

# Star Trek: Independence The Way of the Gun

By Dnoth

*A patriot must be ready to defend his country against his government.*  
~ Edward Abbey

## PROLOGUE

**Stardate: 53703.8 (14 Sep 2376)**  
**Federation Merchant Ship, SS Ethiopia**  
**Sappora Star System, In Orbit of the Independent Planet New Sydney**

"We've been boarded!" screamed one of the Listeners. His voice could barely be heard over the klaxons and phaser fire.

Michael Hall saw the man in a junction down the corridor. His thoughts turned to his duty. He had to get Uhura out of there.

For several years he had worked with the admiral when she was in charge of Starfleet Intelligence. She hand-picked promising officers to become her "Listeners," an elite group of spies; he was lucky enough to be one of them. Nyota engendered a rare type of loyalty. An entire generation of SI personnel came to see her as their superior, mentor, and grandmother rolled into one.

After she retired in 2361, he and several others, continued to serve her. Mike mused to himself. *'Retired, yeah right.'* Uhura didn't understand the concept. 'Retirement' merely meant, she wasn't taking orders from Command anymore.

Hall found himself in Nyota's quarters, though he didn't remember the trip getting there. The woman's dark skin was crisp like rice paper. Her body no longer reflected her mind. A frail façade hid a formidable, yet tranquil woman. Her thin, white hair bobbed slightly as she turned from a monitor.

Michael reached out for her fragile arm, "Nyota, we have to get you out of here!"

She looked up with calm eyes, "Let's go." Uhura moved well for a human of 137 years.

As they reached the threshold, he paused just long enough to hear the sounds of battle down the corridor. Michael ushered the elderly woman as fast as her body would allow. A deathly howl forced the duo to look back. Both knew what it signified. Without a word, they speed up their pace.

The transporter room seemed like an oasis. Hall immediately darted for the controls as Uhura stepped onto the dais.

"I don't see why you had to come here in the first place, Nyota," complained Mike as he manipulated the controls. He was hesitant about starting a conversation. They had half a minute, at best.

Nyota knew it was a comment born of frustration, but answered it anyway, "My contacts here won't talk to anyone else. The details I got about the assassination plan will save Satie's life." She added with a mild sarcasm, "Assuming we can get it to her in time."

Hall had never figured out how she could joke in situations like this, "Doing my best," he rejoined without looking up. "I'm more concerned about protecting you," he continued.

"Such a nice man," bantered Uhura.

The comment was well received. Unfortunately, Mike didn't have time to smile. "I'm beaming you near a safe house on the surface. They won't be able to find you."

"I've heard that before."

"I'm sorry we've failed you, Uhura," said Hall, with remorse on his face.

The retired admiral tilted her head. Her voice was that of a grandma, "You've done nothing of the sort. The fight continues."

Michael broke into a small grin as he slid the energizer. Nyota faded away in a flurry of light.

Hall took a deep breath, secure in the fact that he had done all he could. What happened now didn't matter. He waited several seconds for the inevitable. He was comforted as he thought of what his last words would be.

The hatch parted. A small group of Starfleet security personnel wearing tactical garb pinned him to the bulkhead with brutal swiftness. He had at least three phaser rifles pointed at his head. Mike didn't struggle. He already knew his fate.

One of the attackers checked the transporter logs. A human male commander slowly strode in the room. He had a chiseled face. His eyes were as cold as a shark's. Short, black hair topped his head. The man glanced at the officer going over the logs.

"Sir," reported the security officer, "he routed the signal through several relays and scrambled it. There is no way to tell where she transported to."

"Very well," said the obvious leader of the assault team. The commander nodded at another officer who was now holding Hall. Immediately, the security officer pulled Mike's right arm over his shoulder and yanked down hard.

The sound of gristle snapping and bone cracking filled the room. Hall screamed in agony as his arm made an unnatural shape. The officer let go, allowing Michael to examine the malformed appendage as he cried out.

The commander then walked up and grabbed Mike by the jaw with substantial force. "Stop screaming," said the man in a dispassionate tone.

Surprisingly, Hall did. He was ashamed of his lack of dignity in the face of torture.

"That's better," began the man in a viciously, methodical voice, "I'm Commander Collins. Now, I'm going to ask you a few questions."

In all his years in SI, Michael had never been face to face with someone as cold and collected during an interrogation as the man before him.

Collins proceeded, "Where did the old woman transport to and what does she know?"

Mike was proud when he managed, "Do you know what you're doing to the Federation?"

Without any hint of agitation, Collins raised his foot and crashed his boot into the side of Hall's left knee. His body fell as fragments of his tibia jetted out of his leg. Before he could reach the deck, the commander grabbed him and propped him up against the bulkhead. Mike's mouth was quivering in pain, but the scream was restrained this time.

Holding Hall by the shirt, Collins leaned in, and said calmly, "You're in no position to question me."

Michael now welcomed the end. He tried to stand on his uninjured leg, but the floor was slippery with his blood. "My answer to both questions is: go to hell."

Collins actually grinned and nodded. He whispered into Mike's ear, "I want you to know, my respect for you just went up." He then backed away and gave a palm strike to Hall's nose, forcing it into his brain cavity with a crackle. Michael's lifeless body lingered for a moment before it slid to the deck.

Now uninterested in the corpse, Commander Collins tapped the communicator on his tactical vest, "Away team to Captain Russell."

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The bridge was filled with red alert lighting. Captain Russell stood vigil in the center of the room. "This is Russell, report."

*"We've secured the ship, but the main target transported away."*

Russell looked over to his advisor. The stocky Andorian woman wore a slick, black suit. She looked none too pleased at the news.

"Beamed to where?" followed up the captain.

His first officer responded, *"There's no way to tell, the signal was routed through several orbital relays."*

The Andorian simply folded her arms as she huffed.

"Any recommendations, Agent Visala?" offered the captain. He used the word, 'recommendation,' but Russell knew who was in charge of the bridge. It wasn't him.

Visala snapped as she addressed the ceiling, "Commander Collins, get a fighter, go to the surface and begin hunting her."

*"Understood."*

"But he doesn't even know where to start?" interjected Russell.

The agent had little patience for explaining herself, "Collins has considerable skills. It's why he was recruited for this assignment." Her arms still crossed, she said, "Recall your team and destroy the ship."

Russell nodded, "Away team, beam back over with any prisoners you may have and..."

"No," said Visala. She looked at him as if disciplining a child, "I said recall your team."

Slowly, the captain understood the impact of her command, "You want me to kill Federation citizens?"

"Not citizens," countered Visala, "dissidents."

Until that point, Dalton Russell could pretend the people who approached him for this command had the best interests of the Federation at heart. What had he gotten himself into? He knew his face betrayed his doubts.

The agent clasped her hands behind her back as she approached Russell. "Carry out your orders." She stood on her tip toes so her mouth could reach his ear, "Unless, of course, you want everyone to know you raped that man."

The captain visibly gulped and his eyes glossed over with fear. In a raised voice he ordered, "Away team, come home on the double. Leave the prisoners on their ship."

*"Aye, sir."*

"Should ...um, we stay in orbit?" fumbled Russell.

The grinning Andorian replied, "No, Collins will do his work here, but we need to patrol the route between New Sydney and the Saurian system, so we can intercept any messages... or messengers."

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The simply designed SS *Ethiopia* hung silently in space. A ball of white and blue light came hurtling toward it. The quantum torpedo easily ripped into the hull of the civilian freighter. A few secondary explosions later, there was nothing but debris.

In its wake, the majesty of a *Sovereign*-class ship appeared. On its hull, it read: USS *Philadelphia*.

## CHAPTER 1

**Stardate: 53711.2 (17 Sep 2376)**

**SS Aaron Satie**

**In Orbit of Terra Nova**

The night was long for Lieutenant Commander Ivan Feodrovich Paskevich Cherenkov. He sat on the side of his bunk. The room was comfortable enough. It was his mind that kept him awake. Late yesterday, retired Admiral Norah Satie offered him “a job” via holo-communicator.

Perhaps fate had a hand in introducing Pascal Fullerton to Ivan a month before. Pascal led a group called the New Essentialist movement. Three years ago, the group reverted Risa into its natural rainy climate to show how shallow and privileged Federation culture had become. Cherenkov found that Fullerton’s argument of getting Federation citizens’ collective head out of their ass rang true.

Unknown to Cherenkov at the time, Fullerton had a powerful ally in Norah Satie, the current opposition frontrunner for Federation president.

Now, one of Satie’s aides, Nellen Tore, expected an answer; would he help find Satie’s would-be assassin or not?

A series of tones indicated to Ivan that someone was at the door. “Come in.”

A Delb female entered. Her mild forehead ridges were accented with blue pigments. “Commander, I need to know your answer.”

Ivan stood, wearing civilian clothing. He appreciated Tore’s lack of pleasantries, she normally seemed to be such a spurious person.

He had been searching for something to bring purpose back into his life after his release from the stockade. It led him to back to Terra Nova, the place of his birth. It was appropriate that Satie’s staff caught up with him here. Her offer could give him a new focus. Despite his enmity toward politicians, his decision wasn’t that hard. “I accept.”

Nellen had mixed feelings. She didn’t much care for his ‘kind,’ but she also knew Satie’s reasoning. She managed a polite grin, “Excellent.” She extended a hand. It was taken. “I’m sure the admiral can pull some stings with Starfleet to extend your leave.”

"I'm sure she can," acknowledged Ivan.

"We'll loan you a shuttle for the duration of your employment," continued Tore. "In fact, I already have a lead for you. Satie received an incomplete message from one of our contacts. The communication was cut off at the source."

Cherenkov jumped right into his new role, "From where?"

"New Sydney, a non-Federation planet in the Sappora system."

"How fast is that shuttle?" Ivan asked.

"Warp 5," answered Nellen, as if she expected it.

"Good enough," curtsied Cherenkov.

Tore volunteered, "The *Aaron Satie* will be heading for Sauria. Norah's been campaigning there for the last couple of weeks."

The commander now had a spring in his step. "You have data on Satie's contact?" inquired Ivan, pointing to a padd in Nellen's hands.

"Yes, here you go."

As Ivan took the padd, he ended the conversation with, "Where's the shuttle bay?"

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The USS *Independence* traveled at high warp, its sleek curves cut through the nothingness.

*"Captain's Log: stardate 53714.0. The Independence has been ordered to Pelair Zel II. The Federation member world is near the border with the Tzenkethi Coalition. Due to the beating the planet took during the war, the Security Council has authorized a planetary defense upgrade.*

*On a more personal level, Windslow has been back for about six weeks. We've made an agreement that I'll lead any away team missions. Other than that, his work performance has been ...adequate, but hardly exemplary.*



*All in all, however, I'd say the ship and crew have really come together over the last several months. I'm proud of us."*

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Nicole Chase's naked form rolled off Karim. The bed sheets, along with items of clothing, had long since fallen unceremoniously on the deck. A glistening of sweat covered both of them. Each took a moment to catch their breath.

Bin Nadal ordered between heavy inhalations, "Computer, lower temperature by 10 degrees."

Nicole cooed as she put a hand on his chest, "Thank you."

"It was way too hot in here," commented the security chief.

"No," whispered Chase as she kissed him, "I mean, thank you."

"Oh," blushed Karim, "you're quite welcome."

Nicole reluctantly moved off her lover and looked at the chronometer. "Damn," she said, "I have to be on duty in 8 minutes."

"We are cutting it a bit close; aren't we?" chided the Persian.

"It was worth it," replied Chase as she got up and headed for the sonic shower.

Karim put his hands behind his head, his contentment apparent. A few minutes after Nicole left, a soft beeping started. It took him a moment to realize what it was: an incoming call on a secured channel. He had transmissions on a particular carrier frequency routed directly to his quarters, bypassing the bridge. It was one of many tricks he picked up in Starfleet Intelligence.

In his rush to answer the call, the fact that he was naked eluded him. He sat at his desk and tapped on the computer. Alynna Nechayev tipped up an eyebrow as she beheld Karim with no shirt on. At least, as far as she knew, he had pants on. The security chief moved the display field up, just in case.

"Catch you at a good time, Commander?" asked Nechayev with an ever so slight grimace.

Karim cleared his throat, "Um...how can I, ah...help you, sir?"

Any jovial tone Alynna had quickly vanished, "I have a mission for you. I need you to take a shuttle and go to the coordinates I'm sending you. I want you to recover a very important operative. You'll receive further orders from her when you get there."

"Me? Why not take the whole ship?" inquired bin Nadal.

Nechayev shrugged, "Honestly, this is very important and very sensitive. I just don't trust your captain with it yet."

"But you trust me?"

Nechayev leaned forward, "I trust you enough."

Karim paused as he thought, "What if I convince Aurelia to take the ship?"

She shook her head, "No. First, I doubt she would. Second, if the *Independence* is pulled from her current mission, it would raise suspicions."

Karim began running scenarios through his mind, "It might help if you at least order Captain Aurelia to lend me her yacht."

Again, Nechayev's head shook, "I can't have any traceable involvement. Aurelia would want orders. I won't issue them."

As much as he didn't want to admit it, bin Nadal knew the admiral was probably right. He took the next step, "The *Javelin* fighters are only capable of warp two. Our only other warp capable support craft is the yacht, a *Morpheus* class runabout. The captain will notice it's gone."

"You'll just have to improvise, Commander," offered the admiral. "This has to be done. The future of the Federation is at stake."

The tactical officer unenthusiastically said, "Right."

## CHAPTER 2

### **Supplemental USS Independence, Captain's Ready Room In Route to Peliar Zel**

"...But she said, the future of the Federation is at stake!" pleaded bin Nadal to his captain.

Sintina shrugged, "Then why didn't she order me to do it?"

The Persian sighed in resignation.

"I can't divert," continued Aurelia. "Peliar Zel needs these defense system upgrades. The colony is ten light-years away from the border. I'm not going to delay getting there."

Bin Nadal conceded, but wasn't done negotiating. "Then let me take the *Luger*."

Aurelia sat back, "No. We'll need the runabout to deploy the orbital weapons."

"It could be done with the worker bees," argued Karim.

She nodded in a round about way, "Yes, but it'd take longer."

"Please," begged bin Nadal, "let me do this."

"You and I have been through a lot. I trust you as much as I trust anyone." Sintina considered for several seconds before responding, "Look at it from my point of view. All I have is you coming in here and saying it's so. The only orders I have are to get to Peliar Zel II and reinforce our defenses," she puffed, "that system could easily come under attack by, not only the Tzenkethi, but Orion raiders, or Cardassian insurgents. It's a key star system." She added, "This isn't the best part of the quadrant." She interlocked her hands and rested them on her desk, "What would you do?"

Bin Nadal grudgingly came to the conclusion that Sintina was still not ready to make the leap he asked of her. He didn't really blame her, it was just...disappointing. "I understand," he mumbled.

She dipped her head to get her friend's attention, "I'm sorry."

He silently nodded as he exited.

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Once one got away from the mining operations on New Sydney, the planet was rather nice. Uhura found herself in an affluent section of the main city. This part of town was surrounded by a large barrier to keep 'the rabble' out. There were basically two classes of people here; the rich mine owners and their miners. The disparity troubled Nyota, but nothing would be accomplished by complaining about it to her current company.

Yanas Tigan sat across the room. Her eyes fixed on an old family picture.

Less than a year ago, she was the owner of the sixth largest pergium mine in the Sappora system. Unfortunately, in a bid to save her beleaguering company, her sons took it upon themselves to get involved with the Orion Syndicate. It was the beginning of the end for Tigan Mining Company.

In exchange for paying the 'pension' to a wife of one of their members, the Syndicate would loan them enough money to stop their company from going under. The wife, however, asked for more and more money. The deal soured. Her youngest son, Norvo, in a misguided attempt to solve the situation, killed the woman.

