

Dark Territory For Good Men to Do Nothing

By DarkKush

Munzala
Tonkean Belt
June 2376

"So, this is what it must have been like?" Kall Yano whispered, her nostrils flaring as they filled with the stench of unwashed bodies and desperation. "My grandfather told me of the settlement camps when I was a child, but I thought he was exaggerating, you know? How grandfathers embellish things."

Jake Sisko nodded tightly, thinking wistfully of Joseph Sisko's occasional tall tales. He couldn't lie and not wish that he weren't with the old man now, enjoying a bowl of his granddad's quadrant famous gumbo. Instead he was here, cramped next to Kall, which wasn't a bad thing he also had to admit. He had picked the eager young cameraperson not only because he saw the same drive to prove herself that he had, but also because he thought the Federation News Service assignment would go smoother with a beautiful woman to chat with.

Kall's beauty couldn't be denied. She was a wonderful blend of two worlds, Bajor and Vulcan, with gracefully pointed ears and a ridged nose. Though the woman was caked in dirt, like him, her lustrous brown skin continued to accentuate her attractiveness. She had been a pleasure to work with, and that made him feel even worse for putting her life in jeopardy like he had.

The stern and caring voices of Joseph and Kasidy, his stepmother, floated through his head. They hadn't been the only ones who had warned, cajoled, and demanded that he not venture into Alshain occupied space, but they were the only persons whose words nearly made him waver.

"I don't want to lose you too son, not after..." Joseph's voice trailed off and the corners of his eyes moistened. Jake had had to turn away from the monitor to wipe his own tears away.

"I know why you're doing this," Kasidy had said, after pleading with him to reconsider, *"I know from whom you're doing this, but Ben wouldn't want this...not for you,"* the words had pierced his heart. But Jake had been committed to reporting on Alshain atrocities.

From his research, Jake had concluded that the Alshain had used their wartime alliance with the Federation to cleanse their space of the Son'a, who had been in league with the Dominion. Species cleansing was abhorrent no matter who the victim, but he had learned the hard way how the war had evinced a callousness

that would not be soon removed from the hearts of many a Federation citizen. Many grumbled about the post-war reconstruction of Cardassia, despite the near extinction of the Cardassian people at the hands of the Dominion. Some Federation politicians would only support funding rebuilding efforts by making a big deal about it being for security purposes only, to prevent terrorism, and not on compassionate grounds. In comparison, the much 'smaller' plight of the Son'a was swept under the rug.

It was too politically untenable to intervene in the affairs of the Alshain, especially since their joining the Allied war effort had opened a crucial fourth front and blunted some of the momentum of the Breen's entry into the war.

But the Alshain hadn't been satisfied with exacting revenge on the Son'a for a decades-long parasitic relationship, the Alshain were attempting to rid all of the territory in their sphere of influence of non-Alshain. They were guided by a manifest destiny termed "Greater Alshain" by their ruler, the megalomaniacal Exarch Jedalla. Innocent species like the Tarlac and Ellora, both victimized by the Son'a even more than the Alshain had been, were swept aside like detritus in the attempt to restore a mythical past. The genocidal inferno now threatened to consume species such as this sector's native Munzalans, a langur-like species that had been relocated to this sector as reparations for years of involuntary servitude to the Alshain.

The Alshains' bloodthirsty march reminded Jake of some of the darkest chapters in human history, and he knew he had to do something about it, in the only way he knew how. Where others were content to allow genocide to occur, he would go to the front lines and he would write about it, he would report on it, and if his words, and the images of the suffering of the Tarlac and Ellorans didn't pique the hearts of Federation denizens then the war against the Dominion had been fought in vain.

The cave rumbled again, causing another round of panicked cries. Jake instinctively grabbed Kall and drew her close to him, ostensibly to protect her from any falling rocks. Dust kicked up by the ground quake got in his lungs, making him hack and tearing his eyes. He felt Kall's long, yet supple fingers wiping away his tears before he opened his eyes again.

