

# Dark Territory The Valley of Peace

By DarkKush

**“The tragedy of life is that every man has his reasons” - Jean Reinor  
(*The Rules of the Game*)**

## PROLOGUE

**Lakarian City (The Former Cardassian Union)  
March 2376**

The gloomy sky above mirrored Nebel Keshet's sullen mood. She only wished that she could wrap its darkness around her fluttering heart while banishing her doubts to the fog enveloping the restive crowd before her. She bit down hard on her thin lower lip, tearing its gray flesh, but quickly wiping away the brackish blood with the tip of her tongue. She must maintain the illusion of calm, the deception of normalcy.

If she wavered now, the wary cohort of guards, both Romulan and Cardassian, protecting her target, would surely haul her away to a detention center if not execute her on the spot immediately.

Nebel pulled her fears deep inside her, and contorted her slightly scaly features into the mask of cool, reptilian confidence that she had used so effectively in her position as *public conservator* of Lakarian City, a title that had lost all meaning for her when the Dominion had leveled the metropolis in the closing hours of the lost war in a horrific pogrom to erase the Cardassian race from existence.

The fates had saved her, she realized for this moment alone, when her commitment to justice had driven her to the city's detainment center wring one more confession from a guilty soul. Cocooned deep within the bowels of the detainment center, the prison had become her salvation when the Jem'Hadar flattened the city and its two million inhabitants through a ruthless, though admittedly efficient orbital bombing campaign.

Only she, several guards and prisoners had survived, picking their way through the rumble for days until they reached the blighted surface. Everyone else, her parents, siblings, and her son Thrain had been vaporized. She smiled with a twisted irony that her husband Aldur, fighting along the Klingon

border, had been more safe than she had been nestled in the “secure” bosom of the homeworld.

Her smile morphed into a frown at the thought of her husband. She had not discussed this course of action with him, but she knew he would understand. *How could he not?* Even now he continued the fight for Cardassia somewhere beyond the stars, staging thrilling hit and run attacks, disrupting the shipping lanes of the scavengers picking over the remains of her fallen people.

Sub-Admiral Danclus, one of the triad of civil administrators overseeing the dissolution of the Cardassian Union, was one such *vole*. The tall, austere Romulan, as perpetually gray as the stark, scalded sky hanging overhead, slowly made his way down the welcome line, flanked by burly guards, tight, nervous grips on the triggers of their disruptors belying their fearsome countenances. They were scared, and they should be, Nebel smiled again. She straightened her posture, and ran a calming hand through the shock of her charcoal-colored hair, as if nervous and preparing herself for the honor of meeting this overseer. The words he had spoken only minutes before slid through her mind like a serpent. Standing before a podium, the dour man had actually smiled when he had said, *“The upcoming elections for leadership of the new republican Diet are one more sign that Cardassia and its noble people are one step closer to reclaiming their place among the intergalactic community.”* But his scorpion nature revealed itself when he added, *“But it is necessary that the Cardassian people chose wisely. This is not the time for recrimination and anger; this is a time for hard choices and even harder work.”* The closing statement was a not so subtle reference to the two candidates seeking to head the newly formed legislature of the provisional republic: civilian Professor Natima Lang and former Central Command Legate Pinute Tarkon.

Lang, once a darling of the subterranean Cardassian dissident movement, was the obvious preference of the Federation, Klingon, and Romulan triumvirate thwarting Cardassian destiny. Lang’s calls for admission of Cardassian complicity in their own near destruction, along with reconciliation with the powers that had waged war against them, and now dictated their fate, churned her insides. Her selection to premiership of the Diet would only rubberstamp the continuing dominance of the Federation alliance, as the triumvirate sought to symbolically hand off the reigns of power while maintaining tight control from the shadows.

Tarkon had originally stood in the imperialists’ way, his bold call for restoring Cardassian dignity and resurrecting the old Union sent ripples through the polity, seizing the Cardassian imagination and spirit almost as firmly as Legate Damar’s rebellion against the Dominion had. Both she and her husband had heard his call, and both had joined his True Way party,

determined that Cardassian soil be ruled by Cardassians and not aliens or their puppets.

Of course the Federation alliance hadn't seen it that way, they had branded the True Way party a terrorist front, and moved to stifle its growing influence. The stage had been set to finally finish the mission of Gul Dukat and Legate Damar, to carve a place of respect for a revived Cardassian Union among the constellation of the great powers. But at his moment of destiny, Tarkon wavered, renouncing the more "fanatical" branches of his own organization, joining the True Way in a coalition with more tepid rightist factions, and pledging to promote peace and support the Diet even if he weren't selected as its head.

Nebel wouldn't have believed it if she hadn't heard the blasphemous words slither from Tarkon's own lips. In a cloistered meeting with Lakarian City party functionaries, he had sent a hologram via courier encouraging the party chiefs to urge calm when Sub-Admiral Danclus arrived several days later to promote the elections. She wasn't the only one among her compatriots who had wished that the coward had delivered the message of retreat himself, so that they could stain their hands with his blood.

It was in that moment of vacillation that her destiny had manifested, seizing her with such fervor that she had trembled with near erotic delight. Leaning on some of the convicts she had once sent to prison, Nebel had quickly acquired the materials she needed to transform her body into a biological weapon.

Admiral Danclus was almost upon her. With imperceptible grace, she used the tip of her tongue to press against her false tooth, hollow save for a detonator. The tiny click as the tooth slid out of alignment ignited a series of chemical reactions that would soon reach the bio-mimetic gel capsules cradled in her womb and give birth to a new era of Cardassian liberty. It would be a quick end, mostly painless, but very necessary.

"Are you okay milady," courtly Pradesh Ottur, chief *archon* of the Lakarian court, asked, placing a gentle, fatherly hand on her quivering shoulder. Nebel glanced briefly at him, sad that the kind old man would die along with her and most of the crowd today, but she smiled anyway. She imagined Admiral Danclus's frigid shadow falling across her turned cheek, as the pounding of booted feet drew near.

"Never better," she whispered as the pain of childbirth knifed through her belly and her vision filled with the light of heaven.

---

# I DEMONS

## CHAPTER ONE

**The Bajoran System**  
**April 2376**

***USS Aegis***  
**(Captain's Suite)**

Jasmine Glover's nightmare saved her husband from his. Pulled from the bridge of his burning ship, Captain Terrence Glover quickly snapped awake, wrapping powerful arms around his trembling, whimpering wife. "It's okay honey," he whispered into her ear. "It's okay. I'm here."

Still enthralled in remembrance of the destruction that had shattered her body and shredded her spirit, Jasmine pulled away from him. Despite the numerous skin grafts and the new prosthetic limbs that had replaced her missing arm and leg, his wife still was self-conscious about her body.

Though she had agreed to serve under his new command as Operations Officer, and had finally acceded to sharing quarters with him, she still maintained the separate cabin reserved for the Ops Officer. After several counseling sessions, Jasmine had been coaxed into spending the night with him, and Terrence had needed the warmth of her presence nearer to him as the mission the *Aegis* now streaked toward conjured up enough demons for them both.

"Where?" Her voice groggy, her gaze glassy, it took Jasmine a few seconds to gain her bearings. Blinking her almond shaped eyes several times, the haze slowly dissipated in them, and a small, relieved smile crept over her lips as the reality sank in. She allowed herself to fold into her husband's embrace, until the damnable, and now customary, reserve returned.

Feeling her body stiffen, as the heat between them increased, Glover didn't want to let her go, but sensed her pulling away from him again. He relaxed his iron grip, and she slid out of his grasp, creating a gap between them that was mere inches, but felt like an unconquerable chasm.

"I must've been dreaming," she said, trying to sound sheepish and silly, but her voice was tinged with sadness instead of embarrassment.

"Was it about the *Mandela*?" Terrence gently probed, softening his deep baritone as much as he could. "The Tyra system?" Though the Dominion War had ended a little over four months ago in "victory" for the Federation, it had been a long, quadrant-spanning struggle whose outcome was in doubt up until the minute that the Dominion surrendered at the Battle of Cardassia

Prime. Before that unexpected, miraculous event, the Federation had been pushed to the brink of defeat, outmatched by the shape shifting Founders, their scheming Vorta lieges, and genetically bred Jem'Hadar super soldiers.

The Dominion had been given entrée into the Alpha Quadrant by forming an alliance first with the desperate Cardassian Union and then the mysterious Breen once the Cardassians had begun to see through the Dominion's deceptive promises of galactic mastery.

The Cardassian revolt had finally helped turn the tide in the favor of the unprecedented alliance of the Federation, Klingons, and Romulans, but the self proclaimed rulers of the Alpha Quadrant had borne a terrible price for their reversal. In the closing hours of the war, the Founder in control of all Alpha Quadrant Dominion forces had ordered that the Cardassians be wiped from existence. Over 800 million were slaughtered before the Founder Leader surrendered her forces.

Glover blinked back the memories of the charred, cooked flesh, of too many sightless eyes and faces frozen in eternal horror. He had fought at the climatic battle over Cardassia, and he had walked on the scorched earth left behind by the spiteful Changeling.