The worst part of it, in Yanas' mind, was the fact her sons were now in prison because of her own ambitions. The company...anything for the company.

All Norvo wanted was to be an artist, would that have been so bad? And Janel, he was more competent than she ever let him know. ...Had she ever praised either one of them?

That left Ezri. Yanas never wanted her to join Starfleet, but her daughter was always so stubborn. Ezri was the only one strong enough to oppose her will. Yanas now knew Ezri's insubordination probably saved her from her brothers' fate.

She sold the family business afterwards. The proceeds allowed her to maintain her lifestyle, but not her future generations'.

Yanas' guest roused her out of her daily ritual of regret.

"Thank you again, for allowing me to stay here," said the old, human woman.

Yanas absently responded, "It's the least I could do...after a wasting a lifetime."

Uhura sat next to the unjoined Trill on the couch, "Don't be so hard on yourself, Yanas. You did your best at the time."

"It took the imprisonment of my sons to realize my mistake," said Yanas.

Uhura rested a hand on her shoulder. "Many people don't change," offered Nyota, "even after such a loss. You found the courage to do something different."

The Trill nodded despite herself, "I'm glad one of your Listeners approached me. Maybe I can make something good come out of this."

"As long as you keep that attitude," encouraged Uhura, "I'm sure you will."

Yanas changed the subject, "Have you called for transportation?"

"I don't need to," grinned Uhura, "my people will be coming for me soon."

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Visala commandeered the captain's quarters the moment the ship was launched.

It had taken nearly a year to find the proper officers to assign to the *Philadelphia*. Admiral Ross had done most of the leg work. She had never talked to the man directly, but apparently he had been working with the section on and off since the Federation-Tzenkethi War. The idea was simple: get and maintain direct control of a Starfleet vessel. The resources of a starship would prove to be invaluable to the directorate. Sure, they could gain control of any Starfleet ship at anytime via their command codes, but doing that too often is problematic. And coming up with false presences to have a captain achieve a 31 goal is tiresome. A controllable and unquestioning crew was what was needed. The master-mind of the project was the agent she reported to now; a human known as Morgan.

"Report," ordered the dark-skinned man.

Visala began, "We are patrolling the most likely route for any communications between the old woman and the target."

*"Good."*

"How is your progress?" inquired the female agent.

*"The assassins have been recruited. The treatments are working well."*

Visala let out a light laugh.

Morgan questioned, *"Have I said something funny?"*

"No," rejoined Visala, "It's just we have access to all this mind-control technology and you rely on simple blackmail for the *Philadelphia* crew."

He grinned widely in response, *"Not in every case, some, like Collins, are simply born killers. Besides, sometimes the simplest technique is the most effective."*

## CHAPTER 3

### **Supplemental USS Independence, Deck 4 In Route to Peliar Zel II**

It was 02:15, Zulu time. The corridors of the *Independence* were dimmed. Karim stepped out of his quarters, a duffle bag over his shoulder. He was grateful that he was able to sneak out without waking Nicole. He wore a light-tan, Mandarin shirt; loose fitting brown pants; and an Asian-style, denim jacket. His stride was swift.

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The entrance of the yacht access bay opened. The heavy doors slid with what seemed like an inordinate amount of noise. The hangar was mostly dark.

The Indy housed a 4 support vessels, plus a few worker bees. Like the ship itself, they were designed for war.

Three *Javelin* starfighters were kept in the shuttle bay. They were one person craft with five phaser arrays and mirco-torpedo launchers. Their speed, however, would be inadequate for this mission.

The remaining option was the *Morpheus* runabout. The *Morpheus* is to the *Danube* what the *Sovereign* is to the *Galaxy*. It boasted stronger shields, 360 x 360-degree phaser coverage, 12 photons, with two tubes. Its top speed, warp seven, would be more than enough. Sintina, due to her affinity with ancient firearms, christened her the *Luger*.

The security officer looked to the small launch center. It was lit and manned. Karim reached into the bag, retrieving a small cylinder. He placed it in his pocket and set down the duffle. Then, he headed for the control station.

It was regrettable he had to take these steps. The man he was about to subdue was Crewman Hess. Bin Nadal had only talked to him a few times. Hess seemed like a nice guy. The crewman was probably recording letters for home or playing some sort of computer game. There was little else to do during the graveyard shift.

Karim entered the small room. A large window reflected his image.

Hess was watching a newscast on a padd. He spun around to the door as the commander walked in. The crewman seemed glad to have a visitor, "What are you doing up at this time of night, sir?"

Bin Nadal flatly stated, "I'm going to steal the *Luger*."

After a guffaw, Hess came back with, "That's a good one, sir. But how do you intend to get past me?"

Reaching in to his pocket, Karim answered, "With this hypo-spray."

The grin of the crewman's face barely had a chance to fade before the tactical officer closed the gap and injected him with axonol.

Karim gently rested the man on some non-essential controls. Then, he quickly input a series of commands. The bay lights come on and the launch warnings sounded. Bin Nadal muted the klaxons. As he neared the access port, he heard the interior hatch open. There was no time to react. Whoever it was would have to be neutralized as well. He moved to the ajar entrance, hypo still in hand.

The person stepped in. Karim stopped in his tracks when he realized it was Nicole.

Lieutenant Chase seemed just as surprised as her lover. She jumped back and gave a yelp. Nicole was wearing only silk pajamas. She observed Karim, just a meter away from her. Both of his hands were up; silently urging her to calm down. A hypo-spray was in one of them. "What are you doing?" she demanded.

The security chief lowered his hands, "Go back to bed, Nicole."

His lover was persistent, "Not until you answer my question." She placed her hands on her hips. Her surprise turned to annoyance, "I wake up and you're not there. The computer told me you were here."

He didn't have time to for this. He moved to pick up his bag, "I've been ordered on a covert mission. That's all I can say."

Nicole nodded until something in the corner of her eye caught her attention. She seemed oddly undisturbed by the discovery. "I'd believe that if Hess wasn't unconscious in there."



Karim breathed deeply as he opened the hatch on the advanced runabout. "I don't want you involved."

The woman huffed, "Well, it's a bit too late for that. I already am, or haven't you noticed?" She walked closer, "What's this really about?"

"I already told you."

"A covert mission that requires you to *commandeer* the captain's yacht?" doubted Nicole.

A thought entered Karim's mind. He still had the hypo in his hand. She was in reach. He glanced at it for just a moment, but it was enough for Chase to read his thoughts.

"It's been a long time since I've been in a decent relationship. I'm not willing to let you go to do...whatever you're going to do...alone. I love you, Karim."

Her revelation was comforting to Karim, but he still debated.

She got even closer, "Let me put it another way, unless you use that hypo on me, I'm coming with you." She paused for just a moment.

Karim didn't move to tranquilize her.

Nicole decided not to linger too long. She brushed past him and assumed the co-pilot's seat. "I'll have to replicate some clothes along the way." She tapped on the console and looked at her lover, still at the threshold. "I need someone to set the course. I don't know where we're going."

The security officer looked down at the hypo, then the deck. He whispered to himself, "goddamnit."

He boarded the runabout with a sigh, and sealed the hatch.

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The reptilian doctor, Zo'Kama Do'matar, commanded the ship. Initially, she had no desire to take the Bridge Officer's Test. The issue was recently forced upon her. During, the now Lieutenant Commander, Windslow's absence, there were only two officers on the ship with the qualifications to take

command; Aurelia and bin Nadal. Starfleet regulations required three. So the doctor, being a full commander, was drafted. Once she got a taste, however, she found she liked it. Bin Nadal and she had been rotating the graveyard shift.

Zo’Kama reached for her *ta’rat’ush*, a thick brown liquid, that her Arkonian physiology required. The drink was lukewarm. It seemed hotter going down from last she drank, which meant she was cooling. It was normal for this time of night. She would have to go to the lavatory for a few minutes and raise the temperature in the room, if she expected to stay active for the rest of the night.

An alarm sounded from the ops station. Petty Officer Dorian reported, “Sir, I’m reading a launch sequence from the captain’s yacht.”

“What?” said the Arkonian, as she rose, “Stop it. Secure the locking latches.”

Dorian attempted to do so, but, “I can’t, it someone has blocked remote operation.”

The doctor wasn’t a warp field expert, but she knew enough. A shuttle could launch while its mother vessel was in subspace, but it was a risky maneuver. Transversing the warp-field was tricky. “Well, slow to impulse so they don’t kill themselves.” She added, as if it were an afterthought, “Captain to the bridge.”

The African-European man added, “The *Luger* is disengaging.”

“Tractor beam,” ordered Zo’Kama.

Dorian responded quickly, “Aye.”

The com switched on. “*What is it, doctor?*” asked an obviously groggy Aurelia.

“We’ve had an unauthorized launch,” rejoined the Arkonian.

The captain said to herself, “*Karim*,” but it was loud enough to be heard over the speaker. She informed the doctor, “*I’ll be right there.*”

The petty officer reported with a proud smile, “Sir, we have them.”

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A blue light emanated from port of the runabout.

"Damn, they've locked on," complained Nicole.

Karim remained calm, "I know how to disrupt their beam."

"Can't you just use your security codes to disable it...and their weapons, for that matter?" offered Chase.

Bin Nadal shook his head without looking over, "I could, but I won't."

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Dorian's display indicated a fluctuation in the tractor emitter; then, a total collapse. In his inexperience, he thought a tractor beam couldn't be nullified so easily. He spun on his stool, "Sir, they've used an inverse graviton pulse to disrupt our emitter."

Just then, the turbolift doors parted. Captain Aurelia strode in. Her uniform jacket was no where in sight. Her red undershirt's sleeves were pushed up. "Report."

"He broke our tractor lock," said Zo'Kama as she stepped to the side. "He's about to go to warp. Should we pursue?"

Aurelia considered the question. Her gut reaction was to go after him, disable the craft, and flog him. Yet again, someone had undermined her authority...and her judgment. She never thought Karim, a comrade in arms and trusted friend, would join the likes of Ro, Windslow, Picard, and basically every admiral she had crossed paths with. Her fists clinched.

A new train of thought began in her mind. The last months had forced her to realize she had a bigger responsibility as captain. She couldn't rush head long and do whatever she wanted. It was a lesson she was slow to learn, but beginning to accept.

The captain watched as the *Luger* flashed into subspace on the main viewer.

A possibility entered Aurelia's consciences, '*What if he was right?*'

Amazingly, her logic overrode her emotions. She said, to no one in particular, "I didn't divert for him before. Why should I divert for him now?" She regarded the Arkonian, "Continue on to the Peliar Zel system, but increase to warp nine. I want to get that job over as soon as possible."

Zo'Kama was a little taken back by Aurelia's response, but had no desire to question it. "Yes, ma'am."

"Good luck, Karim," said Sintina, just above a whisper. "I hope you find whoever you're looking for...before I find you."

## CHAPTER 4

### **Stardate: 53725.7 (22 Sep 2376)** **In Orbit of New Sydney** **Sappora System**

The shuttle from the *Aaron Satie* was small, aged, but effective. The civilian craft normally wasn't armed, but was retrofitted several years ago with a single Type-IV phaser.

The trip gave Ivan Cherenkov several days to think. New Sydney, like his birth-planet, had a strong Orion Syndicate presence. His thoughts brought him back down several unpleasant paths.

Now, Ivan focused on his indicators. The debris was consistent with the SS *Ethiopia*, according to the information giving to him.

The craft eased into a field of scrap floating gently in space. Ivan ran what limited scans his vessel could perform and examined the flotsam visually.

He hoped his eyes betrayed him. The EM radiation and neutrino particle pattern could only indicate one thing...a quantum torpedo explosion. Photon torpedoes were fairly common throughout the Alpha and Beta Quadrants, but not quantum. The Romulans were rumored to be developing them, but only Starfleet already had them on hand.

The natural conclusion chilled him to the bone.

There was something more...remnants of an annular confinement beam. Someone transported away.

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Peliar Zel II consisted of mostly desert. The planet resembled a huge bronze buckler to Sintina. She stood near the large display in the conference room on deck two. The captain called this meeting for an update. She was far too antsy to sit at the head chair. "What's the status of the deployment?" she asked the collected senior staff, minus two.

Chief Engineer Jinal responded first, "All available support craft and engineering crews are assembling the torpedo and photon turrets."

"I contacted the civilian engineer corps on the planet," added First Officer Ethan Windslow. "They'll be able to speed up the process."

"It will still take, at least, 30 hours to have them online," assessed the Vulcan engineer.

Captain Aurelia turned away from the monitor, "Is that the best we can do?"

Jinal tipped an eyebrow, "I don't exaggerate my estimates, ma'am."

Aurelia nodded. She already knew that to be the truth, but she felt the need to ask the question, none the less. "Thirty hours then."

The *Independence's* comm. officer and counselor, Lieutenant Kimula, addressed the elephant in the room, as she often did. "What do you intend to do with bin Nadal and Chase once you find them?"

"I intend to pistol whip them," soberly chided the captain.

Windslow rolled his eyes, "Do you have a pistol?"

"A .45 caliber Springfield," rejoined Aurelia, with a malicious glimmer in her eye. Though, it was obvious to Sintina, most of what she just said was lost on the persons assembled.

No one in the room ventured to laugh or object, but several curious glances were exchanged.

Science officer, Tang Zian, changed the subject, much to the relief everyone else. "It occurs to me, that Commander bin Nadal could have used his knowledge of the ship to disable us. It would have made it much easier for him."

Kimula fielded the implied question, "It's no surprise to those of us who served with him during the war. Karim would never abuse his access like that."

"Besides, it was apparently unnecessary," commented Windslow, "He evaded the ship quite easily." He added, after he noticed Aurelia and Zo'Kama glaring at him, "Not that it's anyone's fault. He's just good."

"In his mind," broke in, the Andorian counselor, "it allowed him to do a dishonorable thing with honor...if that makes any sense."

Aurelia also defended Karim, "He believes he's doing the right thing."

"Can you elaborate on that, captain?" Windslow asked.

The captain seemed hesitant. She wasn't sure if she wanted to open that can of worms. It had been six months since Section 31 was revealed to her. But she heard practically nothing from Nechayev since then.

Aurelia wasn't sure what to believe. The very notion that the Federation attempted genocide of the Founders seemed...unlikely. Classified reports indicated it was the Tal'Shiar. Even if elements of the Federation did do such a thing... Sintina found herself justifying the action. Cut off a snake's head and the body will die, after all. The other claims were just too outrageous to accept: the allowing of the Breen attack on Earth, the manipulation of the Tal'Shiar, the subversion of the Federation Government. One point six million Starfleet personnel died to defend the Federation in the past few years. Spreading such rumors was a terrible way to honor their memory.

On the other hand, she couldn't keep her command crew in the dark forever. Bin Nadal's motivations were a legitimate line of questioning. It would come out sooner or later...hopefully not at another court-martial.

Sintina finally relented, "He told me, Admiral Nechayev ordered him to retrieve an operative on New Sydney."

"So he was just following orders?" inquired Jinal.

It was time for Aurelia to roll her eyes, "Maybe, I don't know."

Windslow chimed in, "An operative for what?"

"I don't know," responded Aurelia, "some covert group within Starfleet. I don't really put much stock in what they say."

"That Section 31 he was talking about?" excitedly asked Kimula.

"No."

Lieutenant Tang followed up on Jinal's comment, "Have you contacted Admiral Nechayev to confirm the order?"

"I tried, but her adjutant says she's on leave," said the captain.

The Andorian counselor spoke up, "You don't think Karim lied about it, do you?"

Aurelia barely had a chance to shrug her shoulders when another inquiry was placed.

"Is Admiral Ross involved?" Windslow asked.