"Are you okay?" Her breath was warm and welcome on his face. Though the cave was cramped, with terrified refugees holding each other or themselves, Jake felt the cold approach of death with each fusillade.

"Get a room you two," grumbled Ceven. Kall giggled nervously and pulled away reluctantly. Jake's cheeks grew hot and he glared at the man after wiping the last of the tears and most recent grime away.

"Hey kid, if you don't take her, I will," he replied with a lopsided grin. The crusty Bolian tightly clutched an old-style plasma rifle, a kind Jake had once seen in a museum. To Ceven's credit kept the ancient weapon spotless. It even glinted in the dim light provided by the few lamps that had survived the preceding barrages.

“Stop joking around Ceven,” Zene snapped. The young dark-skinned Elloran’s mien had never been more serious. He held a modern TR-116 rifle; a projectile weapon that Jake knew had been recently discontinued by Starfleet. The young reporter didn’t know how Zene had gotten his hands on the weapon, and he was smart enough not to ask.

If anything, the arrival of Zene and his group of irregulars had selfishly proven a boon to his efforts to highlight the tragedy wrought by the Alshain. The genocide needed faces, it needed human interest stories, and to be blunt, it needed an entertainment value that could lure the casual reader in.

Zene had recently left Starfleet, ending his short career to defend his people against the Alshain onslaught. Only months ago, the man had piloted the *Starship Aegis*, one of Starfleet’s most cutting edge vessels. After that ship had met an untimely end, Zene had decided to leave the Fleet and return home to give his life if need be to prevent more bloodshed.

The *Aegis* connection had proved fruitful for Jake. The ship had been captained by his “uncle” Terrence Glover, the Academy roommate of his father. Before Zene found that out, the Elloran had been determined to expel the journalistic duo. The former ensign still didn’t believe that their reports were doing much good.

So far, they hadn’t generated enough outrage to prompt the intervention of the Federation, outside of tepid support for a safe haven on Ba’ku. But Jake was convinced that the pen remained more powerful than any sword or tritanium bullet.

He had received some positive feedback on his feature on the acerbic Ceven, the ex-Maquis throwing in his lot with another group of underdogs. Jake’s Earth-bound editor gushed that the Bolian had the makings of a folk hero. A modern day Davy Crockett, Jake recalled the woman glowingly saying. The reference brought back memories of Dr. Bashir and Chief O’Brien’s scale model of the Alamo Mission. The model currently resided in Dr. Bashir’s quarters.

Damn it, he caught himself. He was trying not to think of DS9, and especially not Dr. Bashir. His memories of the young doctor hadn’t always been fond ones. His first real taste of war had been on Ajilon Prime only three years ago, and his cowardice had nearly resulted in Bashir’s death. Though Jake would later ‘redeem’ himself, causing a cave-in that prevented the Klingons from slaughtering Starfleet evacuees, he knew had truly done nothing heroic. He had panicked again, but the second time had resulted in him getting off some lucky shots.

He didn’t have a phaser rifle this time. The ceiling shifted, as more rocks fell and dust coated everyone. Jake heard soft groans and sharp cries. He heard hushed prayers, but more chillingly he heard a resounding detonation thunderclap at the mouth of the cave, followed by a gush of superheated air. They were far enough back in the cave to avoid injury from the explosion, but Jake knew that something worse had been loosened. Voices and hearts froze at the lusty howls of the Alshain. That old fear knifed his stomach, making his muscles palsy. The young man gulped hard,

closed his eyes, but snapped them open quickly once his imagination started going into warp. He would rather face what was coming through the breach than the vivid horrors his mind conjured up of what the Alshain intended to do to them.

"They've broken through our barricade," Ena, a soot covered Tarlac female said. Underneath the dirt, the fair-skinned woman was an eye catcher. She cradled her Breen disruptor as she stood up.

"Hold on Ena!" Zene barked, gesturing quickly at the surviving members of his crew. They each took up positions, determination engraving their countenances. Except for one.