His only consolation walking through all that carnage was that his wife had not been with him to see it. She had still been recuperating from her own brush with hell. Almost a year earlier, the Federation had suffered perhaps its greatest defeat ever in the Tyra System, when the 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet was virtually wiped out by Dominion forces. Out of a total of 112 starships, only 14 made it back to Federation space. Her ship, the *Mandela*, had blessedly been one of the few that survived.

The defeat had really hammered home to him and many other Starfleet officers that the Federation was on the verge of actually losing the war, and it had filled him and his compatriots with a fiery resolve that allowed them to retake the initiative, driving the Dominion and Cardassians from strategic Federation starbase Deep Space Nine that resided at the cusp of the wormhole leading to the Gamma Quadrant, the home of the Dominion.

His Academy roommate and dear friend Captain Benjamin Sisko, then the deposed commander of Deep Space Nine, had led the long shot mission to recapture the station, before the Cardassians and Dominion could deactivate a minefield that would've allowed thousands of Jem'Hadar warships to pour into the Alpha Quadrant and ensure certain victory for the Dominion. Commanding Destroyer Unit 5 during that watershed battle, Glover had been able to help his old friend punch through Dominion lines to retake the station and save the quadrant.

He had always been more braggadocios and flippant than either Ben, now ascended to a higher plane of existence to live with the wormhole aliens the Bajorans worshipped as gods, or his other Academy friend, the late Calvin

Hudson, a man whose conviction ran so deep that he had abandoned Starfleet to fight and die with the rebel Maquis along the Federation-Cardassian border. It was a move he and Ben both had condemned as foolhardy at the time, but Terrence had grown to wonder if it wasn't now prescient in light of all that had come to pass. The very thought of losing his wife, a pain that both Ben and Cal had endured before meeting their own fates, had encased Glover in a grim, rage-hardened prism that he had only found release from by killing as many Jem'Hadar and Cardassians as he could.

He joined Benjamin in the pantheon of recipients awarded Christopher Pike Medals of Valor for his actions at the Battle of Cardassia Prime, but it had been a hollow honor. He had lost several crewmen and some very dear friends along the way.

Even the *Cuffe*, his first command, had been destroyed at Cardassia Prime. Hundreds more intrepid, good people had lost their lives over Cardassia when he had plowed his ship into a battery of orbital weapons platforms to protect the escape pods of two disabled starships.

Though he had both written and spoken to each of the bereaved families with consoling words that had become rote to him, Glover had only truly *felt* the loss of those lives in the intervening months since the conflict had ended.

And the more he thought about them, the more he felt responsible for their deaths. His desire, his *need* to inflict punishment, to win at almost any cost had done as much harm as it had been credited for doing good. He knew that many of his crew might protest his assessment of his actions, that many thought his leadership had saved them on countless occasions. Glover couldn't argue with that, but he couldn't evade, nor did he want to, the ghosts at the peripheries of his consciousness, haunting him with the lost possibilities, the lives never allowed the fullness of completion.

"Are *you* alright?" Jasmine's warm breath was soft on his face. He shook his head, shaking away the spectral webs of his own grief. She gave a knowing smile. They might not share each other's bed as frequently, but they constantly carried an almost shared pain, he realized. Terrence cupped her face in his hands, caressing her rich, walnut brown cheeks, tugging gently on her sharp chin.

"I love you." He said, ignoring her question. In response, Jasmine's hazel eyes grew moist.

"I know." She whispered, carefully kissing one of his hands. Unable to control his need to be nearer to her, he sidled closer to her, and kissed her lips. She tore away from the kiss.

"Not yet. I'm not ready."

"It's been over a year Jazz." Glover said, knowing that he shouldn't, that he should be gentle, but not wanting to. Despite his doubts, he was still a man who had a tendency to force the issue. "I just want to be there for you."

"I know," she replied. "But I can't. Not now."

"Why?" He pleaded. "I'm your husband, and I love you. I still want us to do the things, have the family that we dreamed about having before this damned war."

"I know you do, but you know how I feel about that." Jasmine replied, her bright eyes breaking contact for a few seconds, as she unconsciously ran organic fingers over her artificial arm. The cerulean pajamas she wore covered up her scars and the prosthetics that only a practiced eye could actually recognize as non-organic. But of course, his wife knew what they were, and she knew that *he* knew.

"Damnit Jazz," The angry words, born of frustration, slipped through his lips before he could stop them. "When are you going to see that you are not damaged goods? I don't care about some scars and a couple of missing limbs. When I thought the *Mandela* was one of the ship's that hadn't returned from the Tyra system, I almost lost it."

"Yes, yes," annoyance crept into her voice. "I've heard the story before. Took on a Jem'Hadar *armada* single handedly while saving countless escape pods, lived to tell the tale; got the Pike Medal. I'm not in the mood for a history lesson." The spell between them broken, Jasmine turned away from him, and sat up in the bed, swinging her legs over the side. "I'm going back to my own quarters. It's almost time for alpha shift."

Propping himself up on one elbow, Glover reached out to her with his other hand, fingers barely touching the sheer fabric of her pajamas as she slid off of the bed. "Don't go. Please." He begged. "We can work this out."

Her back to him, Jasmine turned around to look down at him, and he saw the struggle raging within her. She looked at him for several more seconds until the chronometer beeped; alerting them both that alpha shift had begun. Without saying anything else, she turned on her heel and left the room. Glover pounded his pillow, and cursed at himself.

Sucking up his grief and disappointment, he rolled out of bed and made his way to the sonic shower. *This day can't get any worse*, he joked to himself as the soothing, sonic rays enveloped him, cleansing his body of any scrape of dirt, grime, or musk. *At least I hope not.*

\*\*\*\*\*

.....

***USS Aegis***  
**(En route to Main Bridge)**

Striding down the long, gray and copper-colored main starboard corridor to the bridge, Capt. Glover walked with a purposefulness he didn't feel, nodding and smiling on autopilot at various passing crewmen, his mind on Jasmine, his thoughts mired to what had and had not just happened between them. Despite his sterling record and his heroic status, marriage was proving his most difficult task, the most enduring mystery to unravel. What frightened him most was that he felt his wife slipping away from him, and he didn't know what to do.

He had tried his best to help Ben and Cal both cope with the untimely deaths of their wives. And it had taken his father years to recover, if he ever really had, when his mother Deitra was lost along with all hands on the *Tombaugh*. Tragedy had even gored him once before when the first love of his life, Captain Tryla Scott of the *Renegade*, had been possessed as part of an alien conspiracy to take over the Federation.

He felt even more helpless now trying to break through to Jasmine than he did during the dark aftermath of the failed invasion, as Tryla had similarly pushed him away as she struggled to cleanse herself from the taint of violation and rebuild her reputation. Jettisoning an illicit affair with her Second Officer was just an unfortunate by-product of the healing process.

He was a starship captain, a man who was supposed to have all the answers to the big questions of space and time, who had been rewarded for his judgment, whether he felt it fully deserved, in both peace and war, but he couldn't even figure out the right words to say to the woman he loved to get her to open up to him, to reveal her heart to him, to let him back in her life. He had hoped that closeness and time would dissolve the armor his wife had enclosed herself in, that was why he had suggested that Jasmine serve with him on the *Aegis*, and he had even enlisted his father's help, something he wasn't wont to do, to help make the case for him.

Admiral Samson Esau Glover, former commanding officer at Deep Space Five, had first become entranced with the captivating young engineer upon her posting to his starbase, and had strongly recommended that Terrence meet her. Glover, always eager to prove he didn't need or want his father's influence or help, had refused. Though he had expressed some initial reservations, Glover was glad that he succumbed to his father's doggedness. He couldn't help but speculate if his father's hand was behind the *Aegis's* current assignment; the admiral always eager to promote his war hero son.



Ordered by Vice Admiral Salk not to discuss the mission, he would have to wait until its conclusion to find out.

Stepping onto the bridge, what little cheer he had tried to muster within himself had dissipated behind the somber mask melded over once convivial features. He tugged at the front of his stately black uniform as he took in the *Aegis's* command center.

"Captain on the Bridge!" Ensign Culhane shouted, a little too eagerly for the morning shift. The rest of the crew stiffened as they stood at attention.

Glover grunted. "At ease." The officers and enlisted crewmen quickly returned to their posts. Culhane flittered by the Science II terminal, several padds stuffed in a crooked elbow. The captain was pleased that the attentive officer had quickly learned never to approach the CO with the gamma shift status reports until he had sat down in his chair. As was his ritual, Glover liked to take in his surroundings before assuming the conn. It was a practice he had started as Second Officer on the *Renegade* and had continued through his XO/CO stints aboard the *Cuffe* and his turn at the helm of the *Aegis*.

