

Dark Territory Death Valley

By DarkKush

Invarrak V
Dominion-Occupied Space
2375

Ensign Amber Faisal ran on instinct, no longer cognizant of the harsh commands bellowed before and behind her, urging her and the survivors from the *Starship Sadat* to press forward through the ravine.

Her mind was still reeling from the tidal wave of horror that had upended her life several hours ago. Her fear and doubt had been growing ever since the Special Missions team had been assigned to their vessel. She was too low on the totem pole, an assistant engineer, fresh out of the Academy, to be in the inner loop. But Amber had learned about the gist of the mission from Lt. Plax, the Alpha-shift helmsmen.

She had taken a liking to the handsome Bolian instantly. Captain Stuart had ordered Plax to transport her, and the other new officers, from the Academy's Beta Ursae Minor II campus, via shuttle while the *Sadat* was undergoing repairs.

During the three months she had spent aboard the ship, Plax had been someone she could talk to about the war and her growing concerns. He had always been a calming influence on her. And he had worked his magic on her after she ran to him with rumors of the Invarrak mission.

Plax had told her everything would be okay, that Special Missions teams comprised the best soldiers in Starfleet. After spending time around them, or hearing from second or third hand sources about Special Missions Team-17, Amber had begun to believe that the Bolian had been right again.

The small team, lead by Lt. Lar'ragos, a stern, hardened El Aurian, had comported themselves with a reassuring, almost inspiring confidence. And initially it appeared that they would carry off the mission to destroy the Dominion listening hub without a hitch. Then everything went wrong.

There was klaxons, smoke, fire, screams, burning flesh. The deck had trembled beneath her feet as if the ship rested on tectonic plates, forcing her to grab onto her console to remain upright. And then out of the fire and horror, the Chief Engineer, her face half melted off had pushed Amber into the hallway, the emergency containment doors slamming shut before the ensign could resume her post.

She had banged on the door, shouting and pleading for the chief to let her back in. Eventually, she had noticed the surge of crewmen running through the halls, and took note of the mechanical countdown echoing over the din.

"That's a self-destruct countdown," she muttered.

"No shit," quipped a passing Andorian, wearing the blue shoulder strip of the Sciences Division. He grabbed her arm roughly by the elbow and tugged her forward. "Come on, this ship's about to blow!"

Confused, terrified, but overall numb, Amber had followed him into an escape pod. Unable to contain the scream building inside her, she had wailed as the pod was ejected and feel in a mad, tumbling freefall to the planet below.

Both she and the Andorian, Nurse Farad, had survived, but far too few others had, among them the captain and Lt. Plax. She held out hope that they had reached escape pods or beamed to the surface, somewhere on the dust bowl planet. Lt. Lar'ragos and his adjunct Corporal Adeel had done a decent job of rounding up almost two dozen of survivors.

Lar'ragos had even informed them that help was on the way. But they had to be a designated evacuation point, which meant traversing quite a bit of treacherous, rocky terrain. Amber's hopes had been dampened by concern about other potential survivors. Lt. Bates, from ship's Security, had vocalized those concerns.

"We shouldn't go anywhere without insuring the whereabouts of the captain and the rest of the senior staff," he declared, his face eerily caked in dried blood.

"There's no time for that," Lar'ragos said, with only a hint of annoyance in his voice. "Once I've made sure you're all safely aboard, we'll try to sweep the planet and pick up any more survivors. But I can't make any promises. The Jem'Hadar are hot on our trail right now."

"If that's the case, then we should be trying to help our people," Bates countered. "To be honest, I'm a little skeptical about the ability of Special Missions to get an evacuation team to Invarrak now that the listening post has been destroyed. I'm sure that Dominion patrol ships are on the way."

"Don't you think we planned for this eventuality?" Corporal Adeel huffed. The tall, massively built Capellan towered over everyone. The flak jacket she wore and the large machine gun she carried made her look even more intimidating. Lar'ragos motioned for the woman to be silent.