Sintina became annoyed at what she perceived as an onslaught of questions she didn't want to deal with, "Look, I'm not going to answer every question. I don't have all the answers...Hell, I'm not even sure the answers I have are the truth, anyway."

Everyone was quiet for several seconds after the mild outburst.

The first officer shifted in his chair, "So what are your orders at this point, ma'am?"

Aurelia was pleasantly surprised when Windslow put the meeting back on track, "We get those damn weapon platforms deployed and go find them." The group sat intently, they seemed to want more. 'Dismissed' didn't seem appropriate. So Aurelia ended with, "Don't just sit there and look at me, let's do it."

Zo'Kama didn't linger; she shot up immediately. Followed closely by Windslow, the rest exited slower and a bit more confused.

\*\*\*\*\*

The New Sydney Police Bureau had a large station on the mining continent for good reason. Most of the crime, at least violent crime, occurred here.

Inside the complex, a large oval window revealed an orange-brown haze that was the result of extensive pergium excavation.

Ivan found himself in front of the duty officer's desk. The NSPB officer was a young male Suliban. Encountering a Suliban was a rare thing. They had



nearly been wiped out by the Tandarans centuries before. His dark blue uniform showed a rank of corporal.

"I've seen the debris myself," continued Ivan. "You must have started an investigation?"

"Of course we have," rejoined the Suliban, "but the findings aren't for the public."

Cherenkov considered his options. If this were a Federation planet, he could use his Starfleet security clearance to get the information. Here, he doubted it would have much influence. In fact, revealing he was in Starfleet might be counter productive. He decided to take another approach, "I'm a private investigator for an associate of one of the passengers. Can you at least tell me if there were any survivors?"

The pitted yellow face of the Suliban sighed, not wanting to volunteer the information, "None were found at the site."

"I detected an ACB from the wreckage. Have you been able to track it?" asked Cherenkov.

The officer shook his head, "I'm sorry, I can't comment on that."

"Why not?"

The Suliban frowned, "Actually, "I've already got in trouble once for sharing this information."

Ivan's curiosity, concern and disappointment was apparent, "Who did you share it with?"

"I, ah...I don't know," stumbled the officer. "He was a dark-haired, light-skinned human wearing one of our uniforms." He added rather reluctantly, "I told him everything before my supervisor came in and asked for his security code. After that, he beamed out."

*'You didn't confirm his authorization?'* criticized Ivan. He nearly vocalized it, but caught himself. In lieu, he asked, "When was that?"

"A couple of days ago, just after we were able to isolate the sig..." said the corporal, before he grimaced.

“So you were able to track it?”

The young man bobbed his head, “Not exactly.”

Cherenkov asked conversationally, “What does that mean, ‘not exactly?’”

The corporal elaborated, “Well, it was probably somewhere in the main city, Port Jackson. But we...”

“Thanks,” interrupted Ivan as he tapped his hidden combadge and transported out.

The Suliban froze for several seconds. Then, he looked around for any witnesses; there were none. He closed his eyes and sighed deeply.

## CHAPTER 5

### **Supplemental USS Philadelphia Captain's Quarters**

A slow, melancholy melody played quietly in the darkened room. Dalton Russell examined the phaser intently. It was the only thing in his universe...that, and his guilt.

Russell wondered how he got to this point. During his stint as captain of the *Budapest*, Dalton's husband divorced him because of infidelity. He had been so lonely ever since.

The party celebrating the victory over the Dominion at *Starbase 304* was so wild. That young ensign was batting his eyes from across the room. Dalton needed the affection.

Then Admiral Ross called, offering to solve all of his problems. For a time, the problems did seem to fade away. Russell got a new command, a *Sovereign*, no less.

Shortly afterwards, his 'advisor' came aboard. It started going down hill from there. Now, he's killed nearly a dozen Federation citizens.

The phaser was cool to the touch. It indicated it was set to level 10.

He doubted his use of a quantum torpedo would be of any consequence. These people seemed to be able to cover-up anything. Though, he hoped otherwise. It didn't matter. He wouldn't be around to feel the repercussions of his actions.

He put the phaser in his mouth...and froze. He left the phaser there for several seconds. He couldn't do it. In his mind, he knew that to be true the whole time, but he wanted to go through the motions. Russell deactivated the phaser and plopped it on the table.

"Coward," he said to himself.

\*\*\*\*\*

The *Luger* began decent procedures into the New Sydney atmosphere.

Chase turned in the co-pilot's chair, now wearing appropriate civilian clothes. "Ok, we're here. Now are you going to tell me why we came?"

"I doubt you'd believe me," responded Karim as he worked the controls.

Nicole only half-chided, "I'm not going to stay in a relationship with a man that keeps secrets."

He looked up and then over at her, "The less you know, the safer you are."

The comment sounded too cliché to Nicole, she laughed and said, "Well, tell me what you can without killing me."

Karim sighed as he returned to the console. After a moment, he glanced over, "Ever heard of Section 31?"

"Section 31 of what?"

The Persian rolled his eyes. He decided to explain it another way. "How well do you know you're Earth history?"

She shrugged, "Pretty well."

"Before the time of the Eugenics Wars," started bin Nadal, "many nation-states had agencies similar to the Romulan Tal'Shiar and the Klingon So'Taj. They had names like the Central Intelligence Agency, the Committee for State Security and the Institute for Intelligence and Special Operations."

"Ok...I'm impressed, but what are you saying?" she asked.

Karim made visual contact with designated landing site. He slowed to 20 percent thrust. He continued, "The Federation has such an agency, it's called Section 31."

"Not a very intimidating name," joked Nicole.

He gave her a look that showed his disappointment in her lack of sobriety.

"Ok, sorry," apologized Chase. "And you work for this group?"

"Not exactly."

She pressed him, "Well, if they didn't order you here; who did?"

One thing bin Nadal learned while running covert ops for intelligence: volunteer as little information as possible. Not only to guard against counter operations, but to protect your allies. He didn't look up from the controls and ignored the question. "Adjusting gravity plating to sync up with the planet's."

\*\*\*\*\*

On the surface, Commander Collins raised a pair of visual enhancers up to his eyes. A Starfleet runabout was coming in. He isolated it and zoomed in. "USS *Independence*," he said. *'Would they be so bold...or stupid?'* He doubted there would be another reason for a Starfleet presence here and it was the best lead he had. He put the enhancers down and began walking to the landing platform.

## CHAPTER 6

### **Supplemental Port Jackson, New Sydney**

Karim looked at the address. It was a rather large home. It sat several meters from a cliff overlooking the ocean. The view was particularly spectacular at the moment. The main Sappora star was setting. It's much smaller counterpart was higher in the horizon. The light glimmered off the water. He turned to Nicole, "This is it."

"Great," said Nicole, "I wish I knew what 'it' was."

They moved to the door. Karim rang the door bell.

A middle-aged woman, Yanas Tigen, cracked open the door after two rings. She peaked out, "Can I help you?"

The tactical officer committed the access phrase to memory, "Mark Twain once said, 'If you don't read the paper, you're uninformed. If you do read the paper, you're misinformed.'"

Yanas nodded, and tried to recall the proper response, "He also said, 'Any kind of royalty, however modified, any kind of aristocracy, however pruned, is rightly an insult.'" She added, "I'm glad you're here. Come in, come in."

The duo crossed the threshold as their host gave them some room. She said, "We were beginning to worry. So we took some precautions just in case..."

Chase was about to close the door when a tremendous force pushed against it. The door slammed into the inner wall. It assaulted Nicole's shoulder in the process and she was forced to the floor from the blow.

Karim barely had time to turn; he too was impacted by the force. It wrapped arms around his waist and pinned him to the ground. Only then, did he realize it was a person. Bin Nadal was able to knee the body off him. It was long enough for him to return to his feet. As the attacker stood, Karim kicked him in the face. The man twirled in the air and landed ungracefully on the hard wood floor.

Bin Nadal started a follow up kick when the attacker caught his boot and twisted hard. Karim knew enough to use his enemy's strength. He spun with

his foot and came around with the other, which landed nicely on the side of the man's head.

Both men impacted on the floor. Fortunately, Karim still had the advantage and quickly rose. He looked to a shocked Yanas, "Call for help!"

In the fraction of a second that it took to address Yanas, the attacker pulled a knife and lunged for Karim.

Bin Nadal saw the motion in the corner of his eye, but it was too late to avoid the blade. The best he could do was to sacrifice his arm to protect his throat. Karim cried out as the blade entered his flesh. The dagger glanced off his radius bone.

Collins withdrew the knife in preparation for another thrust. Karim waited for the perfect moment. *'The best way to defend against an attack is not to be there,'* his sensei used to say. Once his opponent was off balance, he'd counter. The moment, however, never came.

A blur slammed into Collins from the side before he could strike. It was Nicole. Both were knocked down.

Collins heard a woman saying, "Computer, get me the NSPB." He looked up and saw the woman at a communications terminal. He still held the dagger. "No you don't," he said, as he flung the blade at the woman's back. It lodged in her right lung. She immediately tried to scream, but only gasps came out. She panicked as she vainly attempted to reach the knife.

Bin Nadal's first reaction was to help Yanas, but the threat remained. He went to stomp on the man's face when the attacker grabbed Nicole, who was still lying next to him, and pulled her on top of him.

Karim tried to stop his foot, but the momentum couldn't be halted. His boot rammed into Chase's forehead. She seemed to be knocked unconscious by the blow.

Collins grinned as he threw Nicole at Karim. Bin Nadal couldn't help but to grasp his lover and ease her as quickly as he could to the floor. He grimaced as his arm burned with the effort.

The attacker got up and reached for a glass end table. The Persian didn't see it in time to defend against the now hurtling object. It smashed into his face.

Several shards of glass stuck out of it. He could no longer see anything but red. His shriek of agony was blood curdling.

The comm. came to life. An officer on the screen asked, "Mrs. Tigen? Mrs. Tigen?" From the angle of the display, the police officer couldn't see anything, but he heard someone screaming. "If you can hear me, I'm dispatching some officers to your residence."

*'Damn,'* Collins thought. He had a few minutes at best. He assessed the situation. Only one of his opponents could speak and he was screaming. Did he have time to search the house for the Old Woman? Then he heard someone entering from the other room.

"What's going on here?" asked an old, frail, dark-skinned female.

Karim managed a "Run!" to the new occupant of the room. Though, the movement of his jaw caused the glass to cut him further.

Collins began to feel the pain of the assault he just endured. He was glad for the distraction of the woman. He turned to face her. A wide smile crossed his now bruising face. "Uhura," he grinned with a bloody mouth, "you have no idea how happy my boss will be when you're dead."

Uhura seemed to recognize her mistake of exposing herself. She knew she was no match for the man. She accepted the situation, "I've lived a long, prosperous life. Come and get me."

"If you insist," glowered Collins as he strode to her. He immediately wrapped his hands around her neck and began to squeeze her windpipe. The elderly woman gasped and reached for her attacker's hands. He added, "I could just break your neck, but nothing is quite as satisfying as watching the life fade from someone's eyes. ...Watching their realization that they are about to die."

Uhura struggled, but her arms couldn't pry off his hands. The gagging got louder. Her body began to twitch. The gurgle got even louder and more dramatic. It was odd in Collins' experience but he continued to choke her.

Her arms flapped wildly. Her tongue stuck out of her mouth. Finally, with a few final jolts of movement, her body became limp.



Collins dropped her body to the floor and looked upon his most recent triumph with satisfaction. One of the greatest threats Section 31's agenda had been eliminated. He wondered what reward would be bestowed on him.

"Bastard," Karim cursed. He felt an overwhelming sense of remorse. He heard what happened, but between the blood in his eyes, the beating he received, and his stab wound, his body had begun to fail him.

Suddenly, Uhura propped herself up on one arm and asked, "Well, what do you think?"

Collins stepped back, unsure how to react.

The old woman continued, "I always enjoyed performing, but I'm better at singing than acting."

The commander wisened up, "You're a hologram."

The image of Uhura took a sitting position on the floor. She casually looked at her would-be murderer, "Well, I haven't lived this long by being stupid, young man."

Collins clinched his hair with his fingers and screamed with frustration.

"Besides," the hologram added, "I had to distract you long enough for that man to shoot you."

The commander looked toward the still open door. A blond haired man stood there with a phaser leveled. "You should respect your elders," said Ivan Cherenkov before he discharged the phaser.

Collins collapsed.

Ivan moved to the nearest victim. Karim's face was littered with gashes and shards of glass protruding from his skin, there was also a deep cut on this left forearm. Ivan consoled him the best he could, "Don't worry, I looked like that once. We'll fix you up."

Uhura's hologram checked Yanas. She was alive, but each breath was a torment. "I'm so sorry, Yanas," she offered. "You'll be ok. Help is coming, I promise."

Yanas took Uhura's hand and clinched it.

Nicole got up on her own accord.

"Are you ok?" inquired Cherenkov.

"I have a really bad headache," she said, "but I'll be alright."

Uhura spoke up, "I hate to bring this up. But the police will be here very soon. I don't think we can explain all this."

Nicole pointed at the lump on the floor, "What about him?"

"I just stunned him," said Cherenkov. A regret now formed in his mind. He should've killed him. He looked at the form now on the ground and realized, "It's tough to justify murdering him, now that he's defenseless."

"You're right," concurred the elderly woman, "leave him for the police."

Chase volunteered, "I can beam everyone back to our runabout."

"I have my own shuttle," said Ivan.

"Fine," responded Uhura as she assumed command of the group. "Um, what's your name?"

"Ivan Cherenkov."

"Ivan," she continued, "you get back to your shuttle and meet us in orbit." She addressed the young woman, "And you ..."

"Nicole Chase."

"Nicole, you beam Karim and me back to your runabout. I'll treat his wounds while you pilot the craft."

*'How did she know who Karim was?'* she wondered before she curtsied and went to comfort her lover.

Ivan interjected, "Great, but who are you?"

"What, you don't recognize me?"

“You look like Nyota Uhura, but I thought she was dead,” responded Ivan.

“Not exactly,” said Uhura, “let’s just say...letting people think you’re dead has certain freedoms that life can’t offer.”

Ivan didn’t like surprises. He silently cursed Nellen Tore. It would’ve been nice to know who Satie’s contact was before hand. Instead, she just gave him a description of the now destroyed ship in orbit.

The hologram concluded, “I’ll be out in a second. I’m in the basement.” The image of Uhura disappeared.

## CHAPTER 7

### **Supplemental Yanas Tigen's Home Port Jackson, New Sydney**

He felt a faint nudge...another, this time, more vigorous. A voice was heard...  
“sir?...sir, wake up!”

Commander Collins quickly became aware of his surroundings. His eyes opened to see a New Sydney police officer over him. He looked more concerned than anything. *‘He doesn’t know what happened,’* realized Collins. Quickly, he rolled his head to the spot where the woman he stabbed was sitting. She was no where in sight; neither were the others. *‘Did they all leave together? ...No, there was only one officer here.’* The other probably went with the home owner to the hospital...leaving just the man above him. *‘What did the cop on the comm. call her?’* “...Mrs. Tigen,” asked Collins with worried eyes, “is she alright?”

“She’s been sent to the medical facilities. What happened here?” inquired the officer.

“I don’t know,” began Collins, “it happened so quickly.” He propped himself up as he wiped away a manifested tear. “Four humans, two males and two females, busted in and assaulted us.”

“How do you know Mrs. Tigen?”

Collins didn’t miss a beat, “I’m her house keeper. I was about ready to leave for the day, when they burst in.” He grabbed the officer’s arm, “Did you find them...the ones that did this?”

The officer shook his head, “No, not yet. But don’t...”

Collins reached for the officer’s sidearm and shot him in one quick, fluid motion. “Then you’re of no use to me.”