"Godsdammit, I knew this was a fool's errand," the hard bitten Tarlac Galig snarled. "We've doomed ourselves in a vain attempt to save just a hand full! You've doomed us *Ensign* Zene!" He said the Elloran's former rank with palpable disdain.

"No, no, you've all doomed us! You and your damned war!" Cried out an anguished voice. Through the dust-thickened darkness, Jake saw a trembling woman clutching a limp child; their head turned an impossible angle. This had been an ongoing debate among the refugees. Zene had argued that their presence prevented greater Alshain atrocities from occurring at the camp, while others were fearful that the raids the guerillas conducted against the Alshain would result in brutal reprisals.

The debate had been answered with finality when Alshain forces had swarmed the planet, decimating villages in search of Zene's band. An Elloran herald, younger than Jake or Kall, had died at Zene's feet after delivering the news of the surprise Alshain attack. Before the irregulars could scramble, the Alshain had hit the camp, driving the survivors into long abandoned mines that had been converted to inclement weather shelters.

"Shoziz Galig!" Spat B'dulla, a gray furred, charcoal faced Munzalan. A livid pink scar cut diagonally across his visage. B'dulla had rejected the usual pacifism of his people to take up arms.

"No, godsdammit," the querulous Tarlac replied. "If we had just accepted the help of the Son'a they could've protected us."

"Yeah, like they've been *protecting* us all these years," a burly Elloran, whose name escaped Jake, replied drolly. "I promised my mother on her deathbed that I nor my siblings would ever be slaves again."

"Well, at least we can remember what the lash felt like Mannar," Galig remarked. Jake glanced at Zene. The man's back was to him, but he saw him straighten slightly at the dig.

"Now's not the time for this," Jake rasped. Galig chuckled, and shook his head.

"As if you have any right to talk to me, much less be here," the Tarlac said, looming over Jake. Jake stared up at the man, meeting his challenging gaze head on. Galig reached out and flicked the datacard hanging from Jake's neck. "This press pass and you being human protects you."

"You think so?" Jake asked. "You really think battle crazy Alshain warriors are going to give a damn who they sink their teeth into?"

"Yeah," the Tarlac replied, "I do. They might look like animals, but they're much smarter. They know what lives to take, and who to spare. And our deaths will make quite the byline for you won't it Sisko?"

"That's totally uncalled for," Kall replied heatedly. "We're here when we don't have to be. This is our fight because we have chosen it. The galaxy has to be made aware of the injustice taking place here."

"And that means when you get bored, you'll simply chose something else to inveigh against," Galig remarked, totally unimpressed.

"Galig, the Alshain are almost upon us," Zene said calmly, turning around to face the larger man. Jake wasn't certain if it was his imagination, but he thought he heard galloping. Though the Alshain were considered haughty and ostentatious, in part to impress their biped neighbors with gauche displays of their "high" civilization, Jake had read other stories.

He had read reports that their feral natures revealed themselves in combat, and that they often fought as quadrupeds. "If you don't want to fight, if you want to be slaughtered like livestock, please hand your weapon to someone who still has at least a modicum of dignity."

The Tarlac stepped back as if he had been slugged. His hand reached for the pistol at his side, causing several of the irregulars to aim at him. Galig quickly noticed that and his empty hands shot up. "I'm alright, I'm alright," he promised. "I...I was just going to take up position."

"Do so then," Zene's voice never wavered. His gaze turned back toward the mouth of the cave. A few of the refugees took the initiative to huddle their compatriots toward the back of the cave. Some of the refugees shielded their children and other loved ones while others picked up anything that could be used as a weapon. The howling grew louder, and it was punctuated by fierce barking.

Jake's stomach roiled with fear. He felt the shroud of death over his shoulders. He wanted to grab Kall again. He wanted to tell her that he wished there had been more between them, but he didn't. Instead, he did what he had come here to do in the first place.

"Set up the holorecorder," he said dryly. "We've got a story to complete."