"I understand this might be the first actual combat situation many of you have experienced," Lar'ragos gently said. "But now is not the time to come apart at the seams. We have achieved our objective, which is the most important thing. Now we have to rescue as many of you as possible. Sometimes in war there are casualties. We will do the best we can to

minimize any more of them for you and your crew, but that requires your cooperation.”

The El Aurian pinned Lt. Bates with a hard stare. “Everybody understand?” The dazed survivors began to look at each other for answers and affirmation. After Lt. Bates grudgingly offered his support, Amber found herself falling in line with everyone else.

Lar’ragos nodded, his expression grim. “We have one hour to make the rendezvous point, and we’ve got five, rocky miles to overcome to get there. Let’s get going.”

Ketracel infused blood roared in Seventh Kamta’iklan’s ears, blocking out the fierce war cry of the First. His heart pounded as he joined his unit, his brothers, in raising his kar’takin up to the burnt sky in praise of their gods.

Kamta’iklan had only been birthed two weeks ago, and he had spent each day of his life maturing, training, and learning everything he needed to know about the inferior, infidel species that defied the Founders. Today would be his first taste of actual combat, and he was quaking with anticipation.

He tensed as a gruff hand clamped down on his shoulder. “You’re too eager,” Third Yak’Tazan muttered. Kamta’iklan glared at the elder warrior. “Stoicism is the mark of a true warrior.”

Kamta’iklan fought the urge not to pull away from the Third. For one it would be insubordinate, and two, Yak’Tazan had almost neared Honored Elder status, nearing ten years of service to the Dominion. But his respect was rankled by the distaste of First Toran’talak and Second Amar’itan had left an impression on him and the other young Jem’Hadar. Like them, both the First and Second had been bred in the Alpha Quadrant, and Yak’Tazan had been part of the original invasion force.

A force that had so far failed to conquer the Federation and their allies and because of that many of the Alphas looked at the older Gammas with disdain. Kamta’iklan bit back a retort, and tersely nodded. Yak’Tazan replied with a wizened smirk, a most unsettling gesture. Perhaps the First and Second had truly been correct about the weakness of the Gammas after all.

Before he could ponder it further, First Toran’talak stepped to the ledge overlooking a deep chasm. “Shroud,” he commanded. With a thought, Kamta’iklan could feel the natural invisibility cloak he possessed cover him. “Now, let the hunt begin,” the First commanded.

"Damn," Lt. Bates cursed, before he fell to the ground, a neat hole poking through his chest. Several other Starfleet personnel screamed, cursed, or groaned before they joined him on the ground.

The air shimmered around them and almost a dozen Jem'Hadar appeared, several holding bloody melee weapons. "We're surrounded!" Corporal Adeel shouted. "Fire at will!" Before many of the stunned crewmen could respond, the Jem'Hadar cut into them, hacking at will.

Seventh Kamta'iklan now found himself grinning as he speared his first infidel. A corpulent Tellarite, the creature squealed as he pushed him back against a wall of rock, twisting the *kar'takin*. He pulled it out with a wet rip and the porcine creature slumped to hell.

Turning around to look for another victim, he found himself taken off his feet. A feline alien, which he quickly identified as a Caitian, had slammed into him, knocking him to the ground. The Caitian was smaller, but extremely powerful. She fell on top him, forcing him to fall painfully on the pulse rifle strapped to his back. With sharp claws, she began slashing his face. Kamta'iklan didn't know whether to be embarrassed or enlivened that the alien was providing such a challenge from him.

He placed his *kar'takin* on the ground after not being able to angle it to stab the woman. He wrapped his hands around the alien's furry throat and began to squeeze. He closed his eyes and turned his head as the feline went for his eyes.

The woman pulled up, trying to break his hold. He opened his eyes only after his face was splashed with blood and bone. He quickly opened his eyes, and saw he was now choking a creature without a head. He threw the body to the side. His ears pounded with the sound of rapid fire. The Starfleeters had opened fire in the enclosed space, striking friend and foe alike. It was a disgusting lack of discipline. Recovering his *kar'takin*, Kamta'iklan held it close to him. Staying low, he began slicing into the Starfleeters' legs.