The commander stood...blooded, but not beaten. This game wasn’t over yet. He tapped on his chest, “Computer, recall transport. Energize.”

\*\*\*\*\*

“Knight to queen’s level five,” said Jinal, the *Indy*’s chief engineer. He had suggested a few weeks ago to Kimula that they start playing a game other than *kal-toh*. She had handily beaten him several times. Had he really been a Vulcan, it would be rather...embarrassing. In Jinal’s case, however, the stakes were much higher. With each loss, a hidden panic began. *‘Would this be the time that Kimula puts two and two together?’*

He had been hesitant to even spend off hours with her at all. It was too risky. Kimula, however, had a persistence about her.

His parents were killed by the Tal’Shiar during a defection attempt. He escaped, and from 16 on, he was stuck in the Federation. He had been raised to mistrust humans, so he told whoever asked, that he was Vulcan. He continued that lie when he joined Starfleet.

Jinal was constantly in character. It was a terrible burden. He wondered how real Vulcans could manage.

He wanted nothing more than to be done with the lie. But how could he? Years ago, Norah Satie led, what he perceived as, an inquisition against Romulans in the fleet. He could be made an example of, just like that poor man who was *part* Romulan. Now the woman might be president. Only one *Independence* crewmember knew his origin: the doctor. Zo’Kama, however, was sympathetic and had her own run in with Satie in the past.

Even more than that, he feared the reaction from his crewmates, friends, and especially Kimula. He saw how the crew treated Windslow because his deception. How would they treat him?

“What do you think she’ll do to him?” asked the Andorian.

Jinal looked up mildly confused, “What?”

Kimula rephrased, “What do you think Sintina will do with Karim and Chase, once we find them?”

“Oh,” he considered, “If indeed he received orders, even verbal orders, from Admiral Nechayev, he is in the right.”

She removed one of Jinal’s rooks, “But why would she do an end run around the captain like that?”

The Romulan held in a bit of annoyance. Then, he offered, "Karim was in SI, perhaps it is a need to know mission." Jinal looked away from the tri-level board and into her eyes, "You mentioned Section 31 during the briefing today. What is that?"

The Andorian withdrew, even her antenna slumped. She began, "I probably shouldn't answer. It was something Karim told me in confidence."

"Oh, very well," responded the mock Vulcan, as he refocused on the game.

Kimula leaned in, "Well, if you're going to twist my arm. Karim said during our stop-over at DS9, he talked to a doctor there, called Bashir..."

\*\*\*\*\*

The *Luger* and Ivan's shuttle lifted off from the spaceport just seconds ago. Uhura was in the back of the runabout with Karim. All shared a communications link.

Chase opened the discussion with, "Anybody know who that guy was?"

After a brief pause, Uhura said, "We can only assume he was working with who ever attacked my ship."

Ivan jumped in, "*Starfleet destroyed your ship, or someone trying to set up Starfleet.*"

"How do you know?" Nyota asked.

"That's impossible," Nicole said over Uhura.

He responded, "*I found a quantum torpedo signature at the scene.*"

Uhura grinned slightly, "That's possible." She opened a med-kit, "I never saw our attackers and I've heard some rumors."

Lieutenant Chase suggested, "It's more likely someone wants you to think Starfleet did it, but who?"

Nicole's question went unanswered. After a few moments she moved to another subject, "Admiral Uhura, why did you trust us? I mean, you don't even know who sent us?"

"I have a good idea," she rejoined. She pressed a hypo to bin Nadal's neck, causing him to go into a deep sleep. "Besides, at the time, I didn't have much choice in the matter."

Cherenkov came over the line, *"I assume, as soon as we break orbit, we're heading for Sauria."*

"That's right, Mr. Cherenkov." She added, "At warp 5, we should get there just in time."

"In time for what?" asked Chase from the pilot's seat of the *Delos*.

"You don't need to know that, Lieutenant," said Uhura.

Nicole protested, as she looked aft, "You're not going to explain what's going on?"

The elderly woman turned to the cockpit and said, straight-faced, "Nope."

*"I'm reading a vessel on an intercept course with us."*

Nyota placed a shard of bloodied glass on a nearby table, "Is it the NSPB?"

The *Independence* ops officer manipulated some controls, "No, I'm reading it as a *Javelin* class Starfleet fighter."

Nyota put the tweezers back and moved forward. "Well, that confirms it." She sat at the tactical station.

"What are you doing?" questioned Nicole.

"I still know how to fire phasers." She examined the updated LCARS configuration. "I hope," she added under her breath.

*"Its transponder is disabled,"* said Ivan.

Uhura acclimated herself to the controls, "No surprise, there."

"I can't believe a Starfleet ship opened fire on you," commented Chase.

*"If we survive this,"* began Ivan, *"I can guide you to the debris field."*

Chase huffed, "I think you guys are jumping the gun a bit. I mean, we don't even know..."

Uhura cut in, "He's charging weapons." She turned to Chase, "How high do we have to be to go to warp?"

"We can't warp until we're at 500 kilometers," she responded.

"No," said Nyota, "I don't mean the regs. I mean, how high do we have to be to avoid taking part of the atmosphere with us."

Nicole checked with computer, "At 125 km, we wouldn't cause significant damage to the atmosphere, but I'd rather not create a warp field so deep in the planet's gravity well."

The former Head of Starfleet Intelligence dismissed the young woman's concerns, "It's been done before, Lieutenant."

*"Keep heading into orbit so you can warp out of here. I'll hold him off."*

Nicole objected, "But we're better armed."

Ivan's response was quick, *"You're also more important. Get Uhura to the Saurian System."*

"Ivan," said Uhura, "I'm going to keep a transporter lock on you."

*"Acknowledged."*



## CHAPTER 8

### **Supplemental In the Troposphere of New Sydney**

Just below the clouds, Ivan's small shuttle performed an Immelmann maneuver. He pulled up into a half-loop, rotated 180-degrees at its zenith, and headed straight for their pursuer. The *Luger* disappeared into the mist.

Almost immediately, streams of phaser fire emitted from the fighter. Ivan pitched hard to the right. Despite his efforts, about half of the beams slammed into his shields. He returned fire with a single, impotent beam. At least, it hit its mark. The Russian glanced down, his forward shields were at 12%. *'I'm not going to last long against that fighter.'* He wasn't fighting for him, he reminded himself; he was fighting for time.

\*\*\*\*\*

"We have to go back!" pleaded Lieutenant Chase.

The former admiral had resolve on her experienced face, "We can't go back."

\*\*\*\*\*

Too late, Cherenkov realized the fighter wasn't going to engage him. The hostile was making a beeline for the runabout. Ivan set thrusters to maximum and set an intercept course with the fighter; his single, Type-IV phaser blazing along the way. The fighter was just too damn fast. Soon, Ivan found himself looking at the aft of the attacker. He knew his shuttle couldn't keep up. "Come on, fight me!" he cursed.

\*\*\*\*\*

"The fighter is closing," observed Uhura with a calm professionalism. "Transferring power to aft shields."

Nicole reported, "We're at 56 kilometers."

\*\*\*\*\*

The three vessels rushed into the thinning atmosphere. First, the *Morpheus* runabout; followed closely by the fighter, then a few seconds later, the civilian craft.

Collins opened up another devastating onslaught, this time at the *Luger*. One beam after another ripped into their protective barrier. The last two discharges hit the runabout, unopposed. The first left some scoring on the hull, the last rocketed into the aft-port thruster.

\*\*\*\*\*

Inside the *Luger*, the power grid fluctuated and the vessel violently pitched down for a moment. Chase recovered the runabout, and told Uhura, "We've lost a thruster. We're losing speed."

"And the impulse engines are useless to us." Nyota said it more to herself.

Nicole added, "Yeah, most people don't like highly energized plasma in their atmosphere."

Admiral Uhura initiated a firing program at the attacker, "Ivan, can you give us any help?"

*"I'm maxed out on atmospheric flight. I can't get a lock. And I'm more likely to hit you than him."*

Quickly, the old woman checked the capacity of the transporter buffers on the runabout. "Just enough," she whispered. "Hold on, Mr. Cherenkov."

*"Ma'am, what are yo..."*

\*\*\*\*\*

Ivan's entire shuttle dematerialized in flight.

\*\*\*\*\*

Commander Collins achieved another target lock. Another volley would be more than enough to destroy the runabout. Then, he could double back and finish off the civilian shuttle. He reached for the fire control.

Then, he noticed a twinkling of light directly ahead of his fighter. He was confused for only a moment. Everything seemed to slow. The civilian shuttle began to take shape directly in his flight path. He took his hand away from tactical to flight control. The aged shuttle loomed large in his cockpit window.

\*\*\*\*\*

Ivan's weight shifted as he rematerialized in the cabin of the runabout. It didn't take long for him to adjust to his new surroundings. He quickly looked out the aft window. He was just in time to witness the collision. His shuttle broke up upon impact. The fighter's shields glittered blue. Both craft were taken by gravity.

Cherenkov got closer to the view port and looked down. The fighter still seemed to be intact, but was in a free fall. He turned to see both women already gazing at him. He finally reported, "He's down, but I can't tell if he's out."

"It's good enough," commented Chase, "'We'll be able to warp in a few seconds, but our port nacelle was damaged. We won't be able to make warp seven." She looked over to the old woman, "five is the best I can give you."

"Good enough." Uhura closed her eyes, sighed deeply, and leaned back. "Miss Chase, set a course for the Saurian system."

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The G-forces were nearly overwhelming for Collins. Alarms and malfunction indicators lit up his board. Propulsion was off-line. He wondered if it would come back before he impacted on the surface. Luckily, the *Javelin* had something resembling wings. Instead of thrusters he continuously fired his port phaser. Slowly, it brought the lateral spin under control. The fighter was now gliding, more or less.

Collins knew he was still going suicidally fast. He tried to restart the engines....again. The rocky surface now showed more detail.

For some reason, the deuterium wasn't reaching the RCS thrusters. He purged the system and re-injected the fuel. The restart worked this time. His thrusters came to life. Without any emotion, except a slight grimace, he headed back up into the atmosphere.

The commander knew he probably wouldn't be able to bridge the gap to his prey. Even if he did, his photon launcher was disabled and his shields were minimal. To top it off, his craft could only achieve warp two. He wouldn't let them go so easily. ...Perhaps there was another way...

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The runabout *Luger* sped through sub-space.

Nicole Chase joined the others in aft lounge. As she entered, she said, "Looks like we're in the clear."

Uhura sat on a cushioned bench; Ivan opposite her. Karim lay awake, but sore. His face was healed but still slightly red and swelled.

Chase sat next to Karim and propped his head on her thigh. She looked at Ivan, "So what's your story?"

Cherenkov didn't seem enthusiastic to talk about himself, "I'm a Lieutenant Commander in Starfleet. My last assignment was first officer of the USS *Aegis*."

"The *Aegis*? Wasn't it destroyed by Cardassian insurgents?" inquired bin Nadal.

Ivan's face hardened. Being reminded of the fate of that ship was like pulling a scab for the man. Had he...or Captain Glover, only been there, maybe things would have been different. Seventy-five of his fellow crewmates died. At least, he should have died along side them. Luckily, Aquiel, the chief engineer, made it. Aquiel...the woman that turned down his marriage proposal...there was a whole other issue. Finally, he hesitantly answered, "Yes, but I was...at Jaros when that happened."

"Jaros," repeated Nicole, "You mean the stockades?"

"Yes," Ivan began, "Some of the command crew stole the cloaking device from the *Defiant*...to rescue our captain. As punishment, we spent ninety days there."

Bin Nadal intended a joke, "Did you meet a guy called Ethan Windslow when you were there?"

"I know Ethan," Ivan's voice was somber, "he was in an adjacent cell. He's a good man." Cherenkov's blue eyes blazed as he stared at Karim, challenging him to object.

Karim instantly felt ashamed of himself for taking such a pot shot at his XO. A hush fell in the cabin.

After a while, Nicole spoke up, "Should we be sending a message? I assume you want to talk to someone. Why not just send it over sub-space?"

"That might have worked before," said Uhura, "but now, they'd be looking for it...and us."

Chase folded her arms, "Are you guys going to tell me what's going here? I mean, you can't keep me in the dark forever."

Both Karim and Ivan looked to Uhura for guidance. She thought to herself for a moment. *'Nechayev sent Karim, Satie probably sent Ivan, but how did this Nicole get involved?'* She didn't like unknowns. The elderly woman rested her arm on the top of the backrest, and said, "How long have you two been seeing each other?"

"I'll take that as a 'no,'" huffed Nicole.

Bin Nadal answered, "About five months."

Chase anticipated her next question, "I insisted on coming. I didn't give him much of a choice."

"I see," said Uhura, dispassionately.

Chase stood. "Fine, don't trust me," she spat. She headed for the cockpit, "I'm going to make sure we haven't drifted from our course."

Once Chase was out of ear shot, Ivan asked Karim, "Do you trust her?"

"I wouldn't have brought her along if I didn't," he rejoined.

Uhura looked at Karim with non-judgmental eyes, "What have you told her about our group?"

Karim sat up and smirked only slightly, "Nothing."

Uhura smiled, "A man after my own heart."

Bin Nadal got up, "I'd better talk to her." Then, he too, went to the bow.

Uhura and Cherenkov were now alone. She looked at him for several seconds. He examined the deck.

Nyota asked, "Are you alright, Mr. Cherenkov?"

"Sure, why do you ask?"

In a compassionate tone, she observed, "You seem...mildly depressed."

Normally, Cherenkov would have taken issue with someone who said that. But there was something tender and accepting about the elderly woman. She reminded him of his aunt. He exhaled, "You have a way of disarming people, don't you?"

She grinned, "It's one of my most annoying qualities."

He considered going into detail: Aquiel, the *Aegis*, Kespyrtt III, his family. Instead, he simply said, "For a time, I had hoped to get out of this lifestyle of violence, but I keep on being led back."

Uhura nodded sympathetically, "I wanted to settle down a few times myself." She laughed humorlessly, "One man turned out to be stuck in a transporter for eighty-years...but too much had changed." She sat next to Cherenkov and laid her fragile hand on his knee, "The only advice I can give you, is to make your own choices in life. If you don't, other people will be more than willing to make them for you."

## CHAPTER 9

**Stardate: 53729.6 (24 Sep 2376)**

**An Undisclosed Location**

**In Orbit of Lyaksti'kton (The Saurian Homeworld)**

*Hhiss.* Agent Morgan removed the hypospray from the Saurian's neck.

"Saurian" is the name humans...and most other races, call them. It dates back to the first space boomers from Earth. Someone must have thought they looked like dinosaurs. Morgan didn't see any resemblance. ...The green ones maybe...the one he was working on was more of a gray.

Morgan didn't really care for the species. They stank. Their slick skin was *gooey*. They rarely blinked. And their big, bulgy, yellow eyes were...annoying.

The Saurian male was sitting in a metal chair. Morgan rested the hypo on a nearby table. It, the chair, Morgan, and the Saurian all appeared to be on a small chunk of rock, floating in space. All types of colored gases surrounded them. It was quiet and cool; a rather tranquil setting, actually. The scene didn't reflect the horrid procedure underway.

Morgan, a human of African decent, circled the chair and its occupant. "Remind me, what is your programming command?"

The Saurian looked straight ahead, "Wizard of Oz."

"Your default command?" continued the human.

With a blank expression, he responded, "Scarecrow."

"Your activation command?"

"Wicked Witch of the West," said the native.

Morgan couldn't help but smirk. *'No one can accuse me of not having a sense of humor.'* He gave the creature some room, "Excellent...Scarecrow."

In a blink of an eye, the Saurian perked up. He looked around and saw Morgan, as if for the first time. "What am I doing here?" He stood, realizing his environment. He retreated to the chair and looked over, "Who are you?"