Jake was startled by the familiar keen of transporters. "They're beaming in!" Zene shouted. "We've been tricked!" He said, turning his weapon toward the multiple shafts of blinding crimson light forming within the cave.

"But the kelbonite?" B'dulla asked, stumped. The kelbonite ore lacing the rocks of the cave normally disrupted the transporter effect.

"That was the point for smashing the barricade, to beam in from within the cave," Ceven grouched. "Heck, that just makes the target practice easier." Jake flinched

as the irregulars tore through the first round of transports. Blood, flesh, and fur flew everywhere as the lupine soldiers met gristly ends.

But the beams kept coming, with greater rapidity and volume and eventually the guerillas couldn't pick them all off. "My God, keep the recorder going," Jake said as he posted up in a corner. He wished that he hadn't given away the weapon Zene had offered him. Not only to protect Kall and himself, but to help the quickly outnumbered guerillas.

Imposing, heavily-armored Alshain warriors, armed with melee weapons, in addition to razor sharp teeth and claws tore into irregular and noncombatant alike, trampling over the remains of their fallen comrades. With growing horror, Jake realized that the first wave had been nothing more than fodder. The fighting was close quarters, the smells of carnage quickly flavoring the air.

Jake tried to continue reporting, "This...this is what our Alshain allies think of sentient rights," he shouted over the din, ducking just seconds before the club swing would've dissected his head from his shoulders. The air from the club's arc tickled his neck. He stumbled on the floor that was now slick with the mingled blood of the combatants.

Kall grabbed onto him to keep him upright and he clasped her in his arms, pushing her against a sea of writhing flesh. They pushed through the wall of bodies until they found actual rock to stand against. He knew it would be their last stand. Jake moved to plaster himself over her, to protect her as best he could, but he knew it was futile. "Dear Prophets," he heard her whisper as they stood silent witness to the slaughter. The irregulars fought valiantly, but they quickly began to falter. Their mounting losses only fueled the bloodlust of the Alshain. His stomach churned as he watched the canid warriors rip apart limbs, gut people with their claws, and even bite off heads, filling the enclosed space with the terrible crunch of bone and slick slap of meat. Hot blood sprayed everywhere, drenching them all.

Jake had survived combat with both the Klingons and Jem'Hadar, but he had never seen anything so savage. The Alshain had completely lost it. Their exultant howls shook not only the very foundations of the cave, but Jake's soul.

"I-I can't just allow this to go on," Jake muttered after a few seconds.

"What?" Kall asked, the holorecorder propped on Jake's shoulder, to give her a better vantage to capture as much of the melee as possible.

"I've got to help out," he declared. The Bajoran-Vulcan hybrid grabbed his arm, with not surprising strength.

"No," she said, "You'll be killed."

"You really think they are going to let us live, after this?" Jake snapped at her.

"We're journalists," Kall said, a plaintive tone in her voice, "We're supposed to be objective, neutral observers."

Jake shook his head. "Not when horror like this occurs, my God, what would Dad think of me if I just stood by..."

"Jake," Kall said, her tenderness puncturing the shrieks and howls, "You're father, the Emissary..."

"He'll be back," Jake cut her off, "and when he learns what happened here today, I want him to know that his son honored his memory, honored his family's legacy of service, of sacrifice...just like him, just like Mom," he voice choked at the few fragmented memories of Jennifer Sisko he still clutched onto, refusing to allow time to wash away. She had died at the Battle of Wolf 359, a victim of the Borg. His father had been a casualty of the Dominion. Though Jake believed with all his heart that Kasidy was telling the truth that his father had come to her in a vision and promised he would return. In fact, Jake almost could feel the presence of his father looking down on him now, from somewhere in the Celestial Temple.

"This is the right thing to do," he said quietly, to himself and to Ben. He patted himself down, looking for a weapon. The only things on his person was an ancient writing pen, a gift from his father. Jake grabbed the pen and held it aloft like a dagger. "This will have to do."

His scream was born of fear and anger as he joined the fray.

