

# Dark Territory

## DS9: Signs & Portents

By DarkKush

**Deep Space Nine**  
**October 2376**

### **Office of the Commanding Officer**

Admiral Monica Covey propped her elbows on her desk, the glass of amber colored Saurian brandy below her half-finished. Her duty jacket was unzipped, showing a hint of her red undershirt, her five golden pips gleaming weakly in the wan lighting.

She looked up from her musings, unable to muster a smile. "What do you have for me Colonel Yaro," she said, expecting her stocky second-in-command to barge in. Her eyes widened in shock at her visitor. The admiral fumbled to zip up her jacket as she stood up. She smoothed the rumped front of her jacket with one hand while extending the other.

"First Minister," she said, not understating her surprise when she added, "this is unexpected."

The tall, auburn haired Bajoran leader grimaced, even as he took her hand and shook it firmly. "About that..."

"Please," Covey interjected, "A seat and a shot first?" Her grin was weak. She was expecting bad news.

The weathered man tried to smile in return, but found he couldn't either. "Some other time," he replied. They stood awkwardly, merely looking at each other for a few seconds, unable of how to go forward nor wanting to.

"A seat at least?" The admiral offered, her stomach starting to twist. She could feel something brewing in the air, had been feeling it for months. Ever since an assassin had used DS9's own weapons systems to assassinate the visiting Cardassian premier. And she knew before he said it, but she let him say it anyway.

"I see no reason to 'beat around the bush' is the proper expression right?" Shakaar Edon asked. Covey gave a quick nod of affirmation, the twisting tendrils forming into a lead ball in the pit of her stomach.

"You know there was a vote of confidence in my leadership," Shakaar said, pausing a second as he ginned up the courage to continue, "Well, I lost it."

"I see," she said quietly. The former First Minister's eyes widened in shock.

"You already knew." He intoned.

“No,” Covey shook her head, “I didn’t know about the actual vote, and I’m sorry that it has happened. But there has been growing talk, as you well know, not just on Bajor but on Earth as well that your opposition was gaining strength.”

“I know,” he finally plunked down into the proffered seat, dejected and weary. “I just didn’t think that their hand was strong enough yet to force this vote. I thought I still had time to convince my colleagues and the electorate to maintain our present course.” He shrugged, and gave her a jaundiced smile. “You know, when this position was first offered to me I didn’t want it, and even up until this vote, I could pretend that I could step away from the minister’s office at any time, but this...really hurts.”

“A total frinx up, I know,” Covey said, drawing a laugh from the rejected leader.

“You know Monica, I think I’ll take one of those drinks now,” he said, pointing at the half empty glass.

“Of course,” she said, sliding out of her seat and padding over to the replicator inset into the closest wall. Once the materialized brandy was in hand, she gave the ice-filled glass to the thankful Bajoran.

He sniffed it before taking a drink, wincing seconds later. “It’s got quite a kick,” he remarked.

The admiral chuckled, “This coming from a man who can down a whole bottle of Romulan ale. That stuff is like lava, the molten variety.”

“Ha,” he joined in the laughter. “I always knew you could cheer me up,” he said, taking a second, slower sip, and savoring the flavor. “Did you know that there is a push to outlaw all non-Bajoran foods and beverages?” He asked, his tone becoming dispirited. “‘Buy Bajoran’ was the new rallying cry, along with the old standard ‘Bajor for Bajorans,’” he shook his head, “It smacks too much of Jaro Essa and the Circle,” he surmised, “and I thought our people had gotten beyond such narrow isolationism.”

“I’m sorry Edon, but it appears they have not,” Monica wasn’t in the mood to sugarcoat the situation, even to leaven a friend’s mood. “But it seems that isolationism is contagious, if you look at what’s happening in the Federation too.”

“Ah yes, Norah Satie’s campaign,” Shakaar remarked, “Her campaign seems solely based on reducing the Federation’s role in intergalactic affairs.”

“I’m of a similar mind on that,” Covey admitted.

“It seems the former admiral just doesn’t understand how important the Federation has been to keeping the peace across the Alpha Quadrant,” he continued, “If not for the Federation, things could be a lot worse than they are now.”

“I agree, but it’s that’s a tough argument to make to Federation citizens who see so much violence and bloodshed on their viewers a year after conflict with the Dominion ended. The Alshain-Son’a war is a continual loop of tragedy.”

“It is most unfortunate,” he closed his eyes and shook his head. “Especially for species like the Munzalans, Tarlac, and Ellorans that are caught in the middle while the two species that have abused them battle it out.” He finished the drink and placed the empty glass on her desk.

The admiral nodded in agreement as she finished her brandy. The bite was lessened only slightly due to the melted ice. "I guess this is a good time to share with you my bit of news."

"This doesn't sound good," he intoned, leaning forward in his seat.

"I'm being reassigned," she said.

"Now I see the reason you had started in on the Saurian brandy," the ex-First Minister quipped.

"I did need something to take the edge off," she admitted. "My conversation with Command wasn't exactly a cordial one. But it seems that the current administration is looking to salvage what little relationship remains with the Alshain."

"So they're sending you, the one official that is most respected by them," Shakaar finished her statement.

"Yes," she said, "But I don't know how effective I can be," Covey admitted. "Things have changed drastically on Alshain Proper, with the Exarch deposed from the throne, a civil war brewing along with the war against the Son'a, it would be impossible for even Ambassador Sarek to fashion a peace deal." She shook her head, and considered creating another drink.

"Well at least Starfleet Command and the Federation Council have confidence in you," he replied, "Unlike my government."

"Don't lose heart," Covey offered, "I know you are aware of how cyclical politics can be. As soon as you are gone there will be people wistful about your time in office and wanting you back."

"I know," his smile was weary, "I'm just concerned about how much damage the incoming administration will do to Federation-Bajoran relations before that occurs."

"So, who will my replacement have to tangle with?" The admiral asked.

"The likely next First Minister is Visra Dilim, of the Bajor First Party."

Monica was glad she had chosen not to get another drink, because if she had been imbibing when Shakaar dropped that news on her, she would've pelted him when she spat it out. "You're joking right?"

"I wish I was," he said.

"But last I heard, they were a minor, fringe party," she replied. "I thought the center-right opposition was stronger?"

"It seems you pay about as much attention to Bajoran politics as the Bajoran people themselves," his laugh was mirthless. "Bajor First *was* a minority party, but their supporters came out strong in the last election, giving their party an oversized voice in the Chamber of Ministers. The Bajor First Party vaulted to the front among the rightwing parties and now has cobbled together a coalition of them to make a working government."

“I guess I do need to get up to speed on the local politics,” she admitted, “I’ve been so busy here and with politics in general being so sludgy...” The Bajoran picked up his empty glass and held it aloft as if to toast her.

“Truer words Monica,” Shakaar said. “Sometimes I wonder what I did to the Prophets for Them to choose this vocation for me.”

“Perhaps you would like to take a ride to Alshain space with me,” the admiral joked. “I hear it’s lovely this time of year.”

“No,” Edon smiled, “I’ve got work to do here. Just because I won’t be at the head of government anymore doesn’t mean I don’t have a role to play, and the Federation will need advocates in the days to come.”

“I can think of no better spokesman than you,” Monica offered.

“Now I know you haven’t been paying attention to our politics, because if you had seen even one of my speeches such words would never come from your lips,” the man rejoined.

## **Deep Space Nine Operations Center**

Colonel Jatarn Yaro bottled his emotions as he saw the deposed leader of his people lumber from the admiral’s office and make haste over to the turbolift. As innocuous as he tried to be, his arrival and swift departure drew everyone’s attention.

Yielding to the inevitable, the former First Minister nodded at a few of the most stricken Bajoran officers but didn’t slow down his pace.

The news had come across the comnet while Shakaar had been talking with the admiral. Unlike some of the junior Bajoran officers, Yaro had been expecting the outcome.

And in a way he welcomed it. Shakaar was a patriot, a decent leader, but he was too close to the Federation. Jatarn was among those who felt that wasn’t a good thing for the long term interests of Bajor. His wife disagreed, he thought, smiling at the thought of their political debates, which were the only arguments he enjoyed having with her.

“Something funny Colonel?” The harsh question jolted Yaro out of his reverie. He perked up, and looked in the direction of the rebuke. Admiral Covey stood on the upper level, looking down into the operations pit. “My office, now.”

The Bajoran’s expression hardened, but he swallowed back any bitterness at the human’s tone. He was a soldier first and foremost; he respected the chain of command, and he wanted his subordinates to do the same, even if some of them recoiled at being ordered around by an Earthling.

“At once,” he said, tugging on his tight, rust-colored militia uniform. He bounded up the stairs. The admiral had already returned to her office.

Jatarn held his head high as he strode in. It would probably be his office before long. Not that he wanted the post. He had been resistant to taking the position to begin with. He hated Terok Nor. It remained a symbol of repression. He had lost relatives and friends to its ore processing centers. But as a soldier he did what he was told to do. Soldiering hadn't been his first choice; it had been forced upon him by the Cardassians and the need to defeat them. But it had become all that he knew how to do.

Yaro could only shake his head in grim amusement that he had fought so hard for freedom against the snakeheads only to be bossed around by humans. It made him wonder what he had truly fought for in the first place.

He caught the admiral in the midst of retaking her seat. His anger wavered a moment as he recalled his first wife. She also had auburn hair and fair skin like the admiral. If he squinted, he could imagine that Covey might have been a relation, though she didn't sport proud nose ridges.

His momentary sentiment was eclipsed by the resurgence of anger at how the lizards had taken her from him. And he didn't want the Federation to embroil the Bajoran people in another war, one that would take him away from his new wife, or she from him.