"Stand down!" Ensign Faisal heard Lt. Lar'ragos shout. "Hold your fire!" But Corporal Adeel and several others weren't listening. They were firing blindly. Amber was almost as afraid of friendly fire as she was of the Jem'Hadar. The cramped, unforgiving environs of the ravine provided no escape or even good hiding places. She would have to find some way to

survive. She really wished she had paid more attention during tactical training.

I'm so going to ream her ass, Lt. Lar'ragos steamed as he drove a knee into an attacking Jem'Hadar. Corporal Adeel had thankfully stopped unloading her magnetic gauss rifle into the throng. Unfortunately it appeared that she had done so not because of his orders, but because she was now facing down two Jem'Hadar soldiers.

After his attacker bent over, Pava yanked the shunt pumping *ketracel-white* out of the creature's neck, disorienting the warrior while he grabbed his head two-handed to snap his neck.

It's all about precision, economy, Lar'ragos thought, with a dispassion that was almost disquieting even to him. He had seen so much death in his centuries of life, and he had administered much of the death he had witnessed. However, the El Aurian didn't think he had ever seen such wholesale slaughter as he had during the Dominion War. At times it had even given him pause, so he knew he shouldn't look too harshly on many of the green officers from the *Sadat*. Their skittishness and palpable fear were only natural. This was the first time many were seeing the dreaded Jem'Hadar up close, with their bestial, scaly horned faces; their strength and speed, their bloodthirstiness. The only way they were going to survive was to match the Jem'Hadar in viciousness. He didn't think that was possible from this bunch, but he was heartened to know that they would at least go down trying.

The Seventh spied his newest conquest: a slender, human female pressing herself against a wall, the phaser she held shaking in her hand. This kill should be quick, he said, moving toward her with predatory speed. Before he reached her, a strong hand grabbed by the back of the neck and threw him to the ground.

Kamta'iklan hissed when he saw a lithe, smallish, dark haired human standing above him. He snarled before slashing at the man's midsection with his *kar'takin*. With admirable speed the man stepped back, receiving a vicious wound, but avoiding being gutted which had been the Seventh's intent. A scarlet line appeared on the man's stomach. The human grinned. "What was that? A love tap?" Kamta'iklan paused, he sensed no fear from this human and he was doing a commendable job suppressing his pain. He wasn't like the others.

"Lt. Lar'ragos!" The female screamed. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah kid," Lar'ragos said. "Just hold position. I've got this." Kamta'iklan tried to spear the man again, but he grabbed the kar'takin and twisted it, ripping it out of Kamta'iklan's grasp. The young Jem'Hadar couldn't believe it.

"What manner of creature are you?" Kamta'iklan had to ask.

"El Aurian, we're listeners, care to tell me a story," Lar'ragos asked, as he held the kar'takin in one hand, preparing to stab the spellbound Jem'Hadar.

Before the El Aurian could strike, he was thrown off his feet. The human female screamed again. "On your feet soldier!" The Third's gruff voice broke the spell weaved by Lar'ragos. Kamta'iklan stood up. He looked away in shame.

"There is no time for such immature emotions Seventh," Yak'Tazan said, "that one was a worthy foe. I had hoped you were not infected with the same arrogance that your Alpha brethren was. If so, this battle should teach you that these Federation types have mettle. And you haven't even faced off against the Klingons yet," the older warrior gave a raspy laugh.

"But what of him," Kamta'iklan asked. The human female was now by his side, using her body to shield him. Perhaps she was braver than he originally thought, the Seventh pondered.

"Leave them, the female is no threat, and I shot the male in the shoulder. If he doesn't bleed to death we'll save him for last," Yak'Tazan said wisely. "Now, let us finish this battle the proper way." He cradled his weapon.

"But the First ordered us to use our *kar'takins*," Kamta'iklan protested.