Jake's eyes cracked open to a fuzzy white light. "Dad," he muttered, hopeful that he was inside the Celestial Temple; that somehow his father or the Bajoran Prophets had saved him.

"Not quite Mr. Sisko," the bass voice rumbled. Jake's eyes fluttered open fully, and immediately closed. The fuzzy light had turned sharp and painful, matching the pain throbbing in his head and with growing realization, throughout his body.

"Wha-where?" His thoughts were muddled and filled with the clang and roar of a battle by all rights he should not have survived.

"Forgive our medics," the speaker with the deep voice said again. "But we are not accustomed to tending human patients. He has assured me though that none of your injuries are fatal," the man said. "It would be unfortunate for him...and his Sept if that proves incorrect."

Jake eased his eyes open slowly, allowing them to adjust to the light. They resolved on the looming, tawny-furred figured standing over him. The man was tall, most Alshain were by human standards, but his frame was more rangy than muscular. He was dressed in a sleeveless purple tunic-vest and matching pants. A white, gold-embroidered white cape was artfully draped across his left shoulder. "I am Protocol Officer V'Del."

"Where..." Jake's throat was as dry as a Cardassian desert.

"You are in the infirmary aboard our flagship," V'Del said with obvious pride. "Nauarch S'Elani would accept nothing less than the best treatment possible for the son of the honored Captain Benjamin Sisko." With a sick realization Jake realized that Galig had been right all along. Despite Jake's willingness to live among the refugees of Munzala, he was still a privileged Federation citizen, with the

protections afforded to journalist, and the son of a war hero to boot. He was different, and the risks he took had a bigger safety net to catch him if he fell.

"My...partner..." Jake ran his desiccated tongue over his cracked lips, "The woman..."

"Kall Yano?" V'Del knowingly replied. "She is being attended to. Her injuries were unfortunately a bit more extensive. She put up quite the scuffle. Her remarkable Vulcan genetics serve her well."

"Where is she?" Jake's voice hardened. He squinted through the pain and his protesting muscles as he sat up on his bed. He glanced around the spacious, spotless medical room. None of the other beds were occupied. Jake and the protocol officer were the only occupants.

"She is being attended to," V'Del remarked, his one tone becoming firmer. "I have been assured that she will make a full recovery."

"I want to see her, right now," Jake demanded.

"You will see her, but first," V'Del held up a finger. "I have a few questions..."

Jake Sisko felt scraped clean, inside and out as he stood in the shuttle bay deck, surrounded by a duo of stone faced Alshain guards. His Alshain 'hosts' had been roughly thorough in their cleansing of his body and wounds and V'Del had been equally as comprehensive in learning everything he could about Jake's activities on Munzala.

And the young reporter had been able to take a measure of pride from not being able to produce the holorecording footage of the Alshain's rampage inside the cave. That small victory was doused by the protocol officer's adamant refusal to provide any greater illumination on the fate of Kall. And he wouldn't even entertain any of Jake's inquiries about the irregulars or refugees. "Those are legal matters which I am not privy to discuss," the man would repeat ad nauseam.

He trembled in the slightly cold air. The fur and armor covering his lupine sentries protected them much better against the frigid air than the too large one-piece suit they had given Jake. He surmised that their replicator technology wasn't precise enough to get human body dimensions, or perhaps they just wanted to get one more jab in before they put him on the shuttle and sent him packing to the nearest starbase.

The entrance to the bay swished open and Jake's heart pinched. "Yano!" He croaked in surprise, his voice cracking.

Kall Yano stepped in, accompanied by a smiling V'Del. "See Mr. Sisko, I told you, she would be well."

The Vulcan-Bajoran rolled her eyes before walking over to Jake. He forced himself not to run to her. Though when they met he grabbed her and pulled her tightly to him, not caring what the Alshain thought of the emotional display. "Are you okay?" He asked. "How bad did they hurt you?" Up close he could see a

patchwork of still healing scars and scratches marring the woman's face. One ear was bandaged.