Kende, a nurse whom he had met in the Resistance, had been the sole reason that he had survived that horrific war to drive the Cardassians from Bajor. And he knew that the new won freedom would mean nothing for him if she was not in his life.

Another unbidden smile came to his lips at the thought of his salvation. Like him, she had a dark complexion, broad nostrils, and full lips, though gratefully she had a full head of hair.

"Quite the joker today huh, Colonel?" Though the admiral was sitting and he standing in front of her, Yaro felt small. "Take a seat," she said. It wasn't a request.

He stiffly sat down, his right earring jingling. "Have I done something to anger you admiral?"

"Listen Colonel Jatarn, I know you are not a fan of the Federation," the admiral said, with a tense shrug. "And that's your business. As long as you do your duty, you privately have the right to believe what you wish." She caught her breath and stared at the man expectedly for a few seconds. "You may speak freely," she added.

"If you truly believe those things Admiral, then what's the problem?" Jatarn asked, honestly confused. To the human's credit, she had been very charitable to him despite his known views about Federation imperialism or his past support for the Alliance for Global Unity. He had long since come to realize that Minister Jaro had manipulated him and others among the Circle in a base power grab, but just because the messenger had been misguided, didn't mean the message was wrong.

Even after the unfortunate affair had ended, Yaro had not been moved from that point, and it was a wonder that his beliefs hadn't gotten him cashiered out of

the Militia. Oddly enough his principled stand had won him support from the government officials who had sympathized with the idea of “Bajor for Bajorans”.

One of his supporters had been the station’s previous commander, Colonel Kira Nerys. Even though she had been a fierce opponent of the Circle and helped lead to its defeat, the two had common friends from the Resistance, and shared a mutual respect. She had even once recommended him to replace her as second-in-command of Terok Nor, saying that the experience would broaden his view of the Federation as it had hers.

Jatarn had merely nodded at the memory of the woman’s confidence, not believing that any experience could uproot his strong views. He smiled again, thinking of the fierce Nerys, ailing in a hospital on Bajor, a victim of the same assassins who had struck down Natima Lang. He had to admit, Colonel Kira had been half-right.

“That little smirk of yours in the operations center,” Covey smoldered, “Your obvious glee at Shakaar’s removal from office. I won’t condone the injection of politics into the operations center, is that clear?”

“Admiral,” he collected himself, gathering his thoughts as he thought of the best way to address the issue. “I believe I was placed in this position because of my views, which represent an important constituency on Bajor, and that Starfleet would be wise to heed their concerns.”

She nodded tightly in response. “I’ve never denied that,” she said, “and though we haven’t agreed on many issues regarding Bajor-Federation relations I think you have provided invaluable counsel and support.”

“I appreciate that Admiral.”

“These are tough times for Bajor,” she said, before he could continue talking. “For the entire quadrant,” she added. “I don’t want there to be any claim of partiality to the Bajoran political situation coming from the personnel on this station.”

“I assure you that wasn’t the case,” he replied, “I was reminiscing, perhaps at an unfortunate time.”

“Is that all?” She leaned back in her chair, her expression skeptical. But Jatarn held his ground and her gaze.

“That is all,” he said, pausing, before deciding to continue. “But since we are speaking freely, I am not sad to see Shakaar go.”

“I had a feeling you were going to say that,” she said.

“Shakaar is a patriot. I fought alongside his resistance cell on more than one occasion. I know he cared deeply about Bajor, but his policies were misguided.”

“How so?” The admiral sat up again, her cheeks reddening. Jatarn could tell she was spoiling for a fight and he was in the mood to grant her wish.

“While Shakaar certainly cared about Bajor, the Federation cares more about the wormhole and the Gamma Quadrant beyond it. Bajor is a secondary concern.”

“That’s not true,” Covey’s voice rose. She caught herself and apologized. “Please continue,” she prompted.

“Not only does the Federation promote atheism, an affront to our faith, you also have maintained this station, this symbol of our oppression,” his voice took on a hard edge as old angers began to flare up. “If the Federation had truly been concerned about the plight of the Bajoran people they would’ve scrapped Terok Nor a long time ago and created one of their shiny, new starbases.”

“The Federation doesn’t have a state religion, but we respect all faiths as well as the beliefs of non-believers,” she rejoined gingerly. “And you know that Yaro. A little thing like two wars and the complications that have delayed Bajor’s admission into the Federation have prevented a discussion on the fate of Deep Space Nine.”

“That’s why Bajor First supporters decided to take matters into their own hands,” Jatarn said, his confidence starting to brim. “That is why Shakaar was voted out today, because there is a growing certainty that there is a disconnect between what the Federation wants and what Bajor needs.”

“And what would that be?” Through the irritation, Jatarn could see that the woman was genuinely curious about his answer.

“We want to manage our own affairs and with Cardassia in shambles, the Dominion licking its wounds in the Gamma Quadrant, and most of the major powers still rebuilding, many Bajorans are no longer buying the rationale that we need to be protected by the Federation.”

“I see,” Covey said quietly, as she contemplated his words.

“There is more,” the colonel said after a pause. “There is also growing concern that the Federation or Starfleet couldn’t protect us even if it wanted to.”

The admiral sat up with a start. “Why would anyone feel that way?”

“First that rogue Jem’Hadar attack on Bajor earlier in the year, right under Starfleet’s nose, and then assassins turning this station’s weapons against Premier Lang. Who is to say that the next time those weapons won’t be turned against Bajor itself, or the Celestial Temple?”

“I would never allow that to happen,” the admiral declared.

“Colonel Kira probably would doubtlessly have made the same assertion and you see where she is,” he replied, wincing at his own callousness, but Covey asked for truth and he would not disappoint her.

The woman didn’t lash out at him, as he somewhat suspected she would. Instead Covey’s shoulders shrunk as the woman tucked her head beneath them, her chin on her chest. Now she looked small. “How did we come to this point Yaro? How did we engender such distrust among the new Bajoran leadership?”

“Well, the Federation still has some support,” he offered graciously, “but a growing number of average citizens as well do voice sentiments similar to what I have just told you. There is a sense of change in the air, and First Minister Shakaar was caught in the winds of it.”

“And you feel that the Federation-Bajoran alliance will be the next victim?” Covey asked. The colonel felt a pang of regret the woman’s genuine sadness.

"Time can only tell," he replied with honesty, "But I am certain that the relationship will be altered."

"I appreciate your honesty," Covey said, "I always have." The charitable statement rang odd to the Bajoran, especially in the middle of what was supposed to be verbal bout, but he dipped his head respectfully anyway.

"I only hope that you remain as honest with my replacement," she said. Jatarn's mouth dropped open at the news. For a few seconds he couldn't move, could barely think. Had he heard her correctly?

Oblivious to his stupefied condition, the admiral explained that the growing Alshain conflict was the reason for her move. All Yaro could do was nod along as his brain still tried to process the bombshell she had dropped. Covey continued, "I called you in here to inform you that I am being reassigned," she said, "but when I saw that smirk on your face as the First Minister left, well, I guess my emotions got the best of me. For that, you have my apology."

"It is not necessary," the colonel said, "You are human, after all." Quickly realizing how that phrase might be negatively received, he added, "No disrespect of course."

Her eyes narrowed and her mouth pinched, "I'm sure," she said coolly. "I can only hope that you are as forthright with my successor as you have been with me. They will need the truth, not sugarcoating. I am confident you can do that without it interfering with your duties."

"I will do all that I can to make the transition as painless as possible Admiral," Jatarn promised, and he meant it. "May I infer when your successor will take command?"

"Already to push me out of the air lock huh?" The human said, a grim smile on her face. His own cheeks warming, Yaro threw up his hands and waved them excitedly.

"No, that's not what I meant," he quickly replied.

"That's a joke Colonel," Covey was deadpan. "I thought we needed a little levity right now to dispel the heated emotions in the room."

"Oh, I understand, of course," Jatarn said. He didn't grant her a smile.

"Command has not made that decision, and in light of recent political events on Bajor, I can assume that their timeframe will be pushed back further, so you're stuck with me for another several months at least," she said, "Hope that doesn't disappoint you?"

"It does not," he said, a bit detached. Jatarn's mind was still reeling over what the admiral had told him. Major changes were afoot and he was directly in the center of them. He had never been an ambitious man, merely a hard worker, and a patriot, but if the new government offered him Terok Nor, would he-could he-say no? And how would Kende feel about that? And what of his ancestors? To command a station that had perched in the Bajoran sky like a giant predatory bird, feasting on the

entrails of Bajor, for decades. How could any self-respecting Bajoran not feel some rage at the idea?

He needed to pray on this. "Admiral," he gently broached. "May I be excused?"

"I'm assuming you'll not want to merely resume your duties at the moment?" The woman asked, as if reading his mind. Jatarn gave an affirming nod. "By all means," she replied. The colonel was almost at the door when her words stopped him, "Colonel, I hope my confidence in you won't turn out to be a mistake."

A rush of emotions flashed hot across his face, from guilt to indignation. He buried them deep before turning back to her, making sure to keep his expression impassive. The admiral's gaze was searching, pleading, hoping for some connection with him. It was both endearing and pathetic.

She had been a highly capable commanding officer and despite some misgivings, he had enjoyed serving under Covey, but the human need for validation was something he would not miss. Perhaps they will send a Vulcan next, he could only hope. "I have never given you a reason to question my commitment, and I will not do so for your remaining time here or beyond."

The woman sighed, visibly relieved, "I'm glad to hear that Yaro, really I am."

*That makes one of us*, he thought, but he silently dipped his head in again before exiting the office.

## **"Blood Ties"**

### **Prophets' Mercy Hospice**

#### **Bajor**

**October 2376**

Illiana Ghemor allowed the tears to fall. "Ranjen, why are you crying?" Kira Nerys asked, her eyes moistening at the edges.

