled into the monitor, "Withdraw! The Cardassians, Romulans, and now the Federation is calling for our military presence on Cardassia Prime to end!"

Wo'toth felt his heart sink deep into his gut. He could only utter, "What?" Then the general's nightmare came true.

The cloak of leadership nearly fell off Martok's shoulders as he cursed, "Your title is gone! Your house will be gone! You'll be lucky if I allow you to command any of our warriors again!"

All of the planning to discredit the Romulans was now totally out of Wo'toth's hands. It began to slip from his fingers when he killed Goma. He valiantly tried to grasp it again, and again, but in the end, it finally eluded him. In desperation, the now former general, offered, "But ... I have the missing equipment back from the Romulans."

"Fool!" Martok's fist slammed on a console as the screen turned black.

Wo'toth found himself looking at his reflection in the monitor. Only then did he realize how dumbfounded he looked. In one moment, he had undone what over 10 generations of his ancestors had fought and bleed for. He was now nothing more than a common soldier. He whispered to himself, "How did this happen?"

Admiral Charles Whatley sat in his office. Only last night it was violated by the Romulan representative, Sub-Admiral Danclus. *'How quickly situations change,'* thought Charlie. He now talked to his new de facto partner over a secured communications channel, attempting to cover his own posterior. "I swear, I had no idea the *Independence* was running that operation."

The features hardened on the Romulan's face, "I find that hard to believe, Admiral."

Whatley brought up the valid point, "Why would I cooperate with you and then return the equipment to Wo'toth?"

Danclus looked off screen, whether to another person or simply to contemplate, Whatley couldn't tell. After several moments, the sub-admiral continued, "Fortunately, the Klingon pullout has greatly overshadowed the incident." He then leaned in, "As for your new assault ship, you're either lying or you need to control your captains better."

Whatley didn't nod, but he mentally agreed with Danclus' assessment.

In her ready room, Aurelia had been talking to Admiral Whatley for several minutes now.

The dark-skinned Whatley summed up, "So your engineer hacked into a Cardassian transporter and beamed them back."

"That's right, sir."

Whatley made a fist and his other hand wrapped around it, "Well, the Romulans must have beamed the items to our ships to frame us."

The captain evenly replied, "Yes, sir."

The admiral didn't make much attempt to hide his contempt despite his words, "I must praise you for your ingenuity and subterfuge, captain. The Klingons are claiming that they pressured the Romulans into returning the items and, of course, the Romulans are still insisting they never took them. But the situation is still salvageable."

Aurelia hesitantly asked, "Can we help in the investigation, sir?"

He coolly said, "No, you've helped enough here. And Captain, since this is an ongoing investigation you and your bridge crew are not to discuss it with any one, understood?"

"Understood."

"Whatley out," his image disappeared.

Sintina wanted to feel proud, but something was out of place. "Windslow, report to my ready room." Moments later he entered; the door sliding behind him.

"Well, he thinks the Romulans beamed them over to our ships in order to frame us."

Ethan nodded, "I guess that makes sense. Thanks for telling me." He turned, ready to resume his post, when something occurred to him. "Except, if that were the Romulans' hand, you would think they would have pointed the

finger at us before their ship was attacked.” He saw in Aurelia’s eyes there was concern as well. “Things just don’t quite add up, do they?”

Aurelia sat back and crossed her arms, “No, they don’t.”

Cardassia’s orange star began to set. Danclus’ office window had an amazing view of it. *‘The end of a very productive day.’* Long before Goma’s death, the Star Empire decided to give unofficial support to Pinute Tarkon. His “True Way” party offered opportunities that couldn’t be ignored. Danclus had no small part in the timing of the up rise in Lakat.

Once when Danclus was studying Earth’s Second World War, he came across a phrase which he particularly liked. He now watched his “useful idiot” on the media networks.

The backdrop consisted of ruined buildings and rubble; Tarkon climbed a mound of it and began his oratory. “Residents of Lakat, we have scored a great victory for Cardassia! We have forced the Klingons off our planet. Never will Cardassia be ruled by anyone but us! Legate Damar did not die to exchange one overlord for another!” He allowed a pause to soak in the crowd’s approval. “However, with the Klingons gone, I believe we can work with the Federation and Romulans.” The masses seemed less enthused this time, so he decided to end on a high note. “Together, we will restore Cardassia to its former glory! That is the True Way!”

The clapping of the mob grew into a deafening roar.

THE END