"I am First now," Yak'Tazan said, with no glimmer of satisfaction. "Look at the mistake the previous First made," he gestured. The ravine was littered with Starfleet and Jem'Hadar bodies. Many still fought on though. Kamta'iklan thought it would be an easy victory, a rout that would allow them to dispense their rage at the destruction of the listening post, but it had devolved into nearly a stand off. He could see that both the humans and Jem'Hadar were starting to find advantage points from which they could better pick off their opponents. The rout had turned into a stalemate. War wasn't supposed to be so disorderly, he thought. Or at least that is what he had been taught. But maybe what he had been was wrong? He couldn't even fathom the idea.

An energy blast zinged between the Third and the Seventh. Both men tried to find cover. He took the pulse rifle hanging from his back, checked it to see if it still worked and began firing rounds. His satisfaction waned as his frustration grew. His attention shifted to the human and the El Aurian. The hapless female was still trying to stop the man from bleeding. But Kamta'iklan knew it was of no use. Jem'Hadar energy weapons contained an anticoagulant.

He needed an outlet to channel his anger, and she was as good as any. She was still full of the fear he had found so succulent at first. "What are you

doing?" Yak'Tazan rasped as Kamta'iklan stepped out into the open, walking slowly towards the human female. He knew if he walked slowly, her dread would increase. The human looked up, saw him approaching and shrank back. She held up her phaser. It shook in her grip even worse than before.

"Shoot him," Lar'ragos ordered, his voice faint. "That's...an order."

"I can't," she wailed. "I'm not a killer."

"You're....you're a...soldier," Lar'ragos replied. "It's you....your duty." Kamta'iklan grinned. He held his rifle aloft. He pulled the trigger slowly.

"You're pathetic," he smirked, ignoring the pain that exploded in his side. He glanced down to see a large chunk of his body missing, with blood and ketracel white pouring down his leg to the ground below. He fired, happy to give his life for the Founders if he could take two more infidels with him.

He roared with displeasure as his two intended victims disappeared before his eyes. Kamta'iklan stumbled to his knees, unable to stand any longer. With draining strength he crawled to the spot where the two Starfleeters had just been. He dug at the hard earth, unable to believe they had disappeared, had escaped justice.

Kamta'iklan heard the roar of repulsor engines above. He looked up, and saw the silvery white bulky shapes of Starfleet runabouts streaming over head. The Starfleeters began disappearing. "Fire at those vessels," he heard Yak'Tazan shout, but he was unable to comply. All he could do was stare up at the sky, and watch the pulse rifles discharges ping futilely off of the shielded hulls of the runabouts.

Seconds later, the runabouts unleash a rain of their own plasma into the chasm. As the river of fire reached him, Kamta'iklan had a final regret. "Victory was life", First Toran'talak had declared. Kamta'iklan had been dead since he left the birthing chamber, and now he would never know what life was like; just more death.

Starbase 86

Recreation Lounge

September 2375

Lt. Plax reluctantly let go of her hand. "I think you two need time alone," he said. He nodded at Nurse Farad, who quickly got up from the table. "We'll get another round." Ensign Faisal meekly nodded. Lt. Lar'ragos solemnly nodded. Faisal took stock of the man. Despite the nearly life threatening wounds he had received on Invarrak V, Lar'ragos looked spry.

"May I have a seat Ensign," he asked. She gestured for him to take the seat Plax had just vacated. "I want to thank you," Lar'ragos said.

“For what,” she asked, incredulous. Faisal was still ashamed at disobeying the El Aurian’s orders, of not being strong enough to shoot the Jem’Hadar, of almost dooming them both.

“Standing by me,” he said. “And standing up to me too.”

“But I-I could’ve gotten us both killed,” she replied, completely surprised and confused by Lar’ragos’s gentle response. She had thought the man was going to rip into her, and had been avoiding him since the survivors had been transferred to the starbase.

“Yeah,” Lar’ragos shrugged. “Death is a natural occurrence, especially during wartime. But there are worse things than dying, like being stripped of your decency, of your conscience, of being reduced to a survival instinct only...” he let the sentence die and he looked away, his expression vacant. Faisal reached out to him, but the El Aurian pulled away. “Don’t change,” he told the woman before sliding out of the seat. He walked away without looking back.