"I was going to ask you the same question," Kall replied, giving him a once over. "You look a little banged up."

"I feel a little banged up," Jake admitted.

She managed to chuckle, "Well humans are a lot more delicate than my people." He shared in the laughter. She glanced around. "Where are the others?"

Jake's smile faltered. "I don't know. They wouldn't tell me," though he had a sinking feeling that he would never see them again. The Alshain had probably executed them already. Jake just prayed that their suffering wasn't prolonged, and he was already devising a searing eulogy for them.

And he couldn't help sharing that information with the protocol officer. He wanted to wipe that smile off his face. He pulled himself out of Kall's orbit enough to say. "You know, I'm going to write about what happened on Munzala." He declared, "The galaxy will know of this atrocity."

To Jake's surprise V'Del's smile grew toothier. "You can write all you want," he shrugged, "But what is it you humans are fond of saying about the value of images...worth a thousand words or somesuch." The protocol officer's hazel eyes glittered in triumph.

Jake realized the man was just as predatory as the monsters on Munzala though his hunting ground revolved around the manipulation of words and appearances. "It appears that your holorecorder was unfortunately destroyed during the melee, and our subsequent inspections of your persons didn't reveal any additional data, so as far as the galactic community knows, nothing out of the routine happened here."

"That's not true!" Kall charged.

"Without images, it's just words, mere opinions from an improbably idealistic young man, still grieving over the profound losses of the Dominion War and looking to find some meaning in his life. A young man taken in and manipulated by renegades posing as freedom fighters. Magnifying our legitimate claim into species cleansing."

Kall couldn't take it anymore. "There was nothing 'legitimate' about what you did on Munzala; where was the honor in slaughtering unarmed people?"

V'Del shrugged his shoulders again, "What unarmed people? We routed a nest of guerillas. That story has already sent out on the comnet."

"Bastard," Kall pulled away from Jake, but he grabbed the woman before she could confront V'Del.

"Now's not the time," Jake said. "We'll get our say." Further antagonizing the Alshain would do them no good. The most important thing now was to get back to Federation space and see if they could counteract the Alshain lies with the truth. Kall took a step back and Jake knew that the Vulcan-Bajoran understood.

"Which is your right," V'Del replied cheerily. "I wish you safe journeys. It would be in your best interests if we do not meet again. I don't know if the Exarch's charity will be able to protect you if you trespass into our space again."

Starbase 116

Sickbay

"You two are as lucky as you are reckless," the station's commander, a pinched face, violet hued Saurian, glowered at them. As soon as the Alshain had dropped them off, they had been rushed to the infirmary to undergo a full medical checkup. "Putting yourselves in harm's way like that." Jake lowered his head. He didn't like being scolded like he was a child, but he felt so terrible about the tragedy on Munzala, he felt so responsible and so helpless that he deserved to be taken to task, for something. He could sense by Kall's sharp intake of breath at the rebuke that she wasn't going to stand for any of that though.

"With so little to show for it," the chief medical officer, a green Nasat, piled on.

"That's not quite correct sirs," Kall smiled wickedly as she opened her right palm, with a small, circular disc within. Jake's eyes widened and his heart raced.

"That's a holographic data chip," he remarked, a bit dumbfounded by this turn of events. "How did you?"

"Do you really want to know how I got this past our captors?" Kall raised a telling arched eyebrow. "Let's just say, they checked us well on the outside, not the inside." The station commander's face became even more drawn and the medic twisted his face.

"Perhaps not," Jake grinned, his spirits brightening. He hadn't felt so good in a long time.

USS Enterprise-E

Captain's Ready Room

Two weeks later...

"Have I caught you at a bad time Mr. Sisko?" Captain Jean-Luc Picard asked, with obvious sympathy.

Jake Sisko stifled a yawn and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. "Of course not Captain Picard." His eyes cleared, he added, "Though I must admit this is a surprise."