*One for two's not good a track record*, he winced as he sadly remembered the *Cuffe*. The larger *Cuffe*, of the *Nebula*-class, with its distinctively circular, compact frame, would always hold a special place in his heart. Glover didn't know if he would ever be able to feel the same about the *Aegis* as he looked around the streamlined bridge of the *Prometheus*-class starship. A vessel belonging to Starfleet's most advanced line of ships; his elevation to the small club of *Prometheus*-class CO's should've filled him with pride. He was that much closer to the admiral pips that he, Ben, and Cal had all dreamed about during their Academy days and beyond. And he had to admit that *Aegis* had handled herself well during interdiction efforts in her first assignment in the Lamenda system.

Bullet shaped, an array of consoles ringed the command deck; some manned and others left idle until needed. He nodded at the massive; olive skinned Tai Donar, almost inhumanly rigid at the Tactical station, his muscles straining against the confines of his suit. Despite the frenzied ministrations of Mr. Boaz, ship's tailor, the Angosian security chief had yet to meet a uniform that comfortably fit his sculpted form. Lt. Donar curtly nodded back.

At the Science I terminal, Lt. Sial Keta of the Cardassian Security Forces, on temporary assignment to the *Aegis* at the behest of Starfleet Command, twittered, smiling nervously at him, the reptilian cast of her gray, Cardassian features making the gesture look like a grimace. And maybe it was. Glover certainly hadn't gone out of his way to make the liaison feel welcome. Unable to fully hide his distaste for her or the dark brown Cardassian cuirass she wore, he rumbled with little enthusiasm.

.....,

"Lieutenant," he acknowledged her, pointedly refusing to use the Cardassian military equivalent of "*Glinn-sed*", before quickly turning to appraise his bridge crew. They were a motley band, culled from his two previous commands and from various remnants of shattered fleets. All, to his knowledge, had seen some combat in the war. All were coping with the war's aftershocks in some fashion or other.

*Even Keta* he surmised, mentally reviewing the lieutenant's dossier that had accompanied the mission profile he had received after Admiral Salk's briefing at Starbase 375. An expatriate who had spent the later years of the war serving as an expert on Cardassian politics and culture for Starfleet Command, Keta had returned recently to her homeworld as part of the Federation's efforts to build linkages between the conquerors and the conquered.

Still ignoring his seat, Glover tried to shake the stiffness out of his body by sauntering over to the front of the bridge, where both the Ops and Flight Control stations faced the main viewscreen. Looking down over the helm officer's shoulder, the smell of hair spray wafting up from her reddish black hair, the captain asked. "ETA to Deep Space Nine lieutenant?"

Craning her neck to look up at him, Lt. Juanita Rojas smiled before answering. "Under four hours sir." Rojas was one of the few officers that had served with him under both commands. Both she and her late older brother had helped him tame the *Cuffe* and made it worthy of its namesake. And she had stuck with him through the dark days after Chin'toka when Pedro had been laid to rest, her loyalty and commitment to duty unwavering. He gave her a sadly sweet half-smile in response, memories of Pedro flitting almost telepathically between them.

"Thank you Juanita," he whispered, but his gaze had already turned to his wife at the adjacent console. How she got to the bridge before him he would never know because he was afraid to ask. Her eyes glued to the readouts running down her interface, Jasmine didn't acknowledge him. Memories of their recent fight and the bright flares of pain it had caused him crawled at the corners of his consciousness, seeking entry, but Terrence wouldn't allow it. It was all part of the misgivings he had accepted as part of having his wife under his command. There was a time for personal matters, but not on the bridge.

Nervously quaffing a gulp of air, he turned away from her, glancing once over at the bridge before claiming his chair. Culhane was on him before his posterior had fully contacted with the black leather seat. Unctuous, eager to please, he almost dumped the padds in the captain's lap as he stumbled over the small rise that elevated the captain's chair above the two seats

flanking his. Lt. Commander Pell Ojana, Diplomatic/First Contact Officer, to Glover's left, chuckled before ostentatiously swinging her head down to check the small display connected to her chair, the Bajoran's nose ridges crinkling with mischievous merriment. Glover glanced to his right. His Executive Officer, Ivan Cherenkov, ignored the gaffe, his clear blue eyes focused on the screen, or so he would have everyone think, the captain surmised.

"Thank you ensign," Glover tried not to sound grouchy, though he felt he was a little too swift in shooing the young man away. "I'll see to these later." Disappointment shadowing his features, Culhane slinked back to the Science II station.

.....  
Reaching over to hand the padds to Lt. Commander Cherenkov, Glover played around with two of the status displays inset on the armrests of his chair, still not used to the plush throne-like command seat. It was still all too new for him, but at least he found the monochrome, gray, silver, and copper cast of the bridge more in keeping with his mood and the altered, morose state of affairs currently gripping the Federation. No more colorful uniforms or wooden guardrails on bridges. No more children, schools, or innocent, playful banter throughout the corridors. The Dominion War had taken all that way, ripped the illusion of innocence from the Federation.

*And shredding my illusions as well,* Glover sighed as he looked at the pensive, knotted back of his wife. For that, the captain could never forgive them. Turning his eyes to the starscape streaking past on the panoramic main viewer, his insides mirrored the vast, empty coldness of the vacuum.  
.....

### **Central Command Vessel *Rakal* (Bajoran System)**

"You have reservations?" Gul Aldur Keshet, master of the Central Command Vessel *Rakal* probed his first officer, his hooded, obsidian eyes looking for any hint of hesitation or weakness.

Her cabled, neck muscles tensing as she made her ramrod posture even straighter and more unyielding, Glinn Levara Sulle replied, her raspy voice void of treacherous emotion, "Of course not milord." The rapid eye blinking that she had never learned to control broke the illusion of unswerving veracity. It was a nervous tic that he sought to train out of her when she had first become his executive officer almost two years ago. Unsuccessful, he now accepted it as an endearing trait. He could now say with certainty that there was at least one Cardassian he could always tell was being less than forthcoming with him.

"Is it the *Impai*?" He questioned, turning the small monitor on his empty desk toward her to view. "At ease," he added, granting Levara the permission to bend slightly over the desk to peer at the taupe cargo vessel innocuously trudging on the viewscreen. After she remained silent for several more minutes, Keshet, strands of impatience in his voice, prodded. "Speak freely."

"There are Cardassians on that freighter Gul Keshet." She replied, glancing at him when she spoke, her large, azure eyes filled with concern.

"Cardassians that work for Lissepians," Keshet reminded her. "Cardassians that work for Lissepians who transport *Tammeron grain* and *Regrean wheat husks* from Golana to feed the starving, wretched populations of our homeworld. What is wrong with that picture?"

Without inflection, Sulle gave him the expected answer: "We were once masters of both the Lissepians and the Bajorans, and now we toil for one and accept charity from the other."

"Inexcusable," Keshet spat. "Unpardonable."

"But there has been so much death," Levara interjected. "There aren't too many of our people left."

"It is unfortunate," the gul offered, "that more of our blood must be shed, but we can't turn away from our cause. Cardassia freed itself from the Dominion, only to be set upon by parasites from the Federation, the Romulans, and the *Klingons*." He couldn't help but relish special venom when he spoke of the 'foreheads'. Keshet had spent the majority of the lost war fighting in the Klingon theatre of battle, achieving his greatest victory when he helped liberate the Cardassian colony world of Pentath III from Klingon clutches.

"By sacrificing their noble blood to labor in the bowels of a Lissepian freighter, pitied by the Bajorans, these so-called *Cardassians* have proven themselves true enemies of the state. And what is the punishment for treason?"

"Death," Sulle whispered. Keshet nodded and rewarded her with a curt smile.

"Excellent. Now, carry out my orders." Before the glinn could return to the *Rakal's* bridge to execute Keshet's command, the lighting in the room dimmed and the deck plates beneath the gul's feet trembled.

"What was that?" He snarled, even though he knew the answer.

"Another power fluctuation from the cloaking device," Sulle replied. Before Keshet could respond, a harried voice barked through the intercom hidden in the upper bulkhead of the gul's stateroom.

"The cloak is down," Lajal, the war craft's engineering officer barked. "We are vulnerable to detection by the Lissepian vessel's sensors." Seconds later, the intercom squawked again.

“We’ve been sighted,” Intelligence Observer Darcis rumbled. “*Impai* is taking evasive *maneuvers*.” Even through the metal grid, Sulle could hear the customary smugness in Darcis’s voice.

Cursing, Keshet bounded out of his seat, beating Sulle to the door of his office. As the doors slid open to the bridge of the *Rakal*, the gul bellowed. “Battle alert!”

---

## CHAPTER TWO

### Deep Space Nine (Bajoran System)

*He looks so deflated.* The dour thought ran through Colonel Kira Nerys's mind as the large, airlock hatch rolled opened and the Starfleet captain stepped into the corridor. Closing her eyes, she shook her head to clear her mind. Commander Ousanas Dar, the station's newest Executive Officer, came to attention beside her. The Romulan exile's surprising spike of anxiousness was almost palpable as Colonel Kira struggled to find her voice. Nitala'Rax, the Dominion charge d'affairs for the entire Alpha Quadrant, also tensed, his pebbled, reptilian face twisting into a wary scowl.