Morgan said, "Oh, I wouldn't worry about that...Computer, begin training exercise."

The spacescape dissolved and was replaced by a sparsely wooded area surrounded by mostly white buildings. None of them were over five stories tall. There were several gravel paths crisscrossing the area. The sky was a soft orange.

Just off the park, an amphitheater was sunken into the ground. A stone railing protected pedestrians from the drop off. It was about 10 meters to the bottom. The theater was filled to capacity and a human female was addressing the crowd.

The native instantly recognized the place. It was the city square of Nihoor'klem; were he often set up his food cart.

The Saurian looked at Morgan and demanded, "What's this abo..."

"Wicked Witch of the West," interrupted Morgan.

A switch was flipped. Calmly and methodically, the Saurian went to his food stand and reached under it. He pulled up an Alshain-made disruptor rifle.

Morgan crossed his arms and looked on. He said after a moment, "Computer, enable scroll lock at my position."

The native strode to the railing, rested one hand on the top of it and carefully aimed his weapon at the replica of Norah Satie. The weapon locked on to its target. He didn't hesitate and quickly squeezed the trigger.

A bolt of energy disintegrated the presidential candidate in mid-sentence. The crowd didn't react. It wasn't necessary to the conditioning.

"Good work," coolly commented Morgan. "Now, run to the Alshain Ministry of Commerce building. It's only a block away."

The Saurian turned in the appropriate direction with rifle still in hand and ran. Even though the terrain moved, Morgan appeared to still be standing right next to the assassin.

"Faster," ordered the agent, "we don't want you to get caught...alive."



The gunman increased his stride. Soon, he reached the gilded gates of the embassy. He banged on the barrier. "Let me in! You said you'd give me asylum! Please, let me in!"

"Don't plead too long," said the agent, "The Alshain aren't going to protect you, anyway. Now, put the rifle under your chin and fire."

The Saurian turned around, leaned against the gate, and did exactly as instructed. No conscience thought was involved in the act.

The program ended. The hologrid reappeared and only the native and Morgan remained.

The human came closer to the creature. "Very good...I'm the wizard of Oz. You will not remember being here." He, once again, placed a hypo on the Saurian. This time, the native fell to the floor. Morgan crouched down, "Good night, scarecrow."

The dark-skinned man rose, "Computer, return subject one to his home and scan for subject two."

\*\*\*\*\*

Captain Sintina Aurelia only stood 1.6 meters, but her presence on the bridge was far more imposing than her stature denoted. She stood just behind the 'pit,' the lowered tactical and helm stations. Her arms were crossed; her foot tapped.

Counselor Kimula considered reminding Aurelia that such body language was poor form for a captain, but decided to let it slid, in this case.

Aurelia looked over at her first officer. He sat at the operations consol. She chided herself for noticing his short, terra cotta hair was grayer than when he first boarded, nine months ago. The captain only allowed herself an instant to wonder what his experience at Jaros was like. She pushed the notion out of her head.

He looked over at her expectant gaze. "That's it. The *Triarii* has docked."

Sintina acknowledged and turned her head, "Mr. D'nas, take us to New Sydney, warp 9."

\*\*\*\*\*

Collins' fighter approached an Axanar cargo vessel. He determined it was capable of, at least, warp 6.5. It would do nicely.

The *Philadelphia's* first officer hailed them, "Axanar ship, is your destination Federation space?"

A pink-skinned being with several face and head ridges appeared on a small screen in the cockpit. "Yes, but why does that concern you?"

"The New Sydney Police Bureau is allowing me to search vessels heading into Federation space. There is a Starfleet fugitive on the loose and he might be trying to stowaway. May I have permission to dock in your shuttlebay and search your ship?"

"A criminal Starfleet officer?" began the captain, "I guess that's a sign of the times." He sighed, "Of course you may search my ship. My small crew are my direct relatives. I would hate for something to happen to them."

Collins stared blankly and the man, "Don't worry. I'll be quick about it."

## CHAPTER 10

**Stardate: 53736.6 (26 Sep 2376)**

**Runabout Luger**

**In route to Sauria**

Nicole Chase, the *Indy's* operations officer, looked back at the closed hatch. She was annoyed, but not surprised. Uhura, Karim, and Ivan were all talking in the lounge about something...no doubt their 'secret' mission. The old women's distrust of her was more than evident. She didn't blame Uhura, really; but it was very irritating. Nicole made the best of the time alone.

\*\*\*\*\*

The former admiral continued, "My contact saw the holo-simulation..."

"You have a contact inside 31?" blurted Karim, in disbelief.

Nyota forgave the interruption with grace. She answered, "Not everyone inside is as willing to void the Federation constitution. The Section is led by a directorate; not consensus." She got back on track, "Satie is going to speak at Nihoor'klem's central park district. Our assassin is a native Saurian. He has a food cart near the amphitheater."

Cherenkov asked; hoped really, "Do you have a name?"

"No," responded Uhura, "And there is more than one vender in that area."

"How much time will we have to search before the shooter acts?" questioned bin Nadal.

Admiral Uhura shrugged, "I don't know for sure. I only know the assassin will strike during the speech." She looked over at the chronometer, "And we should be able to beam down about a half-hour before the speech starts."

"That's not much time," commented Ivan.

"No," Uhura said, "but it's the time we have."

\*\*\*\*\*

The rounded hull of the USS *Independence* glided in orbit above New Sydney.

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Sintina walked a circuit around the bridge, glancing over the shoulders of different officers as she went. Everyone on deck one was ready for the NSPD to respond.

Finally, an indicator flashed at communications. Kimula quickly swiveled around, "Captain, Deputy Police Commissioner Kalty is on the line."

"Put him on," ordered Aurelia as she moved to the center of the bridge.

A light-skinned, human male filled the viewer. His hair was white, but full. He wore formal civilian attire.

"Commissioner Kalty," began the captain, "thanks for speaking with us."

"I was hoping you could answer some of my questions as well," he stated.

"Oh?" uttered Sintina.

Kalty had a suspicion in his eye, "There has been some very odd Starfleet activity around New Sydney lately. First, a ship is destroyed in orbit by what could only be a quantum torpedo; then, a murdered police officer and an injured citizen. And most recently, a phaser fight in our skies. Do you know anything about all this?"

Aurelia literally stepped back and soaked in what the commissioner had told her. She stood straight again, "I had one officer come here in a *Morpheus* class runabout. But I can't believe he would be responsible for any murders. And he didn't have access to quantum torpedoes."

"Does *your* vessel have quantum in its arsenal?" questioned Kalty.

Sintina's eyes grew wide at the accusation. "Yes, but we just arrived."

He nodded and leaned back, "We believe there were at least two parties involved. Your runabout warped out of here way too low. They were being pursued by a Starfleet fighter; perhaps its mothership destroyed the freighter."

"I find that hard to believe," rejoined Sintina.

Kalty's stare was that of an experienced law enforcement officer, "Believe it or not, the evidence is there."

Aurelia thought it best to change topics, "What happened to the fighter?"

"We don't know," he responded, "Our patrol craft tried to rendezvous, but by the time we got there, both vessels were gone."

Aurelia stepped forward and rested her hands on the consoles separating tactical and helm. "Do you have any idea where my runabout went?"

The commissioner nodded, "It had a heading of 051 mark 356. However, we lack the resources to make chase. If you would be willing..."

"Oh, you have my promise on that," said Aurelia with resolve. She began to dismiss the commissioner and look over at the helm.

He spoke up, however, "A few more things. I've already contacted Starfleet Command and requested any information it had on starships sent to this system. And I'd like to remind you that New Sydney has an extradition treaty with the Federation. I'll be reporting this to our State Department. I want the person responsible for this."

The captain was only half paying attention to what was said. She looked up, "Understood. Thanks for your help."

Commissioner Kalty had obviously hoped for more answers. He reluctantly closed the channel.

D'nas reported what Aurelia had silently ordered, "The Saurian system is along that route, captain."

She returned to the center seat, "It'll have to do. Set a course."

\*\*\*\*\*

**Stardate: 53742.2 (28 Sep 2376)**

Lieutenant Chase looked over at the sensors. A contact directly aft was catching up to them. She activated the comm. "Hey guys, you might wanna come up here."

Seconds later, all three joined her in the cockpit. Ivan reached tactical first. Bin Nadal decided to take the consolation prize of co-pilot. Uhura sat at the engineering station.

Karim examined the displays, "It's an Axanar freighter. It may be nothing to worry about. This is a common trade route."

"Yeah," observed Ivan, "but merchantmen usually don't run with shields and weapons hot."

"You've got to be kidding, me," somberly chided Nicole.

Uhura commented, "He's tenacious, I'll give him that."

The *Independence's* security chief said, "If that is him, at least we have the advantage this time. That ship can't have more than a few type-IVs."

"He's closing," reported Chase, "300,000 km...250."

"Raising shields, weapons at the ready," came from tactical.

"In less than ten minutes, we'll have to drop out of warp anyway," said bin Nadal. "We're just outside the Saurian system."

The elderly admiral then commented, "He wouldn't give himself such an obvious disadvantage. What's he planning?"

The momentary silence in the cabin was the answer.

"Fifty-thousand kilometers," said Chase, "is he going to ram us?"

Apparently Karim had already thought that, "No, his flight path is slightly off ours."

Cherenkov tapped a few controls, "He could beat us to the system and wait for us there. I'd have to assume that fighter is in one of those cargo bays."

"We could drop out of warp inside the system at the very last minute," suggested Nyota.

"He going to pass us," reported Nicole.

Ivan got a dark grin on his face, "That guy just made a fatal mistake." He manipulated the controls, "Locking on with photons."

Karim turned, "Wait! What if it's not him? Right now, all we know is that ship is running on red alert. That's it."

Uhura concurred, "Karim's right. If we're wrong..."

Nicole noticed some movement on the cargo ship. One of the large bay doors began to open. "Look!"

Karim and Ivan got up just in time to see the Starfleet fighter hovering behind the forcefield. It rotated to face them inside the bay.

"Son of a..." blurted Ivan as he quickly moved for tactical.

Two photons shot rapidly out of the fighter, passed through the freighter's shields, and smacked into the *Luger*.

Cherenkov managed to recover from the impact and report, "Fore-port shields are gone!"

"Rotating on Y-axis..." began Chase.

Her attempts were futile, however. A third photon tore into the port nacelle. Inside the runabout, a massive jolt rocked the occupants.

There are few sensations like being on a ship that drops out of warp due to damage. Reentering normal space felt like running into a brick wall. The lights momentarily failed. A micro fracture formed in the hull. The sound of air escaping the cabin was deafening. Suddenly the back-up generator came on and an emergency forcefield sealed the breach.

Uhura relayed, "The port nacelle is gone! Main power is offline."

"So are shields and weapons," added Ivan.

The admiral looked over to the blonde Russian, "He's a sadistic bastard, set up transport inhibitors."

He acknowledged and moved to the storage area.

“Admiral,” shouted Nicole with a smile on her face, “A starship is coming!”

Karim sighed with relief. He looked over to Uhura and reported, “It’s the *Philadelphia!*”



## CHAPTER 11

### **Supplemental Runabout Luger Just outside of the Saurian System**

*'I had a chance to kill him twice now,'* Ivan Cherenkov berated to himself as he activated the inhibitor unit in the aft of the vessel. He made his way back to the cockpit, "The inhibitor is set up." The lack of acknowledgement from the others indicated a new development, "What's going on?"

The elder Uhura fielded his query, "The *Philadelphia* and our attacker seem to be communicating with each other."

Chase quickly offered, "They could be telling him to surrender."

A dread fell over Ivan. The admiral seemed to have it as well, but it was lost on the other two. He moved closer to Uhura, "What about the quantum?" He looked at everyone else, "It had to have come from somewhere."

Nyota coolly responded, "I agree."

Nicole did a one-eighty in her chair. "No, no, no, no. This can't be happening. You're saying we have to evade a *Sovereign* now?"

The group exchanged worried looks. All felt Chase's frustration and anxiety, at least on some level.

A beep came from the co-pilot's station. Bin Nadal reported, "The cargo ship's shields have dropped. A transport is in progress."

Ivan questioned, "Have they captured him...or recovered him?"

"I have a feeling," offered Uhura, "that we'll find out soon enough."

\*\*\*\*\*

Commander Zackary Collins entered the bridge of the USS *Philadelphia* from the turbolift. His face was bruised, but his mannerisms didn't indicate his pain.

An Andorian wearing black was all smiles. “Well done, Commander,” said agent Visala. “You’re just in time. Take a station out of view of the main screen.”

Collins stayed, “I’d prefer to take tactical to make the kill.”

“We’re going to capture them,” spat Captain Russell, “not kill them.”

The Section 31 agent placated Collins, “Don’t worry. We’ll bring them onboard. You’ll have your chance before the end.”

The commander bit his lip. He unenthusiastically said, “Alright.” Then, he rigidly sat at the most port-side console.

Visala sat at an auxiliary station. She ordered, “Go ahead, captain.”

The captain stood in the center of the room. He felt more powerful than he knew he was. *‘I just have to get them onboard,’* he said to himself. After they were in Visala’s hands, he had no further responsibility. He just had to hand them over...that’s all. The thought made him feel better about what he was about to do. “Hail them,” said Russell.

The viewer came to life. An image of a Middle Eastern man appeared.

“I’m Captain Dalton Russell of the USS *Philadelphia*. We’ve talked down your attacker. My security personnel are getting his side of the story. What’s yours?”

Something was a bit off, decided Karim. Russell sounded rushed...rehearsed. The Persian hoped he could be more convincing. “Lieutenant Commander Karim bin Nadal of the *Independence*,” he began, “the person you now have on your ship attacked me on several occasions and he had access to a *Javelin* fighter.”

“Interesting,” offered Russell, though he showed none. He stepped down from the command level, “We’re reading three other humans on your runabout. Who are they?”

The choreographed dialog continued. Now, it was Karim’s line, “We’re an SI team on an urgent mission. That’s all I can say.”

On the surface, the captain quickly accepted Karim's explanation. "Very well," he said, "but your craft has been disabled. We'll dock it in our shuttle bay and you can use us to get to where you need to go."

Bin Nadal gave a kind smile. Now, no doubt existed in his mind. "That's a kind offer, but we'll be fine."

Russell crossed his arms, "I'm afraid I must insist, Commander."

Karim's arm moved under the screen, "So be it." The transmission abruptly ended.

\*\*\*\*\*

Bin Nadal looked back at the others, "It has to be them."

A soft blue light immersed the craft. "They've got a tractor on us," reported Ivan.

"The emergency transporter is standing by," confirmed Nicole.

Nyota Uhura turned to reassure everyone, "Don't get jittery. If we do this too soon, it won't work."

Two nods, and an 'Aye sir,' were her acknowledgment.

\*\*\*\*\*

The captain's yacht moved smoothly along the ventral side of the *Sovereign*-class starship via the tractor beam. When it reached the cut off point, the aft tractor took over the chore of the fore one. The *Luger* arched around to the aft of the ship, where the main shuttle bay was located.

\*\*\*\*\*

Ivan reminded the group, "We have to do this before we lose line of sight with the freighter."

"Do it on my mark," ordered Uhura, "T-minus 10 seconds."

A series of alerts sounded. Cherenkov reported, "Another ship is dropping out of warp."

Karim quickly looked on his own display. He clapped and yelped, "Yes! It's the *Indy*!"

\*\*\*\*\*

A flash appeared in space. The assault cruiser slowed to impulse speeds just kilometers away from the three other vessels.

\*\*\*\*\*

Captain Aurelia got up from her command chair. She impatiently looked over at Kimula, whom was stationed communications, and ordered, "Hail them."