"It is nothing...my child, I-I am merely pleased to see you recovering so well," Ghemor haltingly replied.

The former commander of Deep Space Nine was sitting up in the hospital biobed, with a renewed vitality that she hadn't evinced in months, not since Illiana had put her in this precarious position.

Then Illiana had taken Kira's identity to turn the station's weapons against Cardassian Premier Natima Lang. Since then, she had had a change of heart, and she wanted to make amends. She had taken on another guise, that of a simple ranjen, a low ranking member of the Bajoran religious order, who visited Kira from time to time.

Since this was something ranjens often did for the infirm no one questioned her presence, though she had gotten a few widened eyes at how similar the two women looked.

It still amazed Illiana. She had been born a Cardassian, yet had spent much of her adult life disguised as a Bajoran, an operative for the Obsidian Order, an infiltrator in various resistance cells. Despite their uncanny resemblance she had never met Kira during the Bajorans' war against the Cardassian occupation.

If it hadn't been for her father, who had mistakenly thought Kira was in fact Illiana, and had reached out to the Bajoran and even shared *shri-tal* with the colonel. For a long time Illiana had hated Kira for receiving her father's most valued secrets, which in turn the Bajoran used against the Cardassian regime. Her fury had fueled her actions against the Bajoran, using Ceti Alpha V eels to first take control of her mind. One of the first things she had made Kira do had been to share her father's *shri-tal*. Kira had been more willing to do that than some of the other deeds Illiana had commanded during their mission, such as killing the Dominion representative Nitala'Rax or threatening to use a plasma charge against her friends.

To the colonel's credit she had been highly resistant to suggestion, which unfortunately had caused extensive brain damage.

Seeing how the woman fought against her, fought for her friends, and realizing how much her father had come to value this woman and share her views, slowly eroded Illiana's hatred. It didn't hurt too that she soon realized how Lang's assassination had not made Cardassia stronger, yet more vulnerable to men like Mintof Urlak, the man behind Lang's murder.

Her father had turned his back on authoritarianism, he had found another way, and in the midst of all the fire and wreckage that Illiana had caused, she realized the only way to honor his memory was to do the same.

However, all she knew was blood. The artist she had dreamed about becoming as a child had vanished as soon as she joined the Obsidian Order. So she had set out to avenge both Lang and Kira, first by eliminating the man she thought directly murdered Lang: Elim Garak.

A confrontation on Roket Colony a month ago had resulted in her learning the truth. She had been captured by Garak and DS9's Dr. Bashir, a man who was more than he appeared to be, and given to Section 31, the Federation's Obsidian Order. It had taken very little to escape custody and take on a new identity.

Illiana had found Garak and offered an alliance, which the desperate man had gratefully taken. Together they would help free Cardassia from the yoke of Mintof Urlak, or die in the attempt. She nodded, thinking, *hopefully die in the attempt*.

Illiana was tired of causing pain, but didn't know how else to live. "Ranjen, are you okay?" Kira's voice was heavy with concern, but there was a hint of suspicion in her large brown eyes. Perhaps her memories were coming back, perhaps she could see through Illiana's disguise? In any event, this would be the last time she saw her sister.

"No, no," Illiana said, her voice clotted with sadness, "Just happy is all. The nurses tell me you will make a full recovery."

"It will take some time, but yes," Kira nodded, confidently. "Have you-have you been checking up on me?"

"I have," Illiana nodded, "from time to time." She paused, thinking to add, "As one of several patients I visit."

"Ah," Kira nodded, her suspicion starting to ease. Her eyes beamed with gratefulness. "Thank you."

"It is nothing," Illiana smiled.

"You've come to visit me all this time and I don't even know your name," the colonel said.

"It doesn't matter," Illiana demurred. "Everyone knows you and all have been praying for your recovery. Though perhaps I have been less respectful not to give you time to heal alone."

"Healing alone is the last thing I think anyone would want," Kira said, before adding, "But I am thankful that I didn't have to. When I was in a coma, I-I felt presences, yours...it felt familiar."

Illiana stopped herself from taking a step back. There had been things she had talked about with Kira, personal things that she hadn't shared with anyone. "Is that all you remember...my child?" She asked, her throat suddenly dry.

The Bajoran sat up in the bed, her jaw clenching. "Don't you think I would recognize my own sister?"

The Cardassian's heart seized in her chest and she took a step backward, one hand reaching into the folds of her robes past her disruptor and to the syringe clipped to her belt. She didn't want to kill Kira but she would if she had to, and the contents of the syringe would make it look like a naturally occurring, albeit tragic brain-hemorrhage.

"How?" Illiana asked.

"You don't have to pull the weapon," Kira said, "I know you don't want to kill me, you had ample opportunity especially when I was in a coma."

"Alright," Illiana slowly pulled her hand out of her robe, placing both at her sides, within easy reach of any of the weapons on her body. "How did you know?"

"I would know that face anywhere," Kira smirked, before rubbing one of her cheeks.

"I see," Illiana remarked. She touched her own face. Even the smooth porcelain skin, nearly shorn platinum hair, ice blue eye contacts, different ridge pattern to the nose and fuller lips had not hidden Ghemor's true face or lessened her resemblance to the Bajoran brunette.

"It's a face that has haunted my dreams for a long time now," Kira's expression hardened.

"I...see," Illiana repeated.

"I will never forget your face, what you did to me, my friends, the station," the Bajoran shook her head, tears shimmering in her eyes. "And all I want to know...is why?"

“Well, I did explain some of that to you during your coma, I talked about some of my missions, of how the Dominion captured me on New Bajor, how I began to work for them, and how it eventually led me to you...to Deep Space Nine.”

“I get your hatred for me,” Kira said, “But Nitala’ Rax? He was an innocent and you made me-me...,” the woman broke down, the sobs wracking her body like hurricane waves. Illiana said nothing, but merely let the storm of despair work its way through the other woman’s system. “I know you had something to do with Lt. Easun’s murder as well.”

“I won’t deny that,” Illiana nodded, “I was a soldier, and I had a mission to complete. Simple as that.”

Kira shook her head, but the look on her face wasn’t one of anger or disgust, but a mix of sadness and knowing disbelief. “I used to tell myself that, especially when innocents would die during our attacks against the Cardassians. It numbed the pain for a moment, but that pain, that doubt, that shame, it never goes away.”

Illiana lowered her head, her own tears coming back to the fore. “I know Kira...and I am so tired. I-I just want to make it right, everything I’ve done. I’ve got to serve Cardassia...the greater good just one more time.”

“Oh Prophets,” Kira gasped, “What are you planning?”

“Just know that I am going to make amends, to you, to father, to his dream of what Cardassia could be,” she promised. “Please, trust me sister.” She backed away from the bed. Kira sat up, reaching out for her, wincing at the effort.

The Bajoran clutched the side of her head, the pinched expression on her face, stopping Illiana. The monitor above the biobed began to beep. She approached the bed, concerned about her sister’s condition. She hadn’t felt concern for another sentient being in a long time.

Reaching out, almost touching Kira’s hand, Illiana was pushed to the side as a flurry of bodies entered the room. One of the bodies bumped into her, reaching up to grasp her elbows. “I’m sorry Ranjen, but we will need you to leave the room,” the cultured voice of Dr. Bashir spoke.

Unbidden, she looked up at him, hoping he would recognize her, arrest her, make her pay for her crimes. There was a brief flash of curiosity in the man’s eyes, before the Bajoran medic called him to the colonel. “I’m really sorry Ranjen, but you will have to visit Colonel Kira at some other time.”

She nodded and looked back at the wall of bodies surrounding her sister. Illiana Ghemor slipped from the room and in less than an hour from Bajor. She had promises to keep.

## **“The Doors We Open and Close”**

### **Prophet’s Mercy Hospital**

#### **Bajor**

**October 2376**

Dr. Julian Bashir’s focus was misplaced. He should’ve been beaming about Colonel Kira’s impressive recovery, but his mind kept drifting back to the colonel’s strange visitor. Perhaps strange wasn’t the best word for it. Familiar was more appropriate. Somehow he knew the woman, though he had never seen the ranjen before.

After he had taken care of Kira’s migraine and given the woman a sedative, Bashir had asked the staff about the ranjen. None of them seemed as interested in her. They had told him she had visited the colonel several times, though her path had never crossed with his. Kira was one of several patients the woman visited. Julian did know it was fairly standard practice for the Bajoran clergy to visit the infirm, even aboard Deep Space Nine.

He reasoned that perhaps he had caught sight of the woman there, though that explanation still didn’t quite sit right with him. But where else could he have met her?

His mind recycling possibilities, his nose stuck into a padd filled with Kira’s bio-readings, Bashir caught the motion out of the corner of his eye too late. He plowed right into the person before he could stop himself.

With unusual clumsiness, Bashir’s legs got tangled with the other person’s and both of them pitched toward the floor, until an arm shot out and found purchase. Bashir’s fall was abruptly stopped.

He quickly untangled himself from the person and offered a hand. The younger human male, tow-headed and fresh faced, waved the proffered hand off.

“My apologies Ensign,” Bashir said, his cheeks warming with embarrassment. The ensign wore operations gold beneath his gray and black uniform. Julian tried to place him, but gave up after a few seconds. He could’ve been new to the station or from one of the visiting starships.

“This wasn’t how I envisioned our first meeting Doctor,” the junior officer said. “Minister Tenva said you were a head full of steam, but I wasn’t expecting to literally be caught in your path.”

Bashir pulled back his hand. His posture stiffened, his eyes narrowed, and his voice lowered, “You’re the new contact.” It wasn’t a question.

The man nodded, “I’m temporary, until the section can figure out what to do due to this Bajor First business.”

Otos Tenva, Julian’s previous Section 31 contact, had been a member of the recently ousted government.