"Welcome back to Deep Space Nine Captain Glover," she finally managed to say, bowing slightly. The dark skinned human smiled broadly at her, bowing curtly in return, his eyes flicking next to Commander Dar, who nodded in greeting before finally settling on the solemn Nitala'Rax. The similarly hued female officer on the captain's right, openly gaped at the reptilian. Glover said nothing for several seconds, his dark eyes spewing suspicion at the Jem'Hadar.

Since Nitala'Rax had arrived on the station a month ago as part of the Jem'Hadar security contingent for the intended Dominion envoy, a Vorta named Boran, he had elicited similar reactions, some even more pronounced, from a shattered and still fearful, war weary quadrant. Even Nitala' Rax's heroic actions in thwarting the Alpha Quadrant Jem'Hadar in his cohort from murdering the imprisoned female Changeling incarcerated at Kran-Tobal after surrendering on Cardassia Prime, first murdering Boran and then attacking the prison, still hadn't earned him much trust. In fact, Kira's support of Odo's suggestion that Nitala'Rax fill the diplomatic post had led to calls for her resignation from the Bajoran government, and even some Starfleet circles.

The colonel felt a little sorry for the Gamma Quadrant warrior, a product of the Founder's genetic manipulations who personally hadn't seen action in the Alpha Quadrant. Her faith had taught her not only resilience but compassion and sympathy. But on the other hand, the hardened terrorist seething just beneath her more polished, professional veneer thought that a few hard stares and aspersions was the least the Jem'Hadar could endure for the pain his people inflicted on billions.

"Nitala'Rax I presume," Glover almost spat. The Jem'Hadar grunted, mimicking Kira's bow. Glover didn't return the gesture. He merely continued to glare at the Dominion soldier, a glassy sadness filming over the suspicion. Unsure of how to segue out of the awkward pall of silence that had fallen over

the group, Kira said nothing, uncharacteristically allowing the moment to play itself out without intervention. If the Federation was going to build the bridges of peace with the Dominion, it would have to start at junctures like these, small interactions, where fear and hatred had to be faced and overcome on a personal, and gut level. Instead of interceding, the colonel quickly studied the man whom the captain had become to see if such understanding would even be possible in him. Her inspection didn't leave her with much room for hope.

Deep lines of worry were etched across Glover's forehead and at the corners of his eyes and mouth. Dark, puffy patches of skin pooled beneath his hard brown eyes, a sign Kira knew all too well, of a serious lack of sleep. The dim glaze over his eyes revealed a person haunted by what waited for him beyond the veil of wakefulness.

It was a drastic, shocking reversal from the last time she had met him. The then more ebullient human had visited the station to celebrate Sisko's promotion to captain almost five years ago. His good-natured chiding about the captain's *late* promotion and his boasting about his own *deserved* elevation a year before Sisko almost rivaled the Klingons for bombast. In the halcyon days before the war, he had struck the colonel as a bit obnoxious for a Terran, but strangely compelling. Seeking first to avoid him during the small get together in the captain's quarters, as the night wore on she had found herself drawn to him and his stories about life on the "*final frontier*" as he called it, exploring planets and spatial phenomena, making contact with alien species.

Station records indicated that Glover had returned once again as part of the taskforce that retook Deep Space Nine from the Dominion. In the euphoric sea of bodies that had poured onto the station after the evacuation of the Dominion and their Cardassian pawns, Kira hadn't seen him.

"Captain Glover it's been a long time. How is your father?" Dar finally punctured the awkward silence. Kira had yet to see the usually composed Romulan get flustered, but the emphasis he placed on the word "father" suggested that perhaps the aged Starfleet officer had had less than pleasant dealings with Glover's father, whom she had read was the recently appointed head of Starfleet Security. "I believe I...we... haven't had the pleasure of meeting your staff."

Glover shook his head, as if loosing himself from a dream. "Oh, of course," the grin, a bit sheepish, returned. "Where are my manners?" He mumbled, before gesturing to his right at the striking mocha-skinned female. The two pins attached to the golden collar beneath her gray and black uniform denoted her rank as that of lieutenant. "Colonel Kira, Commander Dar this is Lieutenant Jasmine Glover, my wife and Operations Officer."

Kira smiled warmly and the Operations Officer replied kindly in return. Glover shifted next to introduce the other member of his party, but she beat him to the punch.

"Nerys it's good to see you again!" Pell Ojana stepped down from the docking ring and wrapped the startled colonel in a hug.

Barely catching her breath, the colonel gasped. "Good to see you too Ojana." Both shocked and pleased that another Bajoran would be so publicly friendly with her after the controversy swarming around her support for Nitala'Rax, Kira stiffened in the woman's embrace. Even First Minister Shakaar Edon, her former resistance cell leader and more recently her ex-lover, supported her from the shadows, not wanting to be seen with her in public. The rogue Jem'Hadar had razed the Vehlo settlement surrounding Kran-Tobal in their brutal attempt to incinerate the prison. Thousands of Bajorans had been killed.

"In order to keep the Federation admission process and the Cardassian relief efforts going, Sarish Rez, the First Minister's top aide had informed her, "its best that Minister Shakaar disassociates himself from you." Rez had always been blunter than Edon, Kira remembered darkly.

Squirming out of the older woman's grasp, the colonel smoothed her tunic before turning to her immediate right. She introduced her XO.

"I haven't been here in quite a while," Glover remarked, his voice filled with forced cheer. He looked past Kira to gaze down the bustling corridor. "Care if we took the scenic route while you brought me up to speed."

Kira shook her head. "Of course not, right this way." She gestured with her hand for them to follow her. The contingent took the nearest lift to the habitat ring. The group walked in silence as they made their way from the upper docking pylon down to the Promenade, Nitala'Rax sullenly hanging back from them. The station's main thoroughfare was brimming with life and activity as countless species shopped, drank, kibitzed, haggled, sang, and plied their wares.

Underneath the appearance of normality, Glover's practiced eye noticed the discreet placement of Bajoran and Starfleet guards along the concourse, disruptors hanging from their hips. There was also an unusual amount, or at least he thought so, of Klingon and Romulan soldiers milling about the upper ring of the Promenade, much less discreet and much more fully armed.

He also felt the tension rippling through the civilians as they shuffled along, the fierce clinging to the illusion of normalcy all the more telling of its fiction. Especially here, the war had changed everything. Life would never be the same, but he hoped that after today, the denizens of Deep Space Nine could finally reclaim some semblance of their former lives.



Glover slowed as the group passed the station's infirmary. He knew that his friend Capt. Banti Awokou, one of the few survivors from a Cardassian insurgent attack on his starship, was fighting for his life behind the medical facilities' *kelinide* walls. Glover thought about breaking away from Col. Kira's tour to visit him first before going to the mission briefing. But he knew that his old mentor would frown on Glover placing personal desire above his duty. So he walked on, despondent thoughts taking root in his mind.

This time the colonel decided to break the silence after she noticed Captain Glover's wife looking agape at a the scantily dressed Ktarian female dancing on top of a table of cheering, leering spectators. "First time on the station?" She asked.

"Yes." Lt. Glover replied, her eyes still locked on the salacious sight. "At Deep Space Five we didn't have those kinds of *establishments*." Something about how the lieutenant said "establishment" made Kira frown, but she decided to let the matter pass.

"*Quark's*?" the captain almost laughed as a memory flashed through his eyes. "We'll have to visit."

"I don't think so."

"Maybe next time then." The captain quickly switched subjects. "So how are things?" He asked carefully, avoiding mentioning his absent friend.

"Repairs are coming along," Kira began. "Bajor has reapplied for Federation membership; the station is operating as well as can be expected, thanks to the influx of the new officers sent from Starfleet." She nodded at Dar who gave a tight-lipped smile in return.

"Where is Jake? Kasidy? Or Dax?" As he listed each name, he looked around as if they would appear from the ether. The happiness in his voice was now genuine with interest and concern.

"Oh," Kira replied with after a pause, "they are well. Jake and Kasidy are both on Bajor, overseeing the final construction of the *Emissary's*..." She caught herself, as a familiar pain flashed behind her eyes... "Kasidy's house in the Kendra Mountains."

"Dax?" The captain asked again.

"Lt. Dax is currently off the station." Kira replied, adding, but not quite knowing why she did so, "on Risa."

A mischievous gleam sparked in Glover's eyes. "Change the host, but the *sybiont* stays the same." The momentary respite of mirth quickly receded. "I wish we had more time," Glover remarked more to himself than the group. "I haven't seen Jake in ages, and I've only met Kasidy once. But she seems like a good person."

"She is," Kira affirmed, smiling with genuine fondness as a thought of her very pregnant friend flashed suddenly through her mind.

“Ben always did have good taste.” Not knowing how to respond to that, Kira said nothing and continued leading them on a winding path to the station’s Ward Room.