A dark-haired Caucasian man filled the main screen. He started, "I'm Captain Dalton..."

"What are you doing with my runabout?" interrupted Sintina.

Russell cleared his throat, "We...ah, were offering it aid. It came under attack."

Windslow stood up from operations after he double checked, "Then why do the occupants of that shuttle have a transport inhibitor powered up?" He glanced over at Aurelia the moment he stopped speaking, slightly regretting his outburst.

Luckily, she didn't seem to mind too much. It strengthened her hand, so she really couldn't complain. She cocked her head, "Well, captain?"

All Dalton could muster was, "I...I have my orders."

Commander Windslow advanced on the viewer, bolder than before, "Orders from who?"

The captain of the *Philadelphia* looked as if he were lost. He looked to starboard and seemed to be requesting advice. He began to utter something when Sintina cut him off.

She coyly strutted just above the 'pit.' "Tell me Captain, have you been to the New Sydney colony in the last few weeks?"

Russell began to visibly sweat. He stood there with his mouth ajar for a moment, then he managed, "No. No, we were at...um..."

Aurelia jumped in, "You need to come up with lies quicker than that." She could taste her anger, "Release our runaway, now."

"I can't," was his simple response.

"You will," corrected Aurelia, "Red alert." The lighting immediately dimmed, a red glow surrounded the crew, and klaxons sounded. She looked over at her first officer, "Can you disrupt that tractor beam?"

Ethan Windslow seemed to have resolve for the very first time, "Watch me."

Sintina was genuinely impressed with his determination.

"What do you think you're doing?" burst Aurelia's counterpart.

"It's time for you to pick on someone your own caliber," challenged Sintina. "D'nas, take the *Luger* in tow. Maneuver it out of sight of the *Philadelphia*." She again addressed Russell, "To get them, you'll have to open fire on me."

Captain Russell's brows crimped. A mixture of shock and confusion formed on his face, "Are you crazy?"

Aurelia's answer was instant and deadpan, "That's what my counselor tells me."

The first officer of the *Independence* joined his captain. He looked at Russell, "Have you ever heard of M.A.D., Captain..." He realized Aurelia never gave him the chance to fully introduce himself, "Captain?"

Russell's already confused look evolved into befuddlement. Aurelia's body language didn't reflect clarity, either.

Ethan elaborated, "It's an acronym for Mutual Assured Destruction. It's a term from Earth's 20<sup>th</sup> century. You see, we're both equipped with quantum torpedoes. Whoever launches first, the other will have the chance to launch their own. Our quantums will pass each other in space and both our ships will be annihilated."

Captain Aurelia crossed her arms and rotated her hips to look at Windslow. The look wasn't one of displeasure or anger. Aurelia honestly didn't know what to think.

Ethan offered, "I just wanted the captain to make an informed decision, ma'am."

Her hips straightened out; her arms still crossed. She addressed the captain, "Your move."

## CHAPTER 12

### **Supplemental USS Philadelphia Main Bridge**

Captain Dalton Russell looked over to his comm. officer and swiped his hand across his throat. The audio was muted and the visual display dimmed, indicating they could no longer be seen by the bridge crew of the *Independence*.

Russell looked at Visala in a near panic, "They know about what we did!"

The Andorian Section 31 agent coolly responded, "It's a complication, but not the end of the world."

"Well, what do we do?" begged Russell, as if he were a child that didn't know how to button his pants.

"Of all the ships in the fleet," Collins somberly observed, "why'd it have to be an *Interceptor* class?"

"What do you mean?" asked Visala.

He stood up and walked over, "There are only three starship classes that could possibly take on a *Sovereign: Prometheus, Defiant, and Interceptor*."

"That's a moot point, Commander," said Russell. He looked over at Visala, "I won't fire on another starship."

The female agent considered for a moment. "I agree, Captain. I would rather avoid a fire fight." She stepped around in a small circle, "I can't use my 31 override remotely," then, she spun around, "but we can do the next best thing."

\*\*\*\*\*

The main viewer went to a standby screen. Windslow immediately pointed out to his captain, "If he really did destroy that ship at New Sydney, we need to take control of the *Philadelphia*."

Sintina nodded in agreement, "I'm not leaving unless Captain..." She huffed and quickly referenced a control panel near her chair, "...unless Captain Russell is in our brig."

"But how can we get control without..." Ethan stopped mid sentence. He and Sintina shared a sudden moment of lucidity.

Less than a month ago, the *Independence* was along the Federation-Alshain border. Captain Picard of the *Enterprise* pulled a dirty trick, as far as Sintina was concerned. He temporarily disabled her ship via the prefix codes. He claimed it was a 'delicate situation,'... *'as if I can't be delicate,'* fumed Aurelia. It was a gambit that ultimately worked out, but it frustrated her to no end.

Aurelia spoke for both of them, "Oh hell, not again."

Windslow finished her thought, "If we can do it; so can they." He resumed his station at ops and frantically began to brainstorm for countermeasures.

The captain solicited the science officer, "Tang, can you think of anyway to stop them?"

The junior lieutenant's first reaction was to say *'Well, if it were easy to bypass, it wouldn't much good, now would it?'* but his only outward response was a look of futility.

Having her answer from her science division, she moved to operations, hoping to hear better news. "Windslow?" she inquired, with her hope fading.

"I'm doing the only thing I can think of," reported the first officer, as his hands expertly flew over the controls.

"Which is?"

Ethan explained without making eye contact. "I'm shutting down our entire transceiver array, including the back-ups. No signals will get in or out of our computer."

The holo-projected viewer dissolved, leaving the bulkhead behind it.

Sintina hovered over Ethan, "How can we communicate with the *Philly*?"



Only a hint of annoyance could be heard in the first officer's voice. Leave it to Aurelia to find a flaw in his plan. He rejoined, "You asked for a solution. I didn't say it was perfect."

Tang chimed in, "We're close enough; our combadges will be able to communicate ship to ship."

Sintina allowed herself to breathe. She looked around at her bridge crew with a mischievous grin, "Well, at least now, he can't pull a Picard on us."

\*\*\*\*\*

The holo-screen on the *Philadelphia* dematerialized the same time its counterpart did on the *Indy*. Collins stood behind tactical. He was in the process of recalling the prefix codes for their opponent. Visala and Russell idly stood over his shoulders when the darkened display disappeared.

The Andorian was the first to ask the obvious, "What happened to the screen?"

Russell moved to the communications station.

Collins sought his own answers at the free standing station. He reported, "I can't make a connection. It's like their ship isn't even there."

*"Captain Aurelia to Captain Russell."*

Dalton stopped consulting his communications officer. He stood, looked around for a moment and said in the air, "This is Russell."

*"Captain Russell, respond,"* again came the voice.

Visala rolled her eyes, "It's your combadge." She added, "...idiot," under her breath.

The captain attempted to regain some dignity as he tapped his breast, "Russell here, Captain."

*"I'm so sorry,"* began Aurelia, in an obviously disingenuous tone, *"our whole communications system just had a catastrophic failure."* She could hardly continue without breaking out into laughter, *"You know how these new ships always have some gremlins."*

The captain of the *Philadelphia* bit his bottom lip as he observed Visala's reaction. He responded, "Understood, standby," as he tapped off the line.

"Clever, little bitch," shot the agent.

"Now what?" inquired Russell, to the real commander of the boat.

Collins knew the next logical step and offered, "If we manually target the torpedoes, they would have less time to react."

Russell seemed aghast. He desperately held on to his last fiber of self-respect. He flared at Collins, "You're talking about destroying another Starfleet ship, Commander!"

Before Collins could react, Visala jumped in, "Yes he is. I'd prefer to avoid it, but Captain Aurelia isn't giving us any alternative." She observed both Collins and Russell. The first officer backed down from an aggressive posture. Dalton shrank in compliance. Only then did she order, "Captain, launch your attack."

Captain Russell's last attempt at integrity was diminutive and pathetic. He leaned in and pleaded, "Please, don't ask me to do this."

The thirty-one agent got even closer. She decided it would be the final time she would remind him of his place, "I'm not asking. You know what will happen if you don't follow my orders."

Dalton's eyes began to well. He made an effort to shake it off before addressing his first officer. "Mr. Collins," he said, "proceed."

Zack Collins smirked as if dismissing a social reject. His voice indicated as much, "Yes sir."

## CHAPTER 13

### **Supplemental USS Independence Main Bridge**

Captain Aurelia gazed at the view screen, now showing an image of the *Sovereign* class' aft side. It had been several seconds since the last communication with them. Each second was filled with uncertainty. "What's the status of the *Philadelphia*?" questioned Aurelia to anyone with relevant information.

D'nas, the Tamarian exchange officer, spoke first, "They're holding position, bearing 349 mark 8."

"They are operating at condition green," reported Virak, the female Vulcan was second-in-command of the security division, "shields and weapons are powered down."

Sintina stepped closer to the large screen. She watched it intently, wondering what was going on over there. She began to turn to tell Kimula to hail the *Luger* when a flash of light caught her eye. She instantly recognized the sphere of strobing light as a quantum torpedo. Time itself slowed. Her only order was, "Guys!"

It was enough. Four torpedoes escaped the aft torpedo launcher of the *Philadelphia* in rapid succession. Immediately, a field of pulse phaser fire was laid down by the quick response of Virak. It was less intended to inflict damage on the aggressor's ship and more an attempt to intercept some of the incoming fire.

Simultaneously, Ensign D'nas fired the vessel's maneuvering thrusters in such a way to create the smallest silhouette possible. The *Independence* was only nine decks high. So directly facing the attack offered the best protection.

\*\*\*\*\*

Half-way between the *Sovereign* and the smaller *Interceptor* class, the torpedoes and the phaser pulses violently began to share the same space. The first quantum was hit almost immediately; the second, shortly thereafter. Despite the fact that a flurry of pulses flew all around them, the last two torpedoes continued unmolested to their target.

The third torpedo made a glancing wound on the dorsal shields of the still moving *Independence*. The full brunt of the explosion, however, flew harmlessly into space.

The fourth and final quantum slammed directly into the forward shields, causing a luminescence to appear all around the vessel.

\*\*\*\*\*

Most of the bridge crew had recovered from one small and another major jolt, when Aurelia ordered, "Report!"

The dark-skinned Vulcan responded with professionalism, "Dorsal shields at 70%, Forward shields at 37%."

"What the hell are they thinking!" demanded Kimula from her aft station.

Sintina could feel the room. Everyone was obviously distraught and in shock. Aurelia, however, reveled in stressful situations. She always felt most competent as captain when in battle. She was now in her element. She looked into the eyes of each member of her bridge crew as she talked, "Ok everybody, calm down. That was their best shot. Now it's our game. Let's show 'em how the *Indy* plays!"

Everyone acknowledged in their own way; all somberly refocused on their stations.

She placed a hand on the Tamarian's shoulder, "D'nas, get in close, get in quick. Don't give them a chance to use their torpedoes again."

"Aye, ma'am."

Then the captain addressed her current tactical officer, "Virak, target their weapons and engines. I don't want this bastard running when he finds out he's outclassed."

"Understood."

\*\*\*\*\*

The impulse engine of the *Independence* glowed a bright red as it came to life. She moved straight for the *Philadelphia*, pulse and convectional phasers led the way. Unfortunately, the aggressor's shields had been raised.

Once the gunship was nearly at point blank range, she rotated one hundred-eighty degrees and made a strafing run along the ventral side of the larger ship.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Aft shields at one-quarter; ventral shields are at sixty percent!" called out Collins above the klaxons.

Visala spoke directly to the first officer at tactical, "Return fire!"

"I am!" spat Collins.

The agent was only slightly intimidated by the outburst.

"They can fly circles around us!" yelled Captain Russell in a delirium. "They'll take out one system at a time and wear us down!" He grabbed Visala by the sleeve, "We have to stop this, now!"

The Andorian agent clutched the offending hand and twisted it into an arm bar. "You disgust me." Her powerful release forced him to the deck. She would've made a follow up blow, but Collins made an observation.

"The runabout with Uhura on it," he began, "it's exposed!"

"Destroy it, now!" ordered the 31 operative.

\*\*\*\*\*

The assault cruiser was about one-fourth the beam length of the dreadnought. The *Indy* came up from the underside of the *Sovereign* class; her ventral side faced the enemy through the whole half-loop.

The dreadnought made several hits to the underbelly of the *Interceptor* class. Her shields held, however.

In the melee of phaser fire, a single blast was shot, seemingly away from the battle. Its target, the *Luger*, was helpless and exploded in a quickly vanishing ball of flame.

\*\*\*\*\*

"The *Luger*," called out Windslow, "it's gone!"

Kimula paused in her duties. "Karim," she mourned.

A tight spot of hatred and vengeance formed in Sintina's gut. Though, they often had disagreements, Karim was the closest thing she had to a friend on the ship. He and Kimula shared a special place in her heart. It was a fondness she didn't have with the rest of her crew.

There was now only one thing for her to accomplish in life. "We end this, now," she stated. "D'nas, take us 5 kilometers off their dorsal side. Then, come about; head straight for their port nacelle pylon." She leaned over to tactical, "Ready quantums and bring the pulse phaser to full charge."

The Andorian counselor looked forward, "Captain?"

Commander Windslow knew enough to get within whispering range. "Captain, I know you're upset..."

Sintina jerked her head to face him, "Your damn right I'm upset!"

He continued calmly, "But I think ramming them is a bit premature."

"Who said anything about ramming?" She took a breath and resumed looking at the view screen, "Don't worry Ethan, I haven't gone completely insane with rage." She turned again. She had cold steel in her eyes, "So don't you stop me."

Windslow examined the deck for a moment, then, returned her gaze. He puffed and said, "I'm pleased to know you think I could." Without waiting for her reaction, he returned to operations.

She watched him walk away. A sense of melancholy briefly hit her. She pushed it away once D'nas began to speak.

"We're five kilometers out. Coming around," he reported.

Virak made one eye contact with Aurelia, “Ma’am, might I remind you that our forward shields are very weak.”

“Noted,” said Sintina, by way of dismissing her concern, “target their port pylon with a single quantum, then follow up with both pulse cannons. Bleed the power cells dry, Lieutenant.”

“Understood,” rejoined the Vulcan.

“D’nas,” ordered Aurelia, “take us down right on top of those sons-a-bitches.”

\*\*\*\*\*

The hull of the USS *Independence* made a lateral turn and jetted toward its opponent. A blue-white projectile sped out of her. Once it was away, the machine-gun-like action of the pulse phasers began. A steady stream of flashes flew for a full four seconds.

The *Philadelphia* unleashed its own barrage of phaser fire. The forward shields of the assault cruiser collapsed.

The quantum reached the target first, but only by a fraction of a second. The protective barrier around the *Philadelphia* blazed at it absorbed the attack.

Then the rain of phased energy came. The first few caused the shields to light up. The defenses quickly gave way. Rounds impacted directly onto the ablative armored hull. The armor, however, offered little resistance as it quickly melted away. The final two seconds worth of the offensive ripped into the support pylon, creating gashes and secondary explosions. Finally, the nacelle separated from the ship.

The *Independence* passed right where the pylon had been just a fraction of a second before. Its hull grazed the now free floating nacelle; pushing it out of the way.

\*\*\*\*\*

Chaos broke out on the bridge of the *Sovereign* class. The illumination and controls flickered. Two EPS conduits exploded. One was near the engineering station, killing an officer instantly.

Russell examined the bridge through the eyes of panic. "My god, what have I done?" He stumbled in the darkened room to a small arms locker.

Collins saw the movement and pulled a phaser on his captain. He hesitated when he realized the weapon wasn't being pointed at himself or Visala. He relaxed and turned his attention to his displays.

The distinctive sound and light of a phaser discharge appeared in the dark.