“Tenva didn’t even say goodbye,” Bashir said wryly. “I wonder what happened to him.”

The young man shrugged, completely uncaring. “I didn’t ask.”

“I see,” Bashir said, not the first lie he had told. He had been lying to others, but mostly himself, ever since he had decided to join Section 31. He had done so in the hopes of saving Garak and protecting the people he cared for. “Are you going to give me a name?”

“Crisp,” the ensign grinned, a bit sheepishly, “Apologies.”

“What do I owe the pleasure of this visit?” Bashir didn’t hide his sarcasm. He refused to be disarmed by the aw-shucks guise of the operative.

“There’s a new assignment for you,” the man said, “The data rod will be in your quarters. The usual location.”

Bashir shuddered. He hated that this Crisp was carrying on the invasive practices of Tenva.

“Do I get an inkling of what it will entail?” Bashir asked.

A shadow crossed across the man’s face. “You’re not going to like it.”

## **Doctor’s Quarters**

### **Deep Space Nine**

### **Two nights later...**

“I can’t believe you just up and did this, without even asking me!” Ezri Dax thundered, arms folded severely across her chest, and her delicate chin jutting forward in anger. She pushed from the table, nostrils flaring at its contents, her face a mask of disgust. “And you thought Bularian canapés and Denevan plum pudding were supposed to mollify me!”

Bashir at turns felt both awkward and awful. He didn’t know what to do, short of telling Ezri the truth and that is what he couldn’t, must not do.

“This is a great opportunity,” he weakly offered. “One that Starfleet Medical said would be great for my career.”

“I thought you had become more settled...here, with me,” Ezri said, a stricken look in her eyes.

“Perhaps...that’s the problem,” Bashir hated himself for saying it, even more so for the grains of truth in the statement.

“Julian, you can’t mean that,” Ezri was taken aback.

“No, please, listen Ezri,” Julian thought about reaching out to her, but then changed his mind. “I came to DS9 to study and practice medicine on the frontier, to be on the cutting edge,” he paused, reminiscing over the younger, more callow man he had once been.

“I had every intention of leaving DS9 after an allotted time, of working my way up through Starfleet Medical, of catching up to and surpassing Elizabeth Lense. But

of course, life happens while making other plans,” he smiled, trying to inject some levity into the gathering storm clouds.

“So, I’m just a detour?” Ezri charged.

“No, no, no, I didn’t say that, I didn’t mean that,” Bashir protested.

“That’s what it sounded like to me,” the Trill shot back.

“Listen, it’s not like Cardassia Prime is on the other side of the galaxy,” Julian noted.

“We barely spend enough time together as it is and we live on the same space station,” Ezri rejoined. “Think how hard it will be to continue our relationship on different planets?”

“You know that’s a hazard of the service,” the medic pointed out.

“One would hope that the couples actually discussed their separations instead of one just making the decision on his own.”

“I’m sorry Ezri, but being the Starfleet liaison for the Interspecies Medical Exchange on Cardassia is a plum assignment, and it’s one in which I can do a lot of good. The Cardassian people still need as much help as they can get, and you know that.”

“That’s not the point,” Ezri huffed.

“Then what is?” Bashir started to feel his own anger rise.

“You should’ve discussed this with me first. Maybe I could’ve secured a position on Cardassia Prime too.”

“I didn’t want to upset what you were doing here,” Julian said smoothly. He really didn’t want Ezri too close to him while he carried out the work Section 31 doled out.

“You should’ve given me the option to make that decision or not, but you didn’t,” Ezri said.

“I’m sorry,” Bashir replied.

“Are you? Are you really?” Dax asked, looking searchingly into his eyes.

“Of course I am, why would you ask that?” Julian was incredulous.

“Because over the last several months you’ve spent a lot of time off the station. If I didn’t know better I would think you were putting distance between you and me,” Ezri’s voice was half-accusing, half-breaking.

“Well, I don’t know what to say about that,” It was perhaps Bashir’s first true statement in a long time to his lover.

“That says it all, doesn’t it?”

“Ezri, I don’t understand,” Bashir pleaded.

“I think I do,” Ezri shook her head, a light shining in her eyes. “You’re not ready for this to go forward, and you just don’t want to hurt my feelings.”

“Ezri,” Julian started to protest, but another, hated voice blossomed in his mind: *This is your out, this is your way to protect her...*the despised inner voice clutched the doctor’s vocal cords and he hung his head. “Maybe you’re right,” he said quietly, “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” she reached out and touched his hand for a few agonizing seconds. “Maybe I’m not ready for this to go forward either.”

“Ezri,” he started again, but caught himself. “Maybe it’s for the best,” he smiled weakly.

“Maybe,” Ezri’s crestfallen look belied her words. She pulled back her chair and awkwardly scrambled out of it. “I think its best that I leave.”

Bashir really wanted to stop here, he wanted to hold her in his arms and tell her how he really felt, but he didn’t. If he really loved Dax, he would have to let her go. And so he did.

## “Sunday Stroll”

### **Grand Aqueduct Lotha Province, Bajor November 2376**

“What an engineering marvel,” Lt. Rha’ow placed his hands on the guardrail and leaned over, allowing the breeze to nuzzle his orange-furred face. He looked down into the water surging below before smiling at Lt. Okala, fangs flashing and whiskers twitching. “First, sharing hasperat with your sister Lata and now this unexpected trip. Thanks.”

Science Officer Okala Lahn smiled back at the man. Spending time off the station and with her sister had been more of a palliative than she expected. The pain of Easun’s loss several months ago was still potent, but had become manageable, thanks to the help from Counselor Dax and her friends, including Rha’ow.

The Caitian was still learning his way around the station’s engineering compartments, but they had become fast friends when his duties placed in the operations center.

Lahn thought the nucleus of their friendship was how out of place each of them had felt. This was Rha’ow’s first station assignment and he had the fortunate misfortune to be made assistant to Chief Koenig.

While Koenig would teach the younger man invaluable skills he would likely strain his forbearance. After a particularly grueling shift, Okala thought a trip planetside was in order instead of simply venting at Quark’s. Both were still in their respective uniforms, Rha’ow’s Starfleet black and gray and Okala’s Militia operations silver and gray.

Lata had been only too happy to see her younger sister. Lahn knew that Lata was concerned about her wellbeing and that was partly while she had been avoiding

returning to Lotha. She didn't want to rehash Easun's death and what it had meant to her. As best she could she wanted to forget and/or move on from it.

And she could allow herself to nestle within Rha'ow's joy at visiting the aqueduct and getting some real sunlight even if Lahn found it difficult and treacherous to experience any for herself.

"I can't believe it took thousands of years to complete this project," Rha'ow said. Lahn nodded.

"Yes, wars and other things got in the way...and then the Occupation," Okala suppressed a shudder. "After the Cardassians left, completing the project was something the provisional government thought would unify our people, would signal to the galaxy that we were back and ready to rebuild."

"A grand testament to the endurance and resiliency of the Bajoran people," Rha'ow beamed.

"A lot was done via ancient methods and hard physical labor," Lahn said. "Lata even participated. My parents wouldn't allow me to join in. They said I was too young."

"A pity," Rha'ow shook his head. "But there will be other ways to make history, to leave an impact. I mean, you're doing that every day aboard the station."

Lahn chuckled, the noise sounding alien to her ears. "Your latinum tongue must have been inherited."

Rha'ow wrinkled his nose. He didn't like being reminded that he was the scion of a political dynasty on his native Cait. However, Lahn couldn't help herself. The man had a way with words that sometimes bordered on the surreal.

Rha'ow let the moment pass and Lahn pondered whether she should apologize. Before she could, the Caitian reached out and patted her shoulder. "All in good fun I suppose," he said.

"Yes," she agreed. "I'm sorry if I..."

"No need to apologize," Rha'ow said, "There's nothing to be sorry for."

"Perhaps..." Lahn never let a good opportunity to beat herself up to go to waste.

"Seriously Lahn," Rha'ow moved closer, and she became aware of the nearness of him, of his muscled torso, sinewy arms, and Jumja sweetened breath. She also realized she was bumping against the railing. There was no place to go.

Okala suddenly need oxygen. She looked right and then left and sidestepped the man. She wasn't ready yet...not so soon after Easun.

"Now it is to you that I should apologize," Rha'ow said, turning quickly to face her. He dipped his head.

"No, you don't, it's just..." Okala couldn't find the words or strength to finish.

"Please, say no more," Rha'ow's warm golden eyes were filled with sympathy. "I shouldn't have moved into your space." More gingerly he reached out and touched her shoulder. "I was impertinent."

“What are you doing to her?!” An ugly voice tore interposed more than Rha’ow’s gesture ever had. Both officers turned toward the speaker.

An older woman, clutching the hand of a sneering child both pointed at them. “On Bajor our hara cats are supposed to be leased.”

“Excuse me?” Okala said, not quite believing what she had heard. A burly man, with thick nose ridges, came to the older woman’s defense.

“She’s right. Perhaps we should call animal control.”

“Hold on,” Okala said, her cheeks turning hot. Rha’ow remained surprisingly stoic. “I think you need to apologize right now.”

“No, that creature needs to be in a zoo,” a red-haired woman said, and now a small group was forming, beginning to surround them. Some leered, while others were merely curious. A few looked embarrassed but said nothing. Okala didn’t know who to be infuriated with more: those that were spewing hatred or the ones who knew better but said nothing.

“This man is a Starfleet officer and he should be accorded respect,” Okala said.

“Starfleet,” a voice without a face threw out, “That’s the problem right there!” That assertion got several nods.

“How can you say that?” Okala asked, exasperated. She had heard that an anti-Federation hysteria was sweeping through the planet, but she had thought it would pass in the aftermath of Premier Lang’s assassination.