Without having to be told, Nitala’Rax took up a position outside the door to the conference room. Despite his title of charge d’affaires, the Jem’Hadar’s diplomatic status was tenuous. The Klingons and Romulans both refused to recognize him, and the Federation only tacitly acknowledged his presence to defuse any residual hostility from the Founders. Nitala’Rax didn’t seem to mind the freeze out, being designed for the physical and not verbal battlefield. Kira nodded her assent as the other officers plied past the hissing doors.

\*\*\*

### **DS9 Ward Room**

Inside the humid room, its dimness punctured by the starlight pouring in through ocular shaped view ports sat three pensive individuals. Fleet Vice Admiral Thuosana Shanthi, streaks of gray frosting her black hair, rose guardedly from her seat, as if she expected to be accosted by the new arrivals. Her dark brown eyes scoured the contingent, lighting on Jasmine with annoyance. “Colonel Kira, Captain Glover, Commander Dar, Lt. Commander Pell...” She listed each name curtly in clipped tones, nodding at each in turn. “And you are?”

“Lt. Jasmine Glover. *Aegis’s* Operations Officer.” Glover said before his wife spoke. The captain appeared oblivious to the similarly peeved glare his wife gave him.

“Oh.” Admiral Shanthi replied, turning away from them to introduce the meeting’s other participants. A slender, hawkish Romulan was standing at rigid attention, dark eyes boring into Commander Dar. The man returned her stare in full measure. Shanthi gestured at her. “Commander T’San, of the Romulan Imperial Fleet.”

“*Jolan true,*” she offered, shifting her gaze now to the others, her voice cold and words precise. Glover nodded in acknowledgement.

“And this is Captain Molok,” Shanthi replied, unable to remove the distaste from her voice. The burly Klingon slouched in his seat, not deigning to get up. He merely grinned at them with sharp, *bloodwine*-spotted teeth.

“Let’s get down to business shall we?” the admiral said, retaking her seat. Colonel Kira sat at the seat at the other end of the long table. The other officers sat at the remaining empty seats, Jasmine shyly sliding into the seat next to her husband. “The Dominion War Crimes Tribunal has arrived at Nimbus III, and all the special security arrangements have been made,” Shanthi began. “The Founder Leader is ready to be transported from Bajor.”

Even though Glover knew the *Aegis* had been called to perform this duty, the actual realization that it was about to occur twisted his insides. The fate of the Founder Leader, the mastermind who had led Dominion forces during the war, the butcher who had unleashed genocide on the Cardassians, had been fiercely debated among the great powers of the Federation Alliance. Each had wanted to try the Changeling for her crimes, but also to show the Dominion through the conduct of the tribunal the sentence or superiority of their respective civilizations.

The Federation wanted to show that 'solids', as the Founders termed humanoids or non-morphogenic life forms, were merciful, fair, and that the Changeling would receive a thorough hearing based on law and not vengeance.

The Klingons, on the other hand, felt the Founder needed to be punished, as swiftly and harshly as possible to underline the resolve of the Alpha Quadrant powers. The Romulans drew a middle of the road position. They wanted to glean as much strategic information about the Dominion as possible from the Changeling before publicly executing her.

The wrangling had nearly frayed the fragile post-war coalition, and had forced the Federation Council to accept the death penalty as an option for the tribunes to choose from in order to appease their fractious allies.

Though Glover had become far too casual about dealing death to the Federation's enemies during the war, the idea of the state putting a person to death, even one whose actions were as heinous as the Founder Leader's, made him uneasy. He placed his elbows on the table and cupped his hands as a shiver ran through him.

"After much *discussion*," Shanthi remarked. "It has been decided that both Commander T'San and Captain Molok will board the *Aegis* on its journey to Nimbus III; A show of unity and strength if you will."

Glover glanced at his wife, Pell, and then the colonel before he nodded his head slowly. "I think we can handle transporting the Changeling on our own Admiral. Commander Cherenkov along with Security Chief Donar is running systems checks on brig modifications even as we speak. I don't need babysitters."

"Though that *toy*," Molok spat, referring to the *Aegis*, "you call a warship is pretty to look at, I doubt it can match one of our attack cruisers."

"I can assure you that a *Prometheus*-class vessel is not a plaything." Glover replied, his voice tight.

"Of that there is no doubt," T'San replied, her dry voice finely coated with arrogance. "Commander Rekar proved that." Two years ago, a Romulan boarding party had captured the *Prometheus* prototype and utilized its multi-vector assault mode, splitting the prototype into three separate craft to assault a Federation starship before eventually being captured by a Starfleet

taskforce, with the help of two onboard Emergency Medical Holograms. Since then, security modifications to the original design and countermeasures had been put in place to prevent a similar incident from occurring.

"And so did the two holographic doctors that defeated him," Terrence quipped. T'San smiled coldly, nodding.

"Touché."

"Chancellor Martok bowed to the beseeching of his *Federation* envoy, and wouldn't allow us to claim the Changeling. At least you and your crew can benefit from a real warrior's tactical experience when the Dominion comes to rescue their shape shifter." Molok brayed, muscling into the conversation. "Just like Starfleet did in the Crolsa system."

A nerve pinched in Glover's jaw at the mention of Crolsa. Cardassian militants calling themselves the Crimson Shadow had employed several advanced weapons systems that destroyed two starships, the *Sojourner* and *Phoenix*, and ran a third one, the *Gibraltar* out of the system. The Federation Council had ceded oversight of Crolsa to the Klingons as a result.

Many of the captain's fellow officers, himself included, felt that the Federation had been wrong to abandon the mission in Crolsa. It made the Federation look weak, and the expectant Klingon iron boot had only sparked an insurrectionist impulse throughout all the occupied territories. What galled Glover even more about the debacle, and Molok's boastful evoking of it was that he had a couple of personal ties to the captains of the *Phoenix* and *Gibraltar*. Banti Awokou, the *Phoenix* captain had been a long time mentor. The biogenic attack on his ship had left him in a vegetative state.

He had been brought to DS9 after the Klingons took over in Crolsa in the hopes that the space station's noted Dr. Bashir could find a cure to the neuro-pathogen infecting him and dozens of his crew. After Glover was finished he hoped to see his old friend before he shipped out.

Donald Sandhurst, *Gibraltar's* commander, had served with Glover on the *Cuffe* before he had been appointed its captain six years ago. When Glover had learned Sandhurst was in command of the retreating *Gibraltar* he hadn't been surprised. *The man still hadn't developed a spine*, Glover pursed his lips in consternation.

"About the rescue attempt--I am forced to concur with Molok," T'San admitted, the brows running just above her eyes, crinkling with resignation. "I too failed to convince the Senate that additional warships were needed to dissuade the Dominion from attempting a rescue. Multi-vector capability or not, a flotilla of warships to escort the Founder to Nimbus III is a more prudent course of action."

Pell's upraised hand shot through the air as if she were in a classroom, and had a burning question to ask or point to make. Shanthi ignored her for

almost a minute, before sighing a response. "Would you like to ask a question Commander Pell?"

"Yes," Pell replied, "I can see both Molok's and T'San's points," she added, shrugging her shoulders at Captain Glover and Kira in silent apology. Glover was surprised that Ojana would side with Molok after his implied jibe at Sandhurst's handling of the Lakesh situation. Pell had served with the man both on the *Cuffe*, before Glover's arrival, and the *Chevalier*. The two shared a complicated relationship.

"With vengeful Breen and Son's forces still on the loose and Cardassian insurgents itching for notoriety, not to mention rogue, or not so rogue Jem'Hadar, out to restore their lost honor, the quadrant is filled with people that would like to tear the Changeling apart. I think a convoy might disabuse them from that notion." The Bajoran concluded, with real politick sagacity.

The Fleet Admiral nodded, before slicing into Pell's proposal. "A convoy might very well draw the very attention that you have just described. That is why, in addition to the *Aegis*, two decoy ships, one Klingon and one Romulan, will also be making their way to Nimbus III via circuitous, prearranged routes. Anyone seeking to capture or rescue the Founder will have three choices to choose from."

Shifting in her seat to peer at the triad of *Aegis* officers, Shanthi's voice softened as a faint sheen of praise glossed over her mournful features. "And that's why I proposed that *Aegis*, and you personally Captain Glover, handle this assignment," Shanthi remarked. "One of the Federation's most powerful ships helmed by a Medal of Valor recipient, I think it will send the proper message that will deter any insurgents."

Kira frowned at how stiff and uncomfortable the admiral's unexpected appraisal had made Captain Glover, a man for whom she had once thought self-aggrandizement was as necessary as breathing. 'War makes shadows of us all'. The colonel shook her head clear of the memories that accompanied her recalling the ancient truism repeated often by her father Taban during their imprisonment at the Singha refugee center.

"I would still feel more comfortable if the *Defiant* were accompanying the *Aegis*," Commander Dar, the compact warship's commander said, his quiet voice tinged with pride. "Its cloak might be of use."

"Noted Commander," Shanthi nodded. "However, the same could be said of our allies' ships as well, each similarly equipped with cloaking technology. The *Defiant* will remain here, at Deep Space Nine, to defend the station in the event that the Dominion attempts to intervene in the extradition. The station is still recovering from the last Jem'Hadar strike. To leave it undefended in this climate would be unwise."