Seconds later, the lighting returned to normal, the sparks subsided, and the bridge calmed. An officer gasped loudly and called for help once she saw her captain.

Visala walked toward the body of Captain Russell. The eyes were wide open and lifeless. A small amount of smoke emanated from his open mouth. She observed the sight dispassionately for a moment. "Just as well," she commented.

"Despite his cowardice," said Collins, "his tactical assessment was correct. We can't win this fight."

"We already have," began the Section 31 agent, "Uhura is dead."

Collins nodded slowly, "Yes, but with the untimely death of our captain, we have an opportunity to get out of this with our skins intact."

Visala's antennae perked up, "I'm listening."

\*\*\*\*\*

"How bad did we get 'em?" asked Sintina.

Virak reported, "Approximately half of their weapons are disabled. Their warp drive is off-line. Most of their shields have failed."

"And how about us?"

"Overall shield strength at 35%, severe hull damage on the forward sections, emergency forcefields in place, three phaser arrays are disabled," stated the tactical officer.



*"Captain Aurelia, this is Commander Zachary Collins of the Philadelphia, please respond."*

She tapped her combadge on, "Where's Captain Russell, Commander?"

*"The captain put me and several other officers in the brig a few weeks ago. Some of the younger officers were naïve enough to follow him."*

Sintina shook her head, "What the hell are you talking about, Commander?"

Collins delivered his lines with perfection, *"Captain Russell had been more and more erratic. Then, at New Sydney, he ordered the destruction of a freighter. It was then that I attempted to relieve him of duty. He resisted. Officers loyal to him locked the other senior officers up. During the battle, we were freed. I've assumed command of the ship."*

"And the captain?" asked Aurelia.

*"Dead,"* rejoined Collins, *"He committed suicide before we could subdue him."*

Aurelia put her hands on her hips. The victory seemed so very hollow. Something seemed out of sorts. She attributed her feeling to the fact that she just had a conflict with another Starfleet vessel. It would give an unsettling feeling to anyone. She finally asked, "You're in full control of the ship?"

*"Yes sir, all of Russell's co-conspirators, including the man responsible for the attack on your runabout, have been placed into custody."*

"Do you have any idea why that man fired on my craft at New Sydney?" asked Sintina.

*"I don't know. As I said, Captain Russell had grown very paranoid. He even said something about a rape. I wish I could be more helpful."*

Captain Aurelia paced the bridge for a moment in an attempt to soak in the situation. "Very well, commander, the *Independence* will tow you to the nearest starbase."

*"Yes sir."*

"Captain," came from the operations station, "the Axanar cargo vessel. It's gone."

Her face crunched up, "What do you mean 'gone?'"

Windslow elaborated with astonishment, "It went to warp. It's heading on to Sauria."

Sintina spoke louder, "I thought you got the pilot of that ship, Commander Collins."

*"I can assure you, it's not him."*

"Who else could it be?" blankly inquired the Andorian junior lieutenant.

A glimmer of hope evolved into a grin on Sintina, "They transported off the *Luger* and on to the merchant ship when we were fighting."

Silence came over the comline.

Aurelia continued with a new enthusiasm, "Commander Collins, that escort will have to wait."

*"We'll be able to limp along in about an hour. We won't break any speed records, but we could get to Starbase 87."*

"Alright," said Aurelia, "we'll catch up as soon as we can."

*"Don't worry, Captain,"* reassured Collins, *"The ship is in good hands, now."* Then, the channel closed.

"Stand down from red alert," ordered the captain. She returned to her seat, "Let's find out what's going on that's so damned important."

## CHAPTER 14

### **Supplemental Lyaksti'kton (The Saurian Homeworld) Near the City Square of Nihoor'klem**

The amphitheatre, as most of the other buildings in the area, was made of a white sedimentary stone. The presidential candidate had been told she would be speaking at the very same location where the people of Lyaksti'kton declared their first world government over five thousand years ago. It was no small feat to acquire the location.

Retired Admiral Norah Satie's hair still had a touch of black in it. She wore an extravagant green dress and large earrings. She was reviewing her speech at her lodging, which was a short walk away from the site of her lecture. Her aids: Nellen Tore, a Delbian female, and Sabin Genestra, a Betazoid male; were in the room as well. They were making last minute arrangements.

"I care for the UFP?" began Satie, "'Care' seems a bit distant. I'm changing that to 'love' ...maybe I should add, 'with all my heart.'"

Sabin, a middle-aged man who also had grey showing in his thinning hair, glanced over, "The Saurians don't symbolize love with the heart. The meaning will be lost on them."

Norah tilted the padd down and looked over it, "What do they relate love with?"

He responded, only slightly embarrassed, "The genitals."

"Well," sighed Satie with a reserved grin, "I'm not going to say 'from the bottom of *that*.'"

Nellen shared a short lived laugh with the others. She was younger than the other two by decades; her brunette hair was worn in cylindrical buns on the back of her head. Many people have labeled both Norah and her as being rather cold emotionally. She felt it was an unfair observation. In public they were both professional and somber. *'The way it should be,'* she thought. It didn't mean they lacked a sense of humor. The perception didn't excessively bother her. Satie, on the other hand, dealt with such accusations with much less grace.

Tore looked at the chronometer, "We should begin moving to the amphitheatre."

\*\*\*\*\*

Shortly after the conversation with Captain Aurelia, Visala and Collins retired to the ready room. Visala immediately took up the captain's chair and put her feet up. Collins was more ridged.

The Section 31 agent stared blankly at the overhead. Her calm, almost quite tone, poorly hid her frustration, "That entire engagement was for nothing."

The commander's comment was more pragmatic, "There'll be an investigation."

The Andorian took her feet down and sat up, "Just stick to your story, round up a few junior officers and hand them over to security when you arrive at starbase." She made a dismissing gesture, "I'll make sure it's a whitewash. In a few hours media reports will be singing your praises for saving your ship from an insane, rapist captain."

If he was comforted, he didn't show it, "What about Aurelia and the others? What if Uhura and tells them..."

Visala became very somber, "Any protest she raises will fall on deaf ears." She leaned back and rocked for a moment, "Besides, there is still a good possibility Satie won't survive."

Collins pointed out, "It will take some time to track down Uhura again. It was only happenstance that we found out she wasn't dead in the first place."

"We don't necessary have to find Uhura," countered Visala, "We only have to take out her ability to function." She grimly added, "And now I know of a captain and crew that operate for her."

\*\*\*\*\*

Sabin Genestra and Nellen Tore waited vigilantly out of sight as Norah stepped out from the wings.

The roar of the crowd was deafening as Norah Satie approached the podium. She soaked it all in with decadence; although, outwardly, she attempted to

maintain a humble demeanor. After a socially acceptable amount of time, she waved the masses down. The noise subsided.

“Thank you, thank you.” The retired admiral spoke reverently, “My friends, I love the United Federation of Planets. Unfortunately, in the last few years, the UFP has been following the wrong path.

On Earth, there was an empire called Rome. It spread and spread. Its only way to survive was to acquire more land, more resources, and more people. That is what empires do. But that is not the way of the Federation! The United Federation of Planets doesn’t need new members. We need to care the members we already have!” She paused for the applause. “We should be the beacon of light in a chaotic galaxy. Once we achieve that, we need not solicit others to join us. They will be coming to us.” Again, she allowed the masses time to adore her. “Yes, the Federation has lost its way, but as president, I will bring us back to the light.”

The crowd blasted her with claps and cheers.

\*\*\*\*\*

Hec’lem Ulac’dar, a local food merchant, heard the crowd in the sunken theater. He knew Norah Satie had been visiting his planet. He considered himself a rather apolitical person. He was appreciative, however, that her visit brought him more business today.

Hec’lem’s father told him something interesting when Satie began running for office. He told Hec’lem that his grandfather was once sent to prison for some years by Satie’s father, who had been a judge years earlier.

The merchant dismissed it as a historical footnote. He had never known his grandfather and by all accounts, he probably deserved what he got.

A pedestrian walked up to his cart. “One baked Kumtumus fillet, please.”

Hec’lem gladly began the preparation.

\*\*\*\*\*

The retired admiral continued her speech. “The Dominion is gone, but because of our foreign policy, we are creating new enemies when we were supposed to be winning hearts and minds. Even our former allies, the

Alshain, are becoming more aggressive against us. Any why? ...Because the Santiago administration pushed the Federation into a conflict which we had no business being in. We cannot and should not police the Alpha and Beta quadrants."

\*\*\*\*\*

"Transporter range in 15 seconds," reported Nicole Chase from the flight control position of the Axanar freighter.

Ivan and Karim entered the bridge, "The rest of the ship is clear," he added, "but I wouldn't go into cargo bay one if I were you."

Nicole turned back, "Why not?"

"You don't want to know the answer to that," commented bin Nadal.

The elderly Uhura said, "Nicole and me will stay onboard."

Chase protested, "No! I can help."

Karim was about ready to wave her along when Uhura spoke.

"We can help better by providing support and keeping a transporter lock on them," pointed out Nyota. She turned to bin Nadal and Cherenkov, "Good luck, gentlemen."

Ivan headed back out. Karim dashed to Nicole. She stood, meant his embrace, and kissed. She whispered into his ear, "Come back safe."

He let go, "I'm more worried about you, that guy who attacked us has a starship now."

Nicole chuckled somberly, "Assuming Aurelia left it in one piece."

Karim returned the smile, "Good point." Then he turned, and followed Ivan to the transporter room.

\*\*\*\*\*

"We are putting more resources into the reconstruction of Cardassia Prime than we have put into the Saurian system in 30 years!" declared Satie. Over

the approving sounds of the assembled, she added, "And often, those resources are later turned against us by insurgents."

\*\*\*\*\*

Two pillars of light appeared in the park, revealing Cherenkov and bin Nadal. Both immediately began looking for something...anything that seemed out of place.

"I think we can safely eliminate vendors in the north part of the market," said Ivan.

The Persian curtsied, "Alright, I'll take south west, you take south east." With that, the two parted ways.

Ivan was more forceful in his search than Karim. The Russian simply began rummaging through carts as the merchants vehemently protested. Bin Nadal at least attempted to ask permission first.

\*\*\*\*\*

Hec'lem Ulac'dar saw something out of the corner of his eye. Upon closer inspection it seemed like a dark-haired human was looting another vender. Then, the human moved on to another.

Alarmed, Hec'lem activated a small communications device. His intent was to call the constable. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, a new costumer appeared. He was a Grazerite. The patron didn't look at his selection. Instead, he simply stated, "Wicked Witch of the West," and walked away.

## CHAPTER 15

### **Supplemental USS Independence In Orbit of Lyaksti'kton (The Saurian Homeworld)**

The leading edge of the *Independence* had a few gashes in its hull. The damage was bad, but not crippling. The gunship assumed a standard orbit.

\*\*\*\*\*

"I've found their signals," reported Tang Zian, from the science station. "Commander bin Nadal is on the surface; Lieutenant Chase is on the Axanar ship."

"Virak," said Captain Aurelia, "take a team to the cargo vessel, and bring Chase back. Have another detail meet me in transporter room one." The Vulcan nodded and moved out. Sintina turned and walked to the turbolift. As her back was turned, she called out, "Commander Windslow, you have the bridge."

"Where are you going?" asked Windslow, as he got up from operations.

The door of the lift only allowed a short reply, not that she would have given one of any other type, "I'm getting Karim."

\*\*\*\*\*

Hec'lem emotionlessly reached under his cart and appeared to grab air. He casually began walking toward the railing, which looked down into the sunken theater.

\*\*\*\*\*

Captain Aurelia found herself in a park. Two security personnel flanked her. She saw her tactical officer a few meters away. "Karim!" she called out as she headed for him.

Ivan overheard, and ran to intercept the Starfleet officers.

"What the hell is going on?" demanded Aurelia.



The Persian didn't waste time, "Captain, they're going to kill Satie! We have to find the shooter!"

"Who is going to kill her?" pressed Sintina.

Cherenkov didn't get involved in the conversation, instead he surveyed the vendors. He noticed one was empty.

"Section 31, Captain," explained bin Nadal, "It's one of these vendor owners."

The Russian's eye caught something odd. A Saurian began to rest his arm on the stone railing as if he were holding a rifle. But Ivan couldn't see anything in his hands. He took a few steps closer, now totally ignoring the *Independence* crew.

"Christ, not Section 31 again," started Aurelia. "You and Admiral Nechayev are paranoid about..."

\*\*\*\*\*

"As many of you know," Satie articulated, "my father was one of the most celebrated jurists in Federation history. He once said, 'With the first link, the chain is forged. The first speech censured, the first thought forbidden, the first freedom denied – chains us all, irrevocably.'"

The Santiago presidency has been littered with moral decay and infringements on our civil liberties. He claimed they were necessary measures to fight the Founders. If that's the case, then why haven't those executive orders been retracted? Remember, the Dominion never took your rights away, President Santiago did, and he did it by doing an end run around the Council."

\*\*\*\*\*

Cherenkov was now moving directly for the Saurian. He was still several dozen meters away when a rifle decloaked in the native's hands. Ivan burst into a run. He yelled, "Gun!"

Everyone immediately turned and focused on the Saurian. The two security officers and Karim joined Ivan in the sprint to the shooter. Aurelia began to follow, but soon realized they wouldn't have enough time.

She tapped on her compin, "Aurelia to *Independence*. Lock on to Admiral Satie and beam her up, now!"

"Ma'am?"

"Now, damn it!" she screamed.

\*\*\*\*\*

Hec'lem found Norah Satie through his sights. He heard someone yell, "Gun," but it didn't register in his altered state. His finger began to press the trigger. His target started to twinkle with light. The weapon discharged.

A bright white bolt sped toward the presidential candidate. The twinkling around Satie intensified. The disruptor energy hurtled right at her. Then, it passed where the retired admiral used to be and exploded on the stage.

The crowd began to evacuate their seats in panic.

\*\*\*\*\*

Ivan was just a few meters away when the assassin stood and began running. The Russian kept on his prey; followed closely by the *Independence* team.

\*\*\*\*\*

"*Independence* report," ordered the captain.

"We have her, ma'am. ...but she's not happy."

She gave a small grin, "Understood, keep her there." Then, Sintina began to catch up with Karim and the others.

\*\*\*\*\*

Sabin shielded Nellen instinctively until the blast subsided. They both looked at the ruined stage.

"Did she?" started Tore.

Sabin shook his head, "No, I think she was transported somewhere." He looked around, "Let's go find out what's happening."

The duo made their way to the square.

\*\*\*\*\*

Ivan Cherenkov was in the Starfleet Marines and Special Missions. He was in excellent physical shape, but this Saurian gave him a run for his money. He would have stopped and simply shot the assassin if it wasn't for all the civilians around. He assumed the others didn't have a shot, either.

With the weapon still in hand, the Saurian reached the gates of a compound. Ivan didn't know what it was. The assassin pleaded to be let in, then turned, and put the rifle under his chin.

Cherenkov was just steps away. He reached out, "NO!" Ivan snatched the disruptor out of the shooter's hands and pointed it at the Saurian. It didn't take long for Ivan to find out he was too late.

He had taken the weapon out of the hands of a headless body.

## CHAPTER 16

### **Supplemental USS Independence, Sick-bay In Orbit of Lyaksti'kton (The Saurian Homeworld)**

Dr. Zo'Kama Do'matar reviewed the toxicology report from the assassin. No illicit drugs, no parasites. She was interrupted by a knock on the door frame to her office. The Arkonian looked up.

Jinal, the chief engineer, stood in the threshold. "Did you hear the good news?" he sarcastically asked. The Vulcan engineer was in reality, Romulan. The doctor had discovered his deceit, but promised to help continue it.