“How could you wear that uniform and not say it?” The burly man charged. “You should be defending us, not shielding *them!*”

“The Federation are our allies, they saved us from the Dominion,” Okala pointed out.

“We had a pact with the Dominion, which they honored,” someone called out.

“A pact endorsed by the Emissary,” another voice added.

“Who was a Starfleet officer,” Okala found herself nearly shouting now over the throng. “And a human.”

“His mother was a Prophet, that is what I heard.” The old woman who had first started this said. “He was of Bajor.”

“And that’s more than I can say for your pet there,” The red-haired woman spat.

“Lt. Rha’ow is a sentient being,” Okala said, “Don’t speak of him in that way.”

“It would just be better if he and his kind left our world. We can manage our own affairs.”

“But what happens if the Cardassians come back or the Dominion, or something even worse?” Okala asked.

“I would rather take my chances than wait for another malfunction or ‘sabotage’ to happen,” the burly man rejoined, “and turn Terok Nor’s weapons against us.”

“That’s right,” the red-haired woman said, “They could murder us in our beds!”

“I don’t know what propaganda Bajor First has been telling you, but that would never happen!” Okala declared.

Unfortunately the only words that got through were Bajor First, the name of the rightwing party that had swept into power in the most recent elections. The crowd took up chanting “Bajor First!”

Lt. Rha’ow leaned over to Okala’s ear and finally spoke. “I think it’s best if we leave.”

“These people need to see reason,” Okala protested. What punctuated that statement was a bottle shattering at their boots.

“I think they would rather see blood, mine and yours,” Rha’ow said, “And I would so not want to mar further such a lovely afternoon.”

Okala was still resistant. The planetary mood was shifting, become fearful and insular, a macrocosm for her own feelings after Easun’s death. And she resolved to fight them as she had her own demons.

“We’ll leave...for now, but I promise to be back,” she declared.

## “Crypsis”

### **Lakarian City Cardassia Prime December 2376**

The skyline reminded him of a broken smile. A year had passed and still many Cardassian cities remained as flattened as this one. The city seemed dead, except for the bustle around a new construction project in the center of town. It was to be a new building, the first temple erected for worshippers of the Oralian Way in decades.

The appearance of construction crews and the yammer of men returning to work, not to mention the reclamation of a venerable Cardassian religion and all of the suppressed culture that went with it, should’ve heartened Elim Garak, but it left him bitter instead. He stood in the shadow of one of the skeletal buildings, looking at the near celebratory mood suffusing the project. Average citizens and even soldiers had joined the workers, so many taking a hand in restoring a sense of normalcy to a universe gone mad and hungry for Cardassian blood.

The construction vehicles bore the mark of Mintof Urlak’s conglomeration. He knew that Urlak was just doing this to lock up the votes, for an election that was already a foregone conclusion. But Obsidian Order agents left nothing to chance and Urlak had been among the best of that breed.

And now he stood poised to take over Cardassia and restore the dictatorship that had just led Garak's people to near genocide. Of course the desperate and hungry, the hopeless couldn't see it, but Garak knew first hand of Urlak's intentions. The man had revealed them just before he killed Natima Lang and framed Garak for the murder.

Garak had long given up on any chance of a happy reunion with his people. He had gone from a hero of the Dominion War to public enemy number one in the span of a few months. He knew what he had to do, to save Cardassia from itself, would not be understood by his kind. They would hurl insults at him, they would curse his bloodline, for eternity, but that didn't matter. Urlak had to be stopped, no matter the cost.

"You really need to stop this skulking around," Illiana Ghemor said, "Before long even I'm going to think you are a criminal, and I know what actually happened on Deep Space Nine."

Garak hadn't heard the woman's approach and he chided himself for getting lost in reverie. He couldn't be off his game when he finally went after Urlak. "Illiana, you look different," he said, remarking on her new disguise.

The woman grimaced, "Even your rapier wit has grown dull," she said, scratching her face.

"I'll make certain to polish up," he said, a glimmer of his former insufferable self, emerging. "Problems with the skin graft?" He asked.

"Yes, it is discomfoting," she admitted. Garak felt a pang of sympathy, and then quickly squashed it. If this woman hadn't been part of Urlak's conspiracy, if she hadn't replaced Kira and compromised DS9's computer systems, Premier Lang might still be alive.

The very thought of it made Garak want to eliminate the woman right then. But he was never a man who had been moved much by emotion, at least when he made his best decisions. And Illiana served a key part in his plans for revenge. It didn't hurt that the woman realized now how Urlak had manipulated her and even fancied that she shared a familial bond with Colonel Kira.

"To what do I owe this visit?" He asked.

"The news stories aren't working," she said, "No one cares about financial shenanigans when they are freezing or starving." Thus far Ghemor had been vital to

Garak's plans to expose the web of shady business dealings Urlak had been involved in over the years, not to mention the obscene amounts of money he was pouring into the election. "Urlak is giving the people tangible things while we are giving them only chimeras."

"I am building a case and it will take time."

"The election is this almost upon us," Ghemor pointed out. "None of these revelations are the bombshell you said you would deliver. Don't you think now is the time for the November surprise?"

"No," he shook his head. "Urlak's election is a foregone conclusion. I want him to win."

"Pardon me?"

"I want him to feel comfortable, safe, I want him in one place, all the better when I strike," Garak promised, a maniacal heat warming his cheeks. "These stories are just strands on the web that will trap him when I spring the most devastating charges. He'll have nowhere to run, his credibility will be shot, and the people will finally know the truth. Even if they hate me for it, they will do the right thing."

"And what if they don't," Ghemor countered, "It's not like our collective moral compass has been all that right before. First we oppressed our own people, then the Bajorans, and eventually tried to fight a war against the whole quadrant. Maybe you need to be honest and see us for what we are."

"And what is that?" Garak hissed, ready to flick his wrist and produce the fold-out disruptor connected to it.

"Predators," she said.

"We are predators," he admitted, and she gave him a shocked expression. "Are you surprised I felt that way?"

"Yes," she admitted, "I was starting to wonder if your time in exile had made you idealize our condition."

"No less than your time spent among the Bajorans," he riposted. To that, Ghemor could only give a solemn nod.

"We are predators, but we are also something more, something we have forgotten,"

he pointed to the temple. "And I will not have Urlak sully the good that is still in us."

"I will return now," She said, "I don't want to raise suspicions."

"Continue disseminating the information I provide, and trust that it is having the desired effect," he promised.

"You've just got to know what the desire is," she remarked. He mirthlessly chuckled.

"Correct." He conceded.

## **"A Worm Turns"**

**Corat Damar Hall  
Diet Legislative Building, Cardassia Prime  
December 2376**

"Kall!" Jake Sisko called out, sticking up his arm and waving it vigorously. Despite his height, Jake felt adrift in the sea of bodies surrounding him. Journalists of every creed and stripe it seemed had descended upon Cardassia in the last two weeks. And many of them packed the balcony, crushed against the railing. Jake hoped the structural foundation was sturdy enough and that it wouldn't collapse on the mass of reporters below.

He averted his eyes momentarily to look at the hungry flock, both feeling a kinship and a level of disgust that they were so eager to witness the downfall of a sapient being, even if he did deserve it, and even if Jake was the instrument of his destruction.

From a muckraking standpoint Jake should feel proud of what he had done. His bosses back on Earth surely had. They told him that the information he had uncovered was blaring across the quadrant.

Of course the truth wouldn't have come to light at all without Garak. Jake wished the man was here so that he could get the vindication he so richly deserved. However the wily tailor was still a fugitive, still wanted for the assassination of Natima Lang.

Jake didn't buy into that, even though he knew Garak was capable of reprehensible things, but he also knew that the man cared about Cardassia, and Jake knew that Garak thought Lang had represented the best hope to return Cardassia to the galactic community.

“Jake,” Kall Yano said warmly, right after elbowing a Bzzit Khaht to get out of her way. The young Sisko chuckled. The Vulcan-Bajoran hybrid wrinkled her ridged nose at the less than wholesome smell of the leathery Bzzit Khaht, before smiling at him.

“Where were you Yano?” He asked, taking the brown-skinned woman in his arms. She hugged him tightly. They had started out as colleagues. Jake hadn’t found a better camera person among the litter at the Federation News Service than Kall.

Only recently, after a series of harrowing events, starting with the Alshain slaughter on Munzala, that the two young journalists had decided to admit their feelings and do something about it. And now they were a team in more ways than one.

“Talking with one of the Altair guys,” she said, referring to one of their news rivals, from the Altair Information Syndicate. “He also couldn’t believe that FNS had snatched our plum assignment and given it to Gilmore,” the biracial woman huffed. It rankled Jake too, but he had long ago learned to maintain his composure in public.

“That’s the way things go Yano,” he said, his voice measured. “But the people who matter know it was our work that broke the story.”

“Yeah,” she sighed as she leaned into him, “But it’s Elena Gilmore who gets the glory,” she said, jabbing an accusatory finger like a spear tip at the front of the room. It had been roped off and the bigger named, ‘celebrity’ (Yano’s word) reporters were sitting and chatting amiably.

Jake’s eyes fell on the object of Yano’s ire. The middle-aged, trim auburn-haired human woman was laughing with a Valerian colleague.

Jake pursed his lips, a prick of envy dispelling his mood, but he quickly pushed it away. Elena Gilmore had been-remained-one of his heroes. She had been a war correspondent of the highest order, putting her life on the line countless times to insure that Federation citizens got accurate, truthful information.

Before the wars with the Klingons and Dominion, Gilmore had made her bones exposing corruption on various Federation member worlds. Unlike many, Gilmore’s skepticism often showed the serpent in the paradise many thought the Federation was.