"Odo has sent word via Nitala'Rax that the Founders won't mount a rescue attempt," Kira cut in. The colonel noticed that even the Starfleeters

found it hard pressed not to roll their eyes in disbelief at her seemingly naïve declaration.

"I don't think any Founder's or Jem'Hadar's proclamations carry much water with Cardassian militants," T'San remarked, the specter of the recent assassination of the Romulan civil administrator Danclus on Cardassia Prime, haunting her statement. "In fact, Cardassian militants have only grown bolder in their plans to disrupt the reconstruction process on Cardassia Prime. The transport of the Founder Leader could prove too tempting a target."

"Well, they'll have potentially six targets," Admiral Shanthi gravely replied, alluding to *Aegis's* ability to tri-separate, the *Prometheus*-class's well-known secret.

"You trust your pet changeling?" Molok goaded, shifting in his seat to peer at Colonel Kira. "Just because '*Odo sent word*' means we are to disarm ourselves and lay bare before the Jem'Hadar."

Knowing she shouldn't, realizing it was unbecoming of the station's commanding officer, Kira nonetheless bounded out of her seat. "Odo is a man of honor. I would my stake my life on his word!"

"Take your seat colonel!" Admiral Shanthi admonished.

"You have *kajanpak't* Bajoran," Molok sneered. "I can see why the changeling chose you."

"That's it," Kira said, rounding the table. Glover quickly jumped out of his seat, and placed a firm grasp on her shoulder to slow her down. The colonel resisted the urge to yank away from the human, knowing he was only trying to help.

"All right, all right," Glover said, nudging the colonel back to her seat. She reluctantly complied, never taking her eyes off the chuckling Klingon. "Admiral, I have no choice but to accede to Starfleet Command's orders. However, and let me make it clear, both Captain Molok and Commander T'San will have restricted movement aboard the *Aegis*, and I will consult them only if I feel it is necessary to do so. *Aegis* is my ship."

"I agree *captain*," Shanthi said, emphasizing Glover's rank to remind him of her superior status.

"As do I," T'San said.

"Some ship," Molok mumbled. More loudly he said, "I have no interests in your starship's secrets."

"It is settled then." The admiral smiled at the assemblage, but there was no warmth behind the gesture. "The *Aegis* will depart Deep Space Nine at 2300 hours. The prearranged flight plan is being downloaded into your ship's memory banks even as we speak. Meeting adjourned." Shanthi got out of her seat, and headed for the exit without waiting on the others.

"I have affairs to attend to on my ship before it embarks on its journey," T'San said as a way of farewell.

"The Ferengi's holosuites are the only affairs I plan to attend to." Molok guffawed before exiting, giving the colonel a goading once over before leaving. "My crew *knows* what it's supposed to do."

Unable to restrain herself, the fuming Bajoran pounded the table, and uttered an almost forgotten curse. "I can't believe the arrogance of that Molok! How dare he question Odo's honesty!"

"Captain Molok...or any of us really don't know Odo like you do," Dar offered. "The Founders have cut a bloody swath through much of the Quadrant. Asking for the trust of one, even as noble and honest as Odo, might be a tall order for some."

Wanting to disagree with her XO, and looking for encouragement and confirmation from the others present, Kira's fires dimmed somewhat when she saw that the captain was nodding his head in silent agreement and his wife had a glassy, pained expression in her eyes, as if trapped in a terrible memory.

She knew it was a continued failing of hers to allow her personal feelings to sway her judgment at times, but Kira had rarely seen the lopsidedness of her views versus reality as she did at that moment. "By the Prophets..." she whispered. "You are right. How could I have been so blind?"

"I wish a lot more of us suffered that type of blindness," Glover remarked. He smiled and glanced at his own wife. Kira noticed that Jasmine Glover did not respond in kind.

\*\*\*

## **DS9 Infirmary**

Flashbacks of his mother's funeral plagued Glover as he looked down at the too serene face of Captain Banti Awokou, the man's body encased in a stasis pod that reminded him of a shiny casket. Even Dr. Bashir's brilliance had its limits, and Awokou and the other victims of the Cardassian biogenic pathogen were in repose, awaiting transport to Starfleet Medical in the hopes that a solution might be found for them there. The captain was doubtful.

Ben had always spoken highly of Julian Bashir, in rapt amazement of the man's medical knowledge and talents. The revelation of his augmented heritage had done little to dampen Sisko's enthusiasm for the doctor. Of course, Terrence being his usual competitive self had claimed that his CMOs, first Dr. Nemato, then Dr. Cole and finally Dr. Amoros were better physicians, but he knew the truth.

Bashir had devised the cure to the morphogenic virus killing the Founders, the selfless gesture a key bargaining tool in convincing the Founder Leader to surrender her forces.

Glover wished Bashir were here now so he could ask the doctor personally about Awokou's prospects. Though the junior medic, a weathered Bajoran named Girani had reported the man's grim prognosis, Terrence would feel better if he heard it directly from Dr. Bashir. He was glad though that the medic was busying herself at the infirmary's large curving interface, allowing him a modicum of privacy. That was one thing the DS9 docs had over the omnipresent Amoros too.

He touched the cold transparisteel covering, running his hands just above Awokou's lined, brown face. So much like his own fathers, yet so different. For one, Banti still had his hair. Glover smiled at his dig, imagining the steamed look or quick rejoinder his bald father would lodge at him. In many ways, Banti had been a second father to him on the *Kitty Hawk*, exemplifying a dignity of command that Terrence couldn't muster on his best day. He had never been a man given to complimenting others, but he had to give due when it was warranted.

Banti's reassuring voice and large presence glided through the captain's memories. He would never forget their last conversation.

*"I really wish I had you with me on this one Terrence,"* Awokou had said, after informing Glover that the *Phoenix* had pulled an assignment in the Crolsa system, protecting relief convoys for its solitary habitable planet Lakesh from predacious pirates and militants.

*"It can't be worse than the Lamenda system,"* Glover had said, unwilling to be out topped in anything. Before their current assignment, *Aegis* had gotten its space legs along the long running Cardassian-Xepolite border on a host of missions including stopping the profitable *maraji crystal* trade fueling parts of the insurgency flaming across all Alliance-occupied Cardassian territories.

*"Sending the Phoenix of all ships into Cardassian space during this time of heightened Cardassian sensibilities wasn't the brightest move,"* Awokou had intimated, referring to the ship's previous captain, Benjamin Maxwell. In 2367, Maxwell had killed almost seven hundred Cardassians when he destroyed an outpost in the Cuellar system in a pre-emptive strike against what he thought was an imminent Cardassian invasion. Maxwell's name was doubtlessly more reviled than Glover's own. His actions during the war, especially at the Cardassian planet Loval, weren't exactly angelic.

*"I'm sure you can handle anything those spoon head bastards throw at you,"* Glover had said sincerely. He had fought at Awokou's side against the Cardassians during the first Federation-Cardassian war and he had witnessed the ferocity hidden behind the man's placid veneer.

*"It's not me or the Phoenix crew I'm worried about, it's my backup. Sojourner is commanded by an Exec and Gibraltar has a first time captain."*



"Really?" Glover, interest piqued, had asked. He hadn't been up on the latest round of promotions. A deluge of captainships had come in the wake of the depleted ranks left by the last Borg incursion and then the Dominion War.

*"Someone I think you're familiar with,"* the older man had smiled wickedly. *"Donald Sandhurst."*

*"I now see why you're antsy."* Glover had remarked. *"Captain Awokou." Even after knowing the man for almost twenty years, the thought of addressing the Awokou by anything less than his title seemed disrespectful. "Sandhurst wasn't a bad guy when I served with him on the Cuffe. You know the story, but I didn't feel he had the guts to make the tough decisions. Maybe that's changed. Somebody believes in him."*

*"I did some checking. Rear Admiral Covey signed off on his promotion."* Awokou had intoned darkly.

*"Oh."* Monica Covey had preceded Glover as XO on the *Cuffe* before the woman before being awarded a command of her own. Pell had served with them both, and the three had formed something of a triumvirate that they recreated when Sandhurst left *Cuffe* for Covey's ship, the *Chevalier*.

*"Well, what about the Sojourner commander?"*

*"Commander Taun'Ma? Don't know much about her,"* Awokou had admitted. *"Which doesn't speak much for her record does it?"*

*"No, I guess it doesn't."* Glover had to admit. With Starfleet throwing out captain's pips, for none to fall Taun'Ma's way wasn't a good sign. *"Perhaps Command paired you with those two so they could learn from your experience?"* Glover had tried to put a good spin on the despairing situation.

Awokou had smiled tightly. *"You can't con me Terrence. Remember who won all those games of chess?"*

*"I haven't forgotten,"* Glover had grumbled.