Months ago, he confided in the reptilian. He was obviously wary of Satie, due to her "witch hunt" aboard the *Enterprise* some years earlier.

"I assume you mean the prevention of Satie's assassination?" rejoined the doctor. The Arkonian had a common dislike of the retired admiral. Zo'Kama was forced to formally identify that a crew member of the *Enterprise* was one-quarter Romulan for Satie's crusade. It was the lowlight of Zo'Kama's career.

"I almost wish we didn't succeed," admitted the Romulan. He no longer held his Vulcan persona when alone with Zo'Kama.

"Not that I would wish harm on her," said the Arkonian, "but her actions on the *Enterprise* ruined the life of a good man. A fanatic like that has no place in office."

Jinal plopped in a chair opposite the doctor, "I don't know that I ever thanked you for keeping my heritage secret."

She waved him off, "Your being a Romulan has nothing to do with your ability to serve in the fleet."

"I wish more people thought like you," he responded.

Zo'Kama laughed; it was more of a hissing, really. She said, "That makes two of us." Her smile quickly vanished as she glanced at the report again, "What is that?"

\*\*\*\*\*

Captain Sintina Aurelia walked into the main conference room on deck two. She decided to assemble everyone in one spot and find out what this was all about. Her seat, at the head of the table, was vacant. To the right of it was Retired Admiral Norah Satie; then, her aids Sabin Genestra and Nellen Tore. Ivan Cherenkov, a recent prisoner in the stockades, was next to them. Opposite them were: Nicole, Karim, and a very elderly human female.

Sintina stood behind her tall-backed seat and rested her arms on it. She looked at everyone...they looked back. Finally, she asked, "Who do I need to talk to in order to find out what the hell has been happening over the last few weeks?"

The old woman spoke up, "First, I'd like to suggest everything said here, not leave this room."

The young Latina captain gave her a look, "And you are?"

The presidential contender interrupted, "Captain, she is a true patriot and, like me, a retired Starfleet admiral. You should show her more respect."

Karim addressed the captain's still unanswered question, "This is Admiral Nyota Uhura. She was the Chief of Starfleet Intelligence for nearly thirty years."

Aurelia regarded the humble looking woman, "Good, so you should be able to answer my questions, right?"

"Depends on the question," she rejoined.

The captain sat, "Let's start with: who just tried to kill Admiral Satie?"

"About a month ago," began Uhura, "I became aware of an unspecified plot to remove Ms. Satie from the race for president. I warned her, via a network..." She trailed off, as if allowing herself to finally mourn for her fallen associates. "...now, a smaller network of Listeners."

Norah jumped in, "That's when I recruited Mr. Cherenkov, here. I wanted him to start a second line of investigation. But then, when I lost contact with Admiral Uhura, I sent him to find her."

Ivan dipped his head slightly to Aurelia.

Aurelia returned her focus on Nyota, "So how are you involved with Admiral..."

"Wait," ordered Uhura with a raised hand. "Please Captain, don't use any names other than the people here. To answer your next question: yes, the story Mr. bin Nadal gave you is the correct one."

"Why can't I use the name?" asked Sintina.

Uhura put her frail hand down, "The less names dropped, the safer we all are."

The captain shook her head, "This cloak and dagger crap is really starting to piss me off." She paced, and yelled, "Who am I supposed to know who's right and who's wrong? You say this "Section 31" is responsible for all this, but you have no proof! Seems to me, this thirty-one crap is just some boogie-man you pull out when you can't explain something." She nudged her chair out of the way and put her palms on the table. "Have you ever considered, that maybe...just maybe, you people are the bad guys?"

"How dare you accuse us of such a thing!" spat Satie.

Lieutenant Commander Cherenkov spoke up, "Sir, I can say from personal experience, Section 31 believes the ends justify the means. They don't care about rule of law, morals, or ethics. They will trample over anything or anyone that gets in the way of their goals."

Karim appealed to his friend, "Captain, I know why you're hesitant to believe all this. You want to have faith in the Federation...I do too. I want to believe the people in power aren't capable of such acts. Unfortunately, the facts keep on saying otherwise."

"Facts?" blurted Aurelia, "What facts?"

"When is the last time you did any research on the subject, Captain?" harshly asked Sabin. He continued even as she began to respond, "Or do you just trust the daily news casts to provide you with your information?"

Aurelia spoke over him, "How about classified Starfleet activity reports, mister!"

"Yes," said Uhura, but the room had become too loud for anyone to pay attention.

"Starfleet reports are routinely doctored," countered Nellen.

Satie added, "And the major media has been manipulated by these people for years!"

"I refuse to believe that my entire way of life is a lie!" blared Aurelia.

"Yes!" shouted Uhura. The sound of the elderly woman raising her voice had the effect of a parent uncharacteristically yelling at a child. Everyone stopped talking and looked at her.

"Yes, what?" asked Satie.

Nyota sighed. She felt old again. She looked at Captain Aurelia, "You asked if I had ever considered that I was the bad guy...the answer is 'yes.'"

No one moved. They were fixated on the confession.

Uhura continued, "I debated for years, once I learned the existence of Section 31. What if they were doing what needed to be done, but no one wanted to do? What if they had better intel and knew how to respond better than I did? If I moved against them, would I be hurting or helping the Federation?"

She paused, but no one was ready to comment. So, she went on, "But then I realized, they weren't trying to protect the citizens of the Federation. They were trying to protect themselves. Then, the choice became clear."

Lieutenant Chase coyly asked, "But what about your crew on the *Ethiopia*, Yanas, and the family on that freighter? How many lives is hers worth?" swinging her head to Satie.

Norah gasped, "I had no idea."

Uhura looked over at the young operations officer. She stared at her, "This was never about saving Satie; but saving our republican form of government. Whether you or I agree with her platform is irrelevant. She is a legitimate candidate. It's not the place of Section 31, or you, or me to choose for the citizens of the Federation."

## CHAPTER 17

### **Stardate: 53744.1 (29 September 2376) USS Independence, Captain's Ready Room In Orbit of Lyaksti'kton (The Saurian Homeworld)**

Aurelia stared at the padd. It was operational, but the document was blank. She contemplated what to put in her report. Should she even make a report? Finally, she decided it could wait. Sintina was ready to active the EMH for a massage when the chime rang. "Come in," she sighed.

Ethan Windslow entered. He seemed uneasy.

"What is it, Commander?" she asked.

"Ma'am," he began, "this could be nothing, but I wanted to tell you about something. It's...about my court-martial."

Sintina raised a brow.

He continued, "Part of the reason why I lied about...abandoning my officers...was because I was told by Admiral Ross, that if I did, I would have a great, new assignment." He sat down, "It occurs to me, that I could have been black-mailed to do...well... anything, once I got there."

"What's your point, Windslow," Aurelia pressed.

"I can't prove it," he said, "but I think Dalton Russell was my replacement."

The captain sat back and considered his words.

Ethan muttered, "It's just a...possibly I thought of. I know I can't back it up with anything."

The door chime sounded again. "Enter," said Sintina.

Nyota Uhura took slow, deliberate, but unassisted steps into the room. A padd was in her hand. Aurelia and Windslow both stood. Ethan offered her his chair. She accepted and sat.

"I'd better get back to the bridge," offered Windslow, sensing their guest wanted to speak to Aurelia alone. He exited.



"I've been doing some research," began Uhura, "the crew manifest of the *Philadelphia* is not easy to get a hold of." She handed the padd over. It displayed a personnel file. "The person who attacked us, killed a police officer, and murdered a family is Commander Zackary Collins, the first officer."

Sintina felt ill when she heard the name. She forced her vomit back down her throat. She slapped the padd on the desk once she recovered, "You're saying that I let a murder run off with a *Sovereign* class ship!"

"Yes," coolly said Uhura, "but there was nothing you could've done."

"Like hell!" she objected, "All of you are going to write up an affidavit about what you told me and we're going to take it to the judge advocate for this sector..."

"I can't," observed Nyota, "I'm dead. Neither can Ivan, Nicole, or Karim. They can't be traced back to me, for their own sake."

Aurelia lashed out, "So he just walks!"

"I didn't say that," she responded, "I said any legal recourse would be a waste of time. He's too well protected."

Sintina threw up her arms, "Now what?"

"Now," said Uhura with steely resolve, "Commander Zackary Collins is officially on my bad side."

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Norah Satie, her aids, and Ivan Chernenkov all sat around a large table in the ambassador suite of the *Independence*. Ivan insisted the admiral stay aboard the gunship, considering recent events.

"I'll personally sweep the *Aaron Satie*. I'll enlist the help of Commander bin Nadal. I don't want any of you to return to that ship before it's done, understood?"

Sabin, Nellen, and Norah all nodded. They weren't usually the type to take orders well, but they deferred to Chernenkov in this instance.

A beeping came from the com terminal in the other room, Nellen left to answer it.

"I can't believe 31 wouldn't have a back-up plan," Ivan continued.

"Perhaps we should keep our agenda secret from now on," suggested Sabin.

Satie commented, "No, we need publicity, not secrecy."

"If you attempt to expose 31, you risk losing support. People will begin to think you're a conspiracy theorist," said Sabin.

Nellen Tore returned to her chair with a blank stare on her face.

"Who called?" inquired Satie.

Tore said nothing and reached into her hair bun. She took out a small needle.

The other three all gave her a curious look.

With a grunt, Nellen stabbed herself in the arm with the needle. Immediately, her arm became red and irritated. She cried out in pain as it spread to the rest of her body.

Ivan had heard about organic explosives. He shot up and clamped onto Norah's waist and sprinted with her toward the exit. Satie had no idea what was going on. It was happening so fast. Sabin followed Ivan's lead after only a moment's hesitation.

Tears rolled down Nellen's face as huge blisters developed all over her.

Cherenkov carried the admiral out the hatch. Sabin came out behind them. The commander didn't stop. The hatch slid shut.

"Bridge," yelled Ivan, "set up a level 10 force..."

The hatch covers exploded out into the corridor, and crashed into the adjacent bulkhead. A fireball flowed out toward them. Sabin was lifted off the floor and slammed into Cherenkov and Satie, forcing them to the deck.

The explosion only expanded up to a certain point then it receded back into Satie's room. It caused the windows to shatter and the air took what was left of the fireball out into space. Forcefields went up before anyone was in danger of joining it in the void.

\*\*\*\*\*

The Arkonian doctor was face to face with Norah Satie. Despite how Zo'Kama felt about her, she did her job. "Only a few cuts and bruises," reported the doctor.

"And Sabin?" asked Satie from the biobed. Her Betazoid advisor lay on the other side of the room.

Zo'Kama looked over, "He has severe burns, but in time, he'll recover." She moved over to a third bed holding Ivan, "As for you, your left ankle is sprained."

"We got away lucky," Cherenkov commented. "When can I be released?"

The doctor responded, "In a few minutes."

\*\*\*\*\*

Captain Aurelia and bin Nadal walked down the corridor to sick-bay.

"She was transported aboard, why didn't the biofilters detect the explosive?" questioned the captain.

The security chief postulated, "The filters are only as good as the database of harmful compounds input into them."

Aurelia huffed and jested, "How many holes do I have in my ship, now?"

Bin Nadal gave her an accurate number, "I think five."

\*\*\*\*\*

Sintina and Karim entered sick-bay. Aurelia looked around for Zo'Kama before addressing the injured. "Well?"

The reptilian turned, "He's the worst," as she pointed at Sabin. She added, "But he'll be fine."

Aurelia returned to Satie, "Admiral, do know why Nellen might have done this?"

"No," she said, near tears, "She's been with me for years. She had no reason to do this!"

Zo'Kama overheard and stepped closer, "I think I may have an answer for you."

## CHAPTER 18

### **Stardate: 53747.9 (30 September 2376) USS Independence, Transporter Room Two In Orbit of Lyaksti'kton (The Saurian Homeworld)**

Retired Admiral Norah Satie and Ivan Cherenkov stepped up onto the platform. Aurelia, Windslow, and bin Nadal stood near the controls.

First Officer Windslow informed them, “Mr. Genestra has been sent to your medical bay. Dr. Zo’Kama beamed over enough metorapan and dermaline gel for three months.”

“Thank you,” said Satie with a genuine humbleness.

Karim stepped up to Ivan. He offered a hand, “Thanks, for saving our asses.”

Cherenkov took it. “It’s what I do,” he said with a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

Karim smirked as he moved back.

“Are you sure you don’t want to push back your schedule and rest awhile longer, Admiral?” asked the captain.

Norah shook her head, “The elections are just over a month away. I can’t slow down, now.”

Aurelia nodded. She turned to the operator, “Energize.”

\*\*\*\*\*

The doors slid open to the room holding *Independence’s* other VIP. Aurelia walked in. Nyota seemed to be expecting her on the couch.

The captain moved toward her, “Here is Dr. Zo’Kama’s autopsy report, as you requested, including details about that foreign chemical found in the assassin’s body.”

Uhura reached out, “Thank you.”

“What do you think it is?”

She put the padd down next to her, "The answer to a lot of questions."

Sintina followed up with, "You think Tore and the Saurian were being manipulated with it?"

"Among others," the elder lady replied. She added, "Nellen knew about me. It's probably how 31 found me. In fact, my contact could have lured me to New Sydney."

"I guess not trusting anyone is a way of life for you," Aurelia commented.

Uhura shifted her weight. Obviously understanding her true meaning, she rejoined, "You mean to tell me, that after all you've seen, you still don't believe what's going on?"

Aurelia shot back, "I have more trust in my government than you do."

Nyota laughed, softly, "In some ways, you remind me of James Kirk."

"Then I'm in good company," Sintina said.

Uhura's demeanor became more somber, "Oh, I didn't mean that as a compliment, my dear."

The captain was taken aback.

"You see," continued the admiral, "he was slow to adapt...slow to change his way of thinking. Because of that, he was recruited to be the perfect patsy in the Klingon-Federation conspiracy after the explosion of Praxis. Just as some people thought they could use you as captain of this ship."

"How the hell..."

Uhura answered the uncompleted question, "I don't miss much. Like you, Kirk alienated people left and right. He was tolerated because..." She cocked her head, "or maybe in spite of, his accomplishments. You have no such laurels to rest on."

The captain shifted her hips and crossed her arms, "What's your point?"

"The people who put you here will soon realize that you have been more of a hindrance than a help to their agenda." Uhura stood up; she shooed away

Sintina's assistance. "You'll need allies, Captain. Admiral Nechayev and I are offering to be some."

Aurelia took a deep breath and promptly changed the subject, "When will you be leaving, Admiral?"

She smiled, "Oh, my ride is already here."

"Uh?"

Nyota lifted her wrist and talked into a small device on it, "SuH."

A burly, male voice came back, "*jIyqj loS.*"

The admiral looked at Aurelia. The shock on her face was a treat for the old woman, "Never underestimate a Klingon and his sense of betrayal....Until next time, Captain Aurelia...Hljol HoD Wo'toth."

A red light surrounded Uhura and she disappeared.

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The crippled *Philadelphia* was at warp. They towed their port nacelle with them. It was held by the ship's tractor beam.

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Visala looked into the screen on the captain's desk. Morgan, a fellow agent, appeared to be just as frustrated as she was.

She noted, "We've all failed. The director will not be pleased." The Andorian added, "That ship needs to be neutralized."

*"I agree,"* came from over sub-space. *"It's unfortunate. I thought Captain Aurelia was going to be a good soldier for us."*

"You were mistaken."

The dark-skinned man nodded, *"Yes, I was. The error will be corrected."*

Visala stated, "The sooner the better." She ended the communication.

She got up and exited the ready room. Upon entering the bridge, she asked, "Captain Collins, what's our status?"

Collins now sported a fourth pip. He responded, "We're on course and holding steady."

**END**