The woman was an inspiration to him. So he couldn’t quite be too bummed when she had been picked to deliver the death blow to Trade Provost Mintof Urlak.

His bosses wanted someone more experienced with slaying Goliaths, and he couldn’t blame them for that. Still he did hope, if for nothing else, history’s sake, that both he and Yano got some credit.

But more importantly he hoped the information would lead others to doubt Urlak’s veracity in other areas, including his strong assertion that Garak murdered Lang.

“Please be seated,” a stern, computerized voice said from speakers hidden throughout the hall. No one on the balcony paid attention. The favored reporters dutifully complied.

“Trade Provost Urlak will be arriving at the podium momentarily,” the voice added. Kall squeezed his hand.

“Here we go,” she said, her excitement palpable. Jake nodded, swallowing a lump in his throat. Looking back down again, Jake noticed that Gilmore was perched on the edge of her seat like a bird of prey. She was ready to swoop down on Urlak.

Without fanfare Mintof Urlak strode onto the stage. The man had a slight build but he radiated power. The Cardassian trade minister was dressed in a simple brown tunic and matching pants, his expensive black shoes glittering in the ceiling lights. The man’s comfortable lead in the polls had evaporated over the last week as more stories had emerged. Now it looked like Urlak might lose the premiership to the incumbent, Feren Remec, who had been acting premier since Lang’s assassination.

He stepped quickly to the podium. He cleared his throat before speaking to the audience, “This is a very important matter that involves not just this campaign but the future of Cardassia, so I will dispense with the usual pleasantries if you do not mind,” he paused for only a second, “It has come to light recently that my foundation, the Crimson Order, which had been dedicated to providing services for veterans and their families had been transferring funds to the Crimson Shadow, a breakaway extremist faction.” He stopped and looked around the room and then up into the balcony.

Jake grumbled low in his throat, his lips twisting in confusion. For a man headed towards the gallows Urlak certainly hadn’t lost any confidence. “It is true,” Urlak said. A rumble of voices flowed through the crowd, growing into a din. And many reporters down below leapt to their feet, Gilmore leading the pack. Jake sat back dumbfounded.

He had imagined what this moment would be like, but never thought it would happen. While Garak had been a mere operative in the Obsidian Order, Urlak had been one of its masters. He had never thought the man would ever admit to something so damaging. There had to be a reason why, he wondered, his eyes narrowing as he gazed at Kall.

Yano frowned. She leaned close so that he would hear her over the roar, “I know that look,” she said. “What’s wrong?” Jake shook his head, not sure what to say.

“Please, please,” Urlak raised his voice. “Your questions will be answered satisfactorily,” he promised. He bade the audience to settle down several more times and finally they did.

“I have someone I wish to introduce,” Urlak looked off the stage and waved for someone to step forward. A surprised gush roiled through many as Gul Vaidar Dien stepped onto the stage. He was dressed in a standard military uniform, his brown cuirass as polished as Urlak’s shoes. A row of medals hung from the man’s chest. The audio amplified their clinking in the near silence his appearance had created.

The cadaverous Cardassian militant was the current leader of the Crimson Shadow. He glanced warily around the room before he walked over to the podium. Urlak stepped to the side and then behind the taller man.

Dien gripped the edges of the rostrum and bent down as if he were speaking into actual microphones. Jake's grunt this time was one of grim amusement. Dien had no qualms about blowing innocents to bits but seemed bedeviled by public speaking.

"Fellow Cardassians," Dien began, his voice sounding dry, "I took up arms to protect our homes, our families, our future from invaders." He paused, glaring quickly out into his immediate crowd of reporters. "And now I lay down my arms and submit to the legal authorities."

"What did he just say?" Kall was as disbelieving as many in the audience. The whole auditorium-it seemed-had been stunned into silence. Jake's mind was reeling at the news himself.

It was damn near impossible to fathom. Dien was the current media *bête noir*, the fanatical militant who would never give up until he had turned Cardassia into a graveyard of Federation and Klingon corpses. But he had just upended the galaxy and Jake really wanted to know why.

The gul released his death grip on the podium and pushed away from it, his relief evident. Urlak tugged the man's elbow and Dien now stood behind him. Dien looked down as Urlak addressed the crowd again.

"This is where the Crimson Order's funding went," he explained, "to insure that Dien and those who will surrender along with him, and their families, will have jobs, will have a stake in the new, the one Cardassia we are building." He said, craftily inserting his campaign slogan "One Cardassia" into the statement.

The room erupted; the reporters could no longer contain themselves. Urlak stood placidly, weathering the barrage of questions. After a few minutes, he signaled for silence with a hand gesture and the restive journalists muzzled themselves.

"I promised I would answer all of your questions satisfactorily," Jake could hear, if not see, the smile in man's voice. "But I didn't say I would do so all tonight. Ms. Gilmore, of the Federation News Service, I will grant you the first exclusive interview. Please contact my press secretary at your convenience. Now, I've got a campaign to finish." He backed away from the podium.

Urlak grabbed Dien's hand and held their clasped hands together up in the air, long enough to be recorded, and then he ushered the overwhelmed gul off the stage. Urlak was on the man's heels.

Burly security guards came out to block any reporters from trying to follow the trade minister. Through all the haze of activity, Jake tried to get his bearings.

"I'll be damned," Yano said, echoing Jake's sentiments exactly. "The old sawtooth pulled it off."

"Yeah," Jake said glumly. He took Garak's best card and turned it into an October surprise, as the Old Earth political tactic goes. How was Remec going to beat the man who had just engineered the surrender of the system's biggest terrorist?

He shook his head, looking sadly at Yano. "Many in here think the war is over, but it's just beginning."

## **“Love Prefers Twilight”**

**Dulcett Family Compound  
Morfan Province, Cardassia Prime  
January 2377**

“I still can’t believe I’ve told you this,” Ghirta Dulcett’s scaly gray skin prevented her embarrassment from being evident on her face, but her voice was loaded with it. “But I needed to talk to someone. I-I don’t know what else to do.”

“Don’t worry,” Lt. Ezri Dax said softly, giving the Cardassian woman’s shoulder a gentle squeeze. “This is a strictly confidential conversation, okay?” The Trill put on her best reassuring smile.

Dulcett looked at the woman, eventually matching her smile. “I trust you, I suppose. Things are just so different on Prime, even now. Knowledge such as this could always be used as a weapon.”

“I don’t see how,” Dax replied, quizzically. Dulcett pursed her lips, sympathetic, and a bit envious of the woman’s naiveté.

“You don’t see how my relationship with the new Bajoran Kai could create a political firestorm on both our respective worlds?”

“No,” Dax shook her head, “I do understand that. I just don’t comprehend how I or the Federation could use this information as a weapon. New strains in relations between Bajor and the Cardassian Republic aren’t in anyone’s interests, except Cardassian insurgents.”

“Or the reactionaries on Bajor,” Dulcett quickly added. The woman had noticed a deliberate chill, even more than usual, on the station and definitely on planetside whenever she visited Bajor over the last several months. The reverberations of Lang’s assassination and other galactic events had helped to stir a deep unease among the Bajorans.

And unfortunately, but not surprisingly, some Bajorans had struck out against offworlders, the vandalism even tainting the station. It had become prevalent enough that even Kai Sarkin recently spoke out against it, but Ghirta thought his

words had done nothing to dispel the dark mood gripping his planet. It slightly reminded her of the ominous, chaotic times after the fall of the Detepa Council, right before her people made their devil's bargain with the Dominion. Of course the Bajorans had not become that desperate...yet, but Dulcett knew social dissolution when she saw it, it had marred a good deal of her adulthood thus far.

Once the news came out that Sarkin Noma was the father of her child; that the head of the Bajoran faith had sired a half-Cardassian progeny, Ghirta didn't know what the reaction would be, but she was certain it would not be pleasant. She touched her stomach, already fearful for the child growing within.

"Have you told the Kai?" Dax asked, bringing Dulcett out of her reverie. The Cardassian woman shook her head.

"No, how could I?"

"You can't hold this off, he needs to know," Ezri remarked.

"And he will...but not now, he has so much work to do on Bajor, I don't want to be a distraction."

"I doubt that is how he sees you, and really shouldn't that be his decision to make?" The Trill asked, and Dulcett couldn't deny her wisdom, but fear clutched onto her.

"I'm not ready," she shook her head. "I-I'm just not sure..."

"There are...other options," Ezri proposed, with a pinched expression on her face.

It took Dulcett only a second to catch on. "Never," she said vehemently. "Family is the cornerstone of Cardassian society. I could never terminate a pregnancy."

"Okay," the counselor was more than willing to back away from the suggestion. "But I had to put other options out there. There's also adoption."

"And what would I do in the gestation period until I have birth? Leave my post as the relief coordinator for Cardassia?"

"It is an option, if you want to keep the pregnancy hidden," Dax said, obviously not liking that choice either.

"Yes," Ghirta conceded, "but I love my job, I love building bridges between the Bajorans and my people. And I...I love Noma," she admitted, her voice cracking.

Vacating her post, leaving the station, was something Ghirta really didn't want to do. While she had carried trepidations and a dark sense of irony when Premier Lang had proposed she go to the Bajor system to secure aid for her benighted home planet, Dulcett had done her what was asked of her, and had even unexpectedly found love in the process.

Dax gave her a moment. "Perhaps your child could also be part of building bridges, of realizing common ground," she offered.

"I-I guess," Dulcett said, never considering the possibility before.

"If a Bajoran and Cardassian can find love, the very head of the Bajoran church in fact, that's a powerful symbol that both species can overcome their blood soaked pasts," the counselor declared.

"You speak with a wisdom beyond your years," Dulcett remarked. Something flashed in the other woman's brown eyes, but she merely smirked.