*"As a matter of fact you still owe me several strips of latinum."*

*"Put it on my tab."*

*"Will do,"* Awokou's smile had been pierced with a yawn. *"It's late here. I shouldn't be carking on and on about my problems. I know you have your own." His smile took on a sly cast. "How's Jasmine by the way? After forty years Rozi continues to confound me."*

*"Same as Rozi it appears."* Glover had answered deadpan. Awokou's laughter had been deep and fulfilling.

*"Pray that it always remains so,"* he had said. *"Good night Terrence. Be safe out there."*

*"You too."*

If Glover had known it would be the last time he would get to talk to his friend, to share a memory or laugh with him he would've never allowed the man to terminate the connection. But humans weren't normally blessed, or cursed with such foreknowledge. And despite knowing they weren't, they still

took the truly important people in their lives for granted far too often. Glover knew he was guilty of such transgressions more than he cared to fully admit.

Tracing a finger along the frosty covering of the stasis pod, Glover's face grew hard. *Even near death and you're still teaching me things*, he thought, his eyes misting. *I won't forget this lesson...I promise.*

---

## CHAPTER THREE

### *USS Aegis*

#### (Main Transporter Room)

Lieutenant Commander Ivan Cherenkov, *Aegis's* First Officer, blinked as the beings coalesced in a glittering cascade on the pad in the ship's Main Transporter room. Lt. Tai Donar, shock probably being one of the emotions trained out of him as a product of Angosian military experiments, quickly raised his phaser at the pad. "Don't move," he warned, the weapon's emitter cone trained on the Founder Leader's unformed face. The three other security guards also leveled their weapons at the platform.

The Founder regarded the muscular Angosian and his weapon without interest. "It takes a lot more firepower than that to kill a Changeling, Angosian." She remarked, her voice neutral.

"A lot of things have changed since the war ended," Donar replied with quiet menace.

"Not the solids' propensity for suspicion and violence it appears," the Founder surmised.

"That's enough Lt. Donar," Cherenkov interjected. Without addressing the Founder, he rounded on the slender, hairless, deep blue skinned Bolian standing quietly beside her. "Lt. Daneeka, why isn't the prisoner secured?" Ivan being a lateral entry addition to Starfleet via its Special Missions program for fifteen years, Daneeka's odious role in Admiral Leyton's abortive Starfleet coup four years ago still filled Cherenkov with disgust. But what had rankled him most about the obstreperous Daneeka was that she had actually taken the skills he had taught her in Advanced Tactical Training to use in Leyton's attempt to subvert Federation President Jaresh-Inyo. Ivan glared at the almost languid lieutenant, expecting the light of recognition to ignite in her indigo eyes at any second. It didn't.

Despite her checkered past, the late Captain Benjamin Sisko had given Daneeka another chance at redemption, the woman playing on her time as Security Chief of the *Okinawa* under Sisko. Why the Starfleet would allow the quisling to assume the position of Deep Space Nine's security chief was beyond his capacity to understand.

"What am I supposed to secure her with?" Daneeka asked, a sarcastic smirk inching up one side of her mouth. "She is a *shape shifter* you know."

"The portable inhibitor field," Cherenkov said, raising the gleaming metallic collar in his hand up for both Lt. Daneeka and the Founder to see. Based on a quantum stasis prototype created by the defunct Cardassian Obsidian Order, the inhibitor field denied a changeling the ability to revert back to their natural gelatinous state. First, discomfort, extreme pain, and

then death would result if the reversion didn't take place. Shackles that emanated the field had also been constructed specially for ship-to-ship transport. In addition, a more complex inhibitor field had been installed in *Aegis's* brig.

Lt. Donar and Chief Engineer Uhnari had put their heads together and developed a method to alter the levels of the inhibitor field's polarity, thereby keeping the Founder weakened without threatening her life.

"I offer no resistance," the Changeling offered. "I promised Odo that I would willfully submit to your laws." Cherenkov forced himself not to groan.

"The Founder has kept her word," Daneeka added, *actually* vouching for a Changeling. It was all the Executive Officer could do not to retch. "She has given the Bajoran authorities no problems during her incarceration and I saw no need to shackle her for transport. If she had wanted to escape, she would've attempted to do so by now, especially since Bajor is so close to the wormhole." Deep Space Nine's security chief wrinkled her ridged nose as if having to state the *obvious* was a waste of good oxygen.

Lt. Commander Aquiel Uhnari, standing in for Ensign Huber, at the transporter controls, remarked. "I don't see any cause for alarm," she offered, smiling at the Bolian woman. Daneeka smiled back.

*One malcontent to another*, Cherenkov thought, flipping back through recollections of the chief engineer's own less than stellar career in Starfleet. However, Aquiel had remained in the service, overcoming disappointing turns on Deriben V and then Relay Station 47 as a communications tech to find her true calling in warp engineering.

"No harm no fowl'," Daneeka said, adding. "That's an old saying I picked it up from Captain Zimbata on the *Victory*." The security chief smiled wistfully. "Funny that I would think about that at this moment."

Uhnari gasped, her brown eyes growing large with interest. "An old friend of mine used to serve on the *Victory*. His name's LaForge. Do you know him?"

"Geordi?" Daneeka asked, her smile growing bigger. "Of course. We spent some very close times together."

Uhnari's excitement dimmed somewhat at the revelation. The perceptive Daneeka added. "Not that kind of close." Instantly the engineer's mood turned radiant again. "Just some rousing games of poker, the regular kind, not strip."

Cherenkov cleared his throat. Commander Uhnari dipped her head in embarrassment. "Sorry sir," she muttered.

"Back to the matter at hand," the First Officer drew himself up to his full height, a stern, solemn expression on his face. "Mr. Donar, take your security team and escort the prisoner to the brig. I don't think an intra-ship transport is necessary."

Without being asked, the Changeling glided from the platform onto the deck. Daneeka followed suit.

Tai scowled at the change in the plan, but said nothing as he nodded for his guards to form a cautious circle around the Founder. The Angosian warily snapped the inhibitor collar around the changeling's neck. Daneeka joined the contingent, also without waiting for Cherenkov's permission.

He squelched the growl in his throat. Instead, he said, "Mr. Donar, proceed."

\*\*\*\*\*

After the team had left, Cherenkov turned to Aquiel. "So, what's with this Geordi business?" He smiled as he swept the mahogany skinned Haliian in his arms, stroking the twin ridges running just above her eyebrows.

"Old news," she replied, her eyes twinkling with merriment.

"It better be," he said, kissing her softly. "We Russians are quite possessive."

"So I've been told," she whispered, as she tangled her fingers in his blond hair and pushed his mouth against hers. Almost a minute went by before the now russet-faced Commander pulled away from her, smiling at her matching hunger.

Pulling in a lungful of air, Cherenkov remarked glumly. "I guess we better get back to work. Ensign Huber should be returning to his post any moment now."

"Is that an order?" Uhnari pouted. Before Cherenkov answered, the Haliian reached down and lightly stroked his crotch. Tensing at the pleasurable contact, the Executive Officer grabbed her wrist with surprising roughness, causing the engineer to gasp in delight. "I like it when you get all Orion Corsair on me," she teased.

It was at that damnable moment that Ensign Huber chose to resume his duties. With almost Scalosian speed, Cherenkov released his hold on Aquiel, but not quick enough to avoid being spotted by the Transporter specialist. "Sorry sirs," he replied, his eyes downcast.

"Sorry about what?" Cherenkov replied, his manner steely serious. He didn't even crack when he heard a small giggle escape from his lover.

"Ah...nothing sir." Huber answered, his eyes still scanning the deck plates.

"Nothing indeed." The First Officer snapped. "Carry on with your duties Mr. Huber."

"Yes sir," the young officer hopped to attention, quickly taking over his station, and almost mowing over the Chief Engineer in the process. "Sorry sir!"

"It's okay," Commander Uhnari placed a calming hand on the anxious man's shoulder. He smiled nervously in response, his eyes now glued to the transporter console.

Cherenkov cleared his throat. "Lt. Commander Uhnari, I believe your report about upgrades to the ship's impulse flow regulator is late."

"Hmm...is that so?" The Haliian could barely maintain a straight face. "I'm sure I submitted the report on time. Would you care to join me...in Engineering? Perhaps we can get to the bottom of this."

Gesturing at the door, Cherenkov nodded. "Lead the way." Nodding at the still flustered Ensign Huber, the engineer walked through the sliding door, the First Officer quickly on her heels.

.....

### ***USS Aegis*** **(Main Sickbay)**

"The prisoner is in perfect health...I think," Dr. Amoros declared, his rich basso voice drowning out the incessant beeping of the electron resonance scanner. The scan complete, the biobed containing the Changeling slid out of the resonance chamber. With blunt, though nimble digits, the *Aegis's* Grisellan Chief Medical Officer performed another scan with a medical tricorder. "The tricorder confirms my initial findings. Her morphogenic matrix appears stable. Of course, Starfleet Medical's research into Changeling physiology is in its embryonic stages." The doctor concluded, squeezing the tricorder in his large, hirsute silvery black hands with consternation.

"I think that's good enough for me doctor," Glover quickly offered. In her short time aboard the *Aegis*, the observant Keta had come to realize how perturbed incomplete medical files made the imposing ursine.