Captain Picard gave the younger man a half-smile. "I'm not the personage of the moment Mr. Sisko. You are." Sisko didn't know how to take that. He smiled for a moment and then tried to tamp his enthusiasm behind a more serious demeanor.

"I'm not in this for awards or notoriety," Sisko said. Picard had heard that the young man had recently been nominated for a Brooks Award.

"Of course you aren't," the captain replied. "But I'm sure they don't hurt."

"No, I guess they don't." Jake conceded. "I'm assuming you're contacting me about my most recent expose on the Alshain-Son'a War?" The younger man paused, a pained expression on his face, "About Munzala?" The captain nodded in assent; his expression frosting.

"I think it was a foolhardy thing for you to do, going into a war zone," Jean-Luc realized how silly he sounded as soon as the words left his lips. He didn't know Sisko but he had reproved the young man like he was Wesley. He had only met Jake briefly, years ago, when the *Enterprise-D* had visited Deep Space Nine shortly after his father's installation as station commander. Picard and the elder Sisko hadn't exactly hit it off due to the man losing his wife during the first Borg Incursion, principally led by an assimilated Picard, but eventually they had come to an understanding. Perhaps out of a deep seated guilt, and knowing what had befallen Captain Sisko, Jean-Luc had a desire to protect the man's progeny, among other things...

"Risk is part of the job," Jake said flippantly, the stars in his eyes dimming. His expression became defiant. "The galaxy had to see what's going in the war zone, the Federation needed to know about the atrocities against civilians that the Alshain are committing."

"One could hardly consider the Son'a civilians," Picard found himself taking a defensive tack. "They enslaved two races, tried to destroy a planet, and that's before joining the Dominion and waging open war on the Federation."

"That war ended six months ago," Jake said, with an impatient tone. It appeared like this was a well-trod rejoinder for the journalist. "The Son'a Imperium surrendered and was abiding by the terms of the peace treaty. Whatever obligations the Federation feels it has to the Alshain Exarchate have been paid in full." Jake took a breath before continuing, "And it's just Son'a who are suffering. Tarlac, Ellorans, and Munzalans were slaughtered in the Tonkean Belt. I saw it with my own eyes."

Picard remorsefully shook his head. Anij had been telling him the same things. Some of the war's Son'a survivors had been fortunate enough to make it to Ba'ku, but the captain feared that the more that arrived there, the bigger a target the planet would become for the Exarchate.

"How many innocents should die before we start caring?" Jake had continued during Picard's reverie.

"Salient point Mr. Sisko," Picard said soberly. "May we continue this discussion...off the record?"

"Of course captain," Jake's expression softened. "How can I help you?"

"Despite some of your allegations that Starfleet has turned a blind eye to the plight of those in the war zone, I can assure you that many officers have not," Picard said.

"I take it that you are in that number?" Jake asked, now all business. The captain was impressed by how quickly the man took on a professional bearing.

"Yes," Picard admitted, though it pained him to do so. "Can I trust *you* Mr. Sisko?"

"Captain, I don't think you would've taken the effort to find me if you didn't think you could," Jake answered bluntly. Picard agreed.

"There are some of us who would like to do more, to halt the civilian casualties, or at least provide humanitarian aid, but we are prevented from doing so. However, your articles on how the Alshain are conducting their war have given us renewed entrée in the debate. They are shaping public opinion and in turn that is influencing the policymakers. We would like those articles to continue, without undue risk to you of course."

"Of course," Jake said, pausing. *Here it comes*, Picard realized, *the quid pro quo*.

"My editor and all of FNS are now in my corner," Jake said, "but it would make my job a bit easier if I could get quotes and information occasionally from likeminded officers in the Fleet."

Picard tensed, but he anticipated that Jake would make such an offer. The little boy had he had once met in passing had become a man, a tough, grizzled professional. If the young Sisko hadn't tried to angle for as much information as possible for his readership, he wouldn't be doing his job, the captain realized. And if Picard held protocol above morality he wouldn't be doing his. "I'm sure I can find a way to accommodate you."

THE END