"Yeah, I get that a lot sometimes," her face took on a more serious mien. "After spending time on DS9, I've come to believe that rarely do things happen without cause, that at times there are greater hands at work."

"Yes," Dulcett nodded. "Noma often expresses similar observations. I have never been a religious person, but my time with him has kindled an interest in the Oralian Way, the old Hebitian faith. I have a better appreciation for the concept of fate now, of the impersonal forces behind our actions, guiding our hands. I'm not saying I believe any of it, though I understand Noma better."

"He has also taken to studying the Way and will be conducting tours of Hebitian ruins after the inauguration, he has asked me to accompany him, but I don't know if I should go. There are already rumors about his frequent visits to the station, and once I begin to show...."

"So," Dax said, with a shrug. "You are two consenting adults. Love is a rare, blessed gift in this universe, and don't let anyone take it from you," she said, and Ghirta felt a deep sadness pour from her gaze. "Because when it's gone, it's gone..."

"You lost someone...special," Dulcett understood.

"Several someones," she muttered, "But most recently, he...uh...lost me...."

"I don't understand."

“It’s complicated,” the Trill patted her hand. “I take it you don’t much about Trill physiology?”

“No,” Ghirta shook her head in confusion. “I do not.”

“I’ll have to send you some data on it, it should provide some illumination,” Ezri said, “Even though I’m still grappling with the unique genetic heritage of my people still.”

“We all do,” Dulcett reached out, now comforting Ezri. “This talk has been most... refreshing. I feel...well, I’m not sure how, but at least it wasn’t as lost as before.”

“That’s something at least,” Dax replied. “And I will always be here if you need to talk.”

“Thank you so much Ezri,” Dulcett smiled. “I think you’re first in line to be godmother.” The Trill chuckled.

“I would be honored,” she said. Both women turned at the light rapping against the wall.

The two women settled into a comfortable silence, punctuated by sips of deka tea. Ezri had brought it fresh from Bajor. It had been added to the list of Ghirta’s growing cravings.

“Thank you for coming all this way to see me,” Ghirta finally broke the silence. “I know it is outside of the realm of your responsibilities.”

“Not for a friend it isn’t,” Dax declared. Dulcett’s eyes watered slightly. She dipped her head in respect and acknowledgement.

“Thank you again.”

“Please, don’t mention it,” the Trill said. “The senior staff had been invited to attend Premier-elect Urlak’s inauguration anyway next week. What’s a few extra days of leave?”

“It’s certainly nothing to celebrate,” Ghirta’s eyes now narrowed. “Though I have been invited as well, and due to my family’s political and business connections, I will do so.”

“Not a fan of the premier-elect I take it,” Dax nodded.

“My family has had several run-ins with the Obsidian Order and though the Order is no more, I doubt Urlak has forgotten its teachings,” Dulcett concluded.

“I see,” Ezri said, “I hope that you are wrong though. My experiences tell me that change is possible, but it is extremely hard.”

“True,” Ghirta said, taking another sip of tea. “But change is only possible if one truly wishes for it. I think Urlak’s new moderation is a fiction.”

“He is a politician after all,” Dax smiled.

“True again,” Dulcett laughed, “So maybe I’m being too cynical. Perhaps even an old gettle like Urlak can change, or at least restrain and reroute our often destructive ambitions.”

“Let’s hope he can,” the Trill counselor took a long draught of tea and sat back on the sofa. She closed her eyes, exhaled, and then sat up. “I haven’t been completely truthful with you Ghirta.”

“Oh?” The woman raised an eye-ridge. “How so?”

“I was planning to come to Cardassia Prime earlier anyway, before you called,” Dax admitted.

“Why?”

“Julian,” Ezri sighed again. “I haven’t seen him since he left the station.”

“That was several months ago,” Ghirta pointed out.

“Yes, several painful, confusing months,” Dax added. “For a long time I didn’t want to talk to him, there’s a part of me that still doesn’t, however....”

“The part of you that does has dug into you like a taspar beak,” Dulcett nodded sagely. She patted Dax on the knee. “I understand full well, the tug of the heart.”

“It just ended so abruptly between us, there was so much left unsaid, on my end at least,” Dax said. “I wanted to see him, to see how he was doing, but also to let him know how I’ve been feeling. If we can’t work it out, I think it’s the only way I can move on.”

“No, it isn’t,” Dulcett said.

“What do you mean?”

“You have already moved on, you do it every day that get up and perform your duties,” Dulcett replied. “You just want to see him again; you want either to resume the relationship or closure. What happens if you don’t get either?”

“I hadn’t thought about that,” Ezri admitted, pursing her lips. “I don’t even know if Julian will even talk to me.”

“I’m certain he will,” Dulcett said with confidence.

“I wish I shared your certainty.”

“From my impression it might have ended abruptly, but not rancorously,” the Cardassian said. “And while you’ve been thinking and replaying your final moments in your head all this time it’s a good bet that Dr. Bashir has as well. He might be eager to talk to you, but afraid to broach the subject.”

“Julian is afraid of very little,” Ezri was incredulous.

“Matters of the heart have turned stout-hearted Klingons into mewling grishnar cats,” Ghirta promised. “You’re not leaving this compound until you contact him and see if he wants to meet with you.”

Ezri smiled, “Okay,” she said hesitantly. “I’ll do it.” Ghirta pointed to an alcove.

“My personal communicator is nestled within. The room is sound-proofed,” she assured her. “Do it now.”

Ezri jumped slightly at the command. She pulled herself off the couch and stepped slowly over to the alcove. After she dipped inside it, Ghirta finished her tea and patted and stroked her stomach. The minutes stretched on and Ghirta considered making another cup of team before she heard a rustle behind her.

Dax’s gait was energetic as she exited the alcove. Her cheeks were reddened but a lopsided smile was on her face. She sat back down beside Ghirta. “How did you know?”

“I’m more than a little familiar with the strange river ways of the heart,” she patted her stomach again.

“If things go right I know who I’m recommending to replace me as counselor,” the smiling Trill said cryptically.

## **“Chained to Life and Death”**

***USS Defiant***  
**Gamma Quadrant**  
**March 2377**

This was the only time Colonel Jatarn Yaro wasn’t awed by the Celestial Temple. His thoughts were elsewhere, on what lay on the other side of the cosmic tunnel.

Instead of being entranced by the powerful currents and strong swirls of color inside the Temple, he prayed silently to the Prophets.

“Kende,” he murmured, half-realizing he had verbalized the object of his prayers. He had not wanted his wife to go to the New Bajor colony. The first settlement had been wiped out by the Dominion, but the planet had been resettled over the summer, this time with help from the Dominion.

Jatarn had inveighed on his wife not to join in the first group of new settlers but a recent and severe outbreak of Correllium fever had drawn several of Bajor’s top medics to the colony, and Kende had accompanied Dr. Girani.

Yaro had feared that the fever was another Dominion assault, like the plague they had left behind on Aamazzaria or the Teplan blight Kira had told him about. However the Dominion had sent Vorta scientists to New Bajor to assist in finding a solution.

The cynical part of Jatarn had wanted to think the move was just a smokescreen but he had to admit that conjecture was irrational. Despite the actions of a few rogue Jem’Hadar the Dominion had honored the peace treaty. That being said, Jatarn would never fully trust them, just like he would never trust the Cardassians, no matter how few of them were left after the Dominion’s genocidal campaign.

Sometimes he felt that one Cardassian was one too many. Darkly, he wondered if someone hadn’t considered his own people’s excursion into the Gamma Quadrant along that same line.

He pounded his armrests, cursing the ship to go faster. And feeling silly for cajoling an inanimate object. Yaro’s frustration tightened his chest. He wanted to do something, hit something, but he settled for stalking around the small bridge.

He knew his behavior was adversely affecting the dedicated bridge crew, but he didn't know what else to do.

"What is our ETA to New Bajor?" he asked his executive officer for the umpteenth time. The colonel came to stand behind the woman's chair, unable to stop from looking over her shoulder to find the answer himself.

Lt. Diega Cruz, of Starfleet, was gratefully unperturbed. "Sir, we shall arrive in the Kotha Tremali system within two hours."

"Not good enough," he huffed before stalking back off. He circled the bridge again, before announcing, "I'm going to my quarters. Lt. Cruz, you have the bridge."

### ***USS Defiant***

Jatarn went to his quarters only long enough to change clothes. He then went to the recreation room. Yaro went through a full Suus Mahna workout, drawing as much sweat from his body as he was able to.

Towelng off, he then fell back on the Orion dancefighting he had learned while in the resistance, taught to him by an Orion slave woman, a concubine of one the Cardassian overseers. She saw something of her own plight in the oppression of the Bajorans and helped them whenever she could.

Jatarn's body wasn't as flexible as it once had been and his bones creaked and cracked as he put them through their paces. His will remained indomitable though.

Once he was finished he fell to a heap on the training mat. He was glad no one else was around to see the display. He was glad to have somewhere to expend his pent-up energy, but it hadn't made him take his mind off Kende, or the last message they had received from New Bajor.

It had been a distress call. Mystery ships had attacked the colony. Adversaries had begun beaming down and pursuing the colonists. And then the message had abruptly cut off.

Kende could already be dead for all he knew. And he hated to think her last moments would be in terror, horror as someone stalked her.

He would do anything; give anything to prevent such a thing from happening. The thoughts pounded on him as heavily as the water did in the shower he took back at his quarters. He had forgone a sonic shower for one with water. He needed the sting of hot water on his skin.

Stepping out of the shower, he heard the buzzing of his intercom. Dropping his towel, he ran over to the wall communicator and activated it. "Jatarn here."

"Colonel, we need you up here," Lt. Cruz said. The Bajoran pushed the lump down in his throat.

"On my way."

## **Main Bridge**

### ***USS Defiant***

As soon as Colonel Jatarn stepped onto the bridge, he cursed the Romulans for taking back their cloaking device. On the viewer was a Jem'Hadar destroyer flanked by two smaller, but no less lethal, Jem'Hadar fighters.

The crimson lighting on the bridge told him that Lt. Cruz had already placed the ship on red alert. "Shield raised and weapons are primed," she told him as she smoothly vacated the captain's chair. There was a curious look on her face, "The Dominion ships have not done the same. And the lead ship is hailing us."

"Curious," Jatarn mumbled. "Put it through," he ordered as he sat down in the center seat. A female Vorta greeted him.

"Colonel Jatarn," she said, with a tight nod.

"How do you know my name?" He warily asked. The woman's wan smile was just as tight.

"I am Keilan, of the Dominion," she said. Similar to other Vorta the woman had nearly translucent skin, pale blue eyes, dark hair, and elfin features.

"I can see that," he grouched, his certainty growing that the Dominion in fact had been the culprits that attacked New Bajor. Why else would they be in this sector of space? And had they come to vaporize the *Defiant* to cover their crimes? "I assume you wish to talk about New Bajor?"

"Yes," the woman said, "Survivors from the attack informed us that they had gotten off a message through the worm hole. We were coming to make sure you made it here safely."

"Come again," Jatarn nearly sputtered. He couldn't believe he heard what the woman said correctly. Keilan repeated her statement.

"You've been to the New Bajor colony?"

"Yes, to render aid," Keilan cocked her head to the side, a quizzical expression on her alabaster face. "We also received a distress call, and being that this is our quadrant and near Dominion space, we were able to respond quicker."

"How many survived?" Jatarn nearly stumbled over the question, he was so eager to clasp any ray of hope.

"I don't have the exact count, but roughly two thousand denizens survived, including the Vorta scientific contingent," Keilan answered.

"My God," Cruz muttered, "There were nearly four thousand colonists."

Jatarn shook his head and said a prayer for the lost, while hoping that Kende was not among them. He thought to ask the Vorta but realized how stupid and selfish that would be. It's unlikely that the Vorta knew the identities of any or many survivors. Then again, she did know him...

"There may be more among the living, and had yet to be recovered," Keilan said, "However some were absconded."

"Absconded?" Jatarn asked, his hopes failing again. "By whom?" He barked.

“The Draï,” Keilan answered assuredly.

“The Draï?” Jatarn parroted. “I’ve never heard of them.”

“As far as we know they’ve ever only entered your quadrant once, on Stardate 46477.5. They were in pursuit of a creature called Tosk when they attacked Deep Space Nine,” Keilan replied.

Jatarn tore his gaze from the screen to glance at Cruz. From her station, Cruz had swiveled around to return his gaze. “Tosk, the sentient they were pursuing, referred to them as the Hunters,” she said.

“Hunters,” Jatarn rubbed his chin. Now the message from the colony about being hunted was starting to make sense. His blood chilled, Jatarn feared that the hunters had found new quarry. Done with wasting time, the colonel barked, “Helm, maximum warp to New Bajor!”

## **New Rakantha, New Bajor Colony Gamma Quadrant**

He found her in a refugee camp outside of New Rakantha. When *Defiant* had arrived, the colonial capital was still in flames. The reunion had been brusque, but no less heartfelt. His wife’s smooth brown skin was blackened by soot and her clothing was singed but she was thankfully none the worse for wear. Kende had had to pull herself from Jatarn’s embrace to continue tending to the injured, which were streaming in in droves.

Jatarn ordered most of the *Defiant* crew down to the surface to help Dr. Girani and his wife, while ordering the starship to fly around the planet and assist the Dominion where they were needed.

He got to work himself as part of a search and rescue team, disoriented by the sight of Jem’Hadar and Vorta helping rescue trapped colonists. Some of the survivors were rightly frightened by the fearsome appearance of the Jem’Hadar soldiers, usually harbingers of doom and not salvation.

Time stretched into infinity and still they worked. Finally overcome by his humanoid limitations, Jatarn returned to the refugee camp. He found his wife, who was also fatigued. After stealing away to Dr. Girani’s makeshift office, they fell into each other’s arms.

“Kende, I thought I lost you,” he murmured into her ear before he kissed her sooty, sweaty forehead.

“You’re not getting rid of me that easily,” she smiled, her humor still present. He laughed, needing it and her more than ever.

“What happened?”

“These ships came from the sky and men materialized, their faces hidden by helmets. They had these crossbow things and they just begun shooting anyone they encountered,” she shuddered. “It was ghastly.”

“Did they say why? Did they even talk?” Jatarn gently asked.

“Evil doesn’t need a reason, you know that,” Kende said knowingly, and both of them shared a knowing look and dark memories of the Occupation.

“It makes no sense,” he said, angry with himself, for no reason other than needing to direct the frustration somewhere.

“What didn’t make sense was that some of the people hit dematerialized like they were caught in a transporter beam. More were slaughtered, but others were whisked away,” Kende said, shaking her head. “I don’t understand, but I fear more for those poor souls than the dead.”

Jatarn’s face hardened, “I think I know what the fate of those captured might be.”

“What?” Kende looked up at him, with fearful eyes the size of small moons.

“The Dominion believe that the attackers came from a species called the Draï,” Jatarn informed his wife. “They incurred into the Alpha Quadrant once before, in pursuit of a captive. It appears that these Draï fancy themselves hunters.”

“Oh Prophets,” Kende whispered. She looked toward the sky and in the direction of the Celestial Temple. She mouthed a silent prayer. Jatarn joined her and then they continued holding each other for a long time.

### ***USS Defiant***

#### **Two days later...**

Only a will as forceful as Chief Engineer Roger Koenig’s could pull Jatarn from the planet. Koenig had offered to take *Defiant* back to Deep Space Nine to inform Starfleet and get more assistance himself, but Jatarn knew that was his duty.

He wished that the Draï hadn’t destroyed the subspace com net preventing more information from getting back to the Alpha Quadrant. Bajor and the Federation needed to know what happened here and could soon happen on their side of space.

Keilan had told him that the Draï were powerful, so powerful that the Dominion had never sought to annex them, but merely coexisted with them.

Until this point the Draï had never shown an expansionistic ambition so the two powers had warily circled the other. Keilan couldn’t fathom what had prompted the attack on New Bajor.

To figure out the motive was beyond his station, but Jatarn just hoped that the *Defiant* was chosen for the taskforce to return to New Bajor and also to demand answers from the Draï. He would forcefully argue to return to the devastated colony. He wasn’t going to leave Kende alone any more than he had to.

Keilan had promised to watch over the colony until *Defiant* or other Starfleet vessels returned, and while the woman was confident that the presence of the Dominion warships would deter any more Draï attacks, Jatarn wouldn’t feel truly comfortable until Kende was back on Bajor.

Pulling himself away from his own thoughts, Jatarn asked, "What's our ETA to the Celestial...worm hole?"

"One hour," Commander Koenig barked from an aft console. The man didn't hide his annoyance. The crusty engineer was serving as his executive officer. Lt. Cruz and most of the ship's personnel had stayed behind on New Bajor. *Defiant* was piloted by a skeleton crew, just enough to get them through into the Alpha Quadrant.

Jatarn wished that Koenig had stayed behind on New Bajor. Admiral Covey, the station's previous commanding officer, had brought the cantankerous human along with her to the station. He had hoped he would've left with her.

But he had chosen to stay aboard, the creaky Cardassian space station providing a wealth of things to fix and inspiring him with admittedly innovative solutions.

"Sir, I'm receiving an anomalous power reading right off our starboard nacelle," Ensign Zroht said, pursing her deep blue lips.

"What is it?" Jatarn asked, looking in the Bolian's direction. The woman had bent over her console, nearly nose deep into the readings.

Seconds went by before her head snapped up, "Sir! Evasive maneuvers!" She cried.

"Do it," the colonel snapped at the helm.

Before the harried Betelgeusian could respond the ship rocked violently left. Jatarn was flung from his seat. Smacking against the floor, his head spun as the ship did. Grasping on to consciousness, Jatarn called out, "What?"

He spit out blood and his jaw felt wrenched out of place. He struggled to get to his feet, but the ship was still gyrating.

"Koenig?! Zroht?!" He tried to yell out, but the words came as a rasp and then were squelched by pain.

Only able to sit up, his head still reeling, Jatarn blinked back the darkness. He saw Zroht at her post. Though his hearing was muffled, he made out the woman screaming, "Cloaked gravitic mines!" Through the smoke, he gratefully saw Commander Koenig on his feet, at his post, but he was looking in Jatarn's direction.

The engineer barked again and seconds later hands clamped around his arms and lifted him gently back to the command chair.

"How is he?" Koenig snapped and Jatarn saw and felt the young human giving him the once over.

"I think he might be suffering from a concussion," was the answer.

"Get him to sickbay," the engineer ordered.

"Wait a moment," Jatarn tried to say and spat up more blood. He latched onto his seat and refused to move. "I can still help."

"He's not leaving his seat sir," the man trying to pry him from the seat said in frustration.

"Four ships on long-range sensors," Zroht called out.

“Dominion?” Koenig asked with surprising hopefulness. The colonel was angry that Koenig had beaten him to the question, but his brain felt like sludge.

“No sir,” the Bolian said, color draining from her face. She added, “Commander, we are being hailed.”

“By whom?” Both the colonel and the chief engineer said at the same time.

“On screen,” Koenig ordered.

A gaunt humanoid with pale yellow skin and a corrugated forehead glared at them with an anticipatory gaze.

Koenig being no fool said, “I take it those mines were yours.”

“The Draï,” Jatarn spat.

The alien smiled, “Let the hunt begin.”

**END**