During her mandatory physical upon boarding *Aegis*, the furry medic bored her with a voluminous tirade at how the Federation's lack of knowledge about *Rudellian plague*, a disease fatal for Cardassians such as herself, had severely impeded their efforts at administering effective medical care to many needy Cardassians on the shattered homeworld.

"Lieutenant...did you hear me?" Keta blinked, her mind returning to the present and the task at hand. She looked nervously at the scowling captain. "Are your readings in agreement with the Doctor's?"

The young Cardassian held up her own tricorder and ran it over the prone form of the Founder. Anticipating the dearth of knowledge the Federation, and its allies for that matter, had about the mysterious changelings, Glover had requested that Keta also scan the prisoner to detect any anomalies that might prove threatening, sure that if the Founder was trying to alter her body chemistry or structure for any purpose, dual scans

from two different machines, as well as two different sets of eyes would detect it.

Of course, Keta was sure she had caught a sigh in the captain's voice when he had called her to the Main Sickbay. Now, that the Founder was onboard, she would perhaps be the second most unwelcome person on the *Aegis*.

Knowing that her midnight assignment was only a symbolic salve to Cardassians who demanded a part in the trial of the Founder, if they couldn't punish her themselves, Keta knew that her presence was unwanted. Her efforts or counsel weren't of much value on Cardassia Prime either. Even among the new generation of Cardassians committed to reconciliation, the taint of her work against her own peoples' ambitions during the war left a taste too bitter for many of her compatriots to swallow.

She was sure that after the Changeling was safely on Nimbus III, that she would be shuttled to another less glamorous assignment. Hopefully it would at least be somewhere her race or her past were not impediments. Unfortunately, she couldn't think of anywhere that place might be at the moment.

"Lieutenant?" Glover asked again, his tone ripe with annoyance. Flustered, the now bulky gunmetal device almost slipped from her gray fingers.

"My apologies sir. My readings indicate that the Founder is well." Glover nodded tersely.

"May I sit up now?" The Changeling asked, her voice dripping tedium. The hulking Lt. Donar and his small group of equally intimidating guards moved to form a cordon between the biobed and the captain.

"Of course," Glover replied. The Changeling turned into viscous orange goo, reforming seconds later sitting upright on the biobed. Donar was just pulling his phaser out of the holster, when the Founder looked at him, her lipless mouth curled into a mocking smile.

"No more theatrics," the captain warned.

"I meant no harm," the Changeling responded innocently. "I just find the solid need to rely on musculature for movement very time consuming."

"Is that right?"

"It is." The Founder nodded, shaking her head with feigned understanding. "I am glad to see that there is one solid at least who understands my dilemma. I am ready to return to the holding facility."

"You don't give orders on this..." Glover began, but the retort died on his lips when he noticed that the Founder's eyes were looking past him. Turning his head to follow her gaze, with the doctor and the security team following suit, Keta found everyone starting at her.

Wanting to look away, to hide from the invasive scrutiny, but unable to give any of them the satisfaction of seeing her fear, the Cardassian met all of their gazes, eventually staring into the soulless eyes of the Founder.

"What is *that* doing here?" The Changeling spat, the first spike of emotion the monster had evidenced. "I thought I had had all of them killed. A pity."

Dr. Amoros leaped over to the Science Officer, blocking her view from the sadistic Changeling.

"Mr. Donar, get her out of here, right now!" Glover barked, his face a caricature of righteous indignation. The security team coiled around the Founder, shuffling her out of the infirmary.

After the shape shifter had been removed, the Grisellan stepped away from her. Captain Glover walked over, and clamped two firm hands on her shoulders. She tried not to wince as he incidentally pinched sensitive muscles along her neck ridges. Looking down into her eyes, he said, as gently as he could. "I'm sorry you were subjected to that."

It was the first time that this particular human had lied to her. Though she was sure Captain Glover was sorry for her as an individual, Keta knew he wasn't sorry about the slaughter of the Cardassians, or at least sorry *enough*. She knew that somewhere deep inside his core, hidden from his enlightened Terran sensibilities, was the belief that the Cardassians had deserved the holocaust the Dominion unleashed on them.

She nodded acceptance for his sympathy, and smiled wanly in return. "It's all right." A lie for a lie. In the oblique corners of her own heart, Lt. Keta knew it wouldn't be the last time such an exchange would be made.

.....

## **USS Aegis (Main Bridge)**

"Sir, picking up a distress beacon." His wife informed him. "Code One Alpha Zero."

"Location Lieutenant?"

"About a parsec from Golana. It's a Lissepian freighter."

Glover's mood darkened as his interest piqued. "By who?"

"They believe Cardassians sir," Jasmine looked up from her station, a confused expression on her face.

"They 'believe'?" Glover prodded. In response, his wife shrugged her shoulders.

"That's when the message cuts off. However, it is on a rotating frequency, repeating every three minutes."

Glover looked first at a skeptical Cherenkov. "What do you think?"



"I'm not sure," the First Officer admitted. "There has been an upswing in violence by renegade Cardassian factions, unwilling to acknowledge the fact they lost the war." He winced when Lt. Keta glanced at him in response. Terrence merely rubbed his smooth chin, ignoring Cherenkov's perceived impolitic gaffe.

"Mr. Donar, anything on long range scanners?"

"Nothing sir." The taciturn Angosian rumbled, seemingly angry that the violating ship was not waiting at the scene of the crime.

"Let's go check it out then," Glover concluded.

"But sir, what about the tribunal?" Cherenkov asked.

"I don't think we'll be all that late, and besides, we have standing orders to investigate and offer assistance to any ship in distress." Standing up, he went over to the Tactical console, the possessive Lt. Donar moving over only slightly to allow his commanding officer access to his board. Peering down at the tactical readouts of the cargo vessel for several more seconds, Terrence grunted. "Lt. Glover, please inform Starfleet Command and the tribunes that we are altering course to render aid to a distressed ship."

"Aye sir." Jasmine quickly relayed the information.

"All right, Lt. Rojas," Glover strolled down the curved deck of the bridge to stand behind the ship's alpha-shift Flight Control Officer. Juanita Rojas smiled up at him, reddish brown curls ringing her cherubic face.

"Yes captain?"

"Lay in a course to the source of the beacon, warp 8."

"You got it sir," the junior grade officer replied with relish, happy anytime she got to fly beyond warp factor 5.

"Do it." The *Aegis* shuddered, as the *Prometheus*-class vessel's powerful warp engines thrust to life.

"Should we inform our 'guests' about the change in plans?" Jasmine asked, turning around in her seat to look at him, worry lines furrowing her forehead. Glover responded with a peeved expression, more annoyed at the prospect than the question itself.

"I'll do it," he mumbled. "Mr. Cherenkov, you have the conn."

---

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *USS Aegis* (Captain's Ready Room)

"You can't do that!" Molok thundered, springing out of his seat in Glover's ready room. He slammed gauntleted fists on the captain's polished ebonite desk.

"I just did!" Terrence roared, pushing back his chair as he hopped out of his seat. He got in the Klingon's face, prepared to trade barbs or blows if necessary. "This is my ship! Don't forget that!" Before his assignment to the *Cuffe*, he had served on the Klingon warship *Dorna*, as part of Starfleet's Officer Exchange Program with the Empire's Defense Force. Glover knew that the best way to handle Klingons was to match their bellicosity.

"With decisions like that, I don't see how you got it!" Molok snarled.

"Captains please!" T'San, now on her feet, placed placating hands between the two. Uneasy at playing peacemaker, she used surprising strength to push both men back from the brink of violence. Glover flopped back into his seat, and the startled Molok hit the deck with a loud thud. Within seconds he was back on his feet, fists balled, but he didn't advance.

T'San looked from Glover to Molok. "This is his ship, and he had every right to make the decision, even if it is ill-advised. Neither you or I would tolerate challenges to our authority on our own vessels."

The Klingon loudly huffed before grumbling. "You are correct." Turning away from him, the Romulan commander looked down at the still seated Glover.

"How much of a delay will this 'rescue' take?"

"That depends," the captain offered. "But hopefully we shouldn't be delayed by no more than a day. Other ships might've already responded to the distress beacon before we get there."

"One day," Molok huffed again.

"How old is the distress beacon?" T'San asked, ignoring the Klingon. Glover wished he could turn such an oblivious eye to the surly Molok.

"It is less than 12 hours old. This increases the chance that there are survivors." The news didn't brighten either of the other officer's moods.

"And the message said that they believe Cardassians are behind it?" Molok asked, adding before the captain could answer. "It doesn't surprise me. Those people never knew when they were beaten."

"But why would Cardassians attack a Lissepian ship?" T'San asked, her eyes glinting as her mind struggled for clarity. "The Lissepians were vassals of the Cardassian Union for decades."

"True." Glover agreed, absently stroking his chin. "It doesn't make sense, but there isn't much about the growing insurgency on Cardassia Prime that does." Each day the Federation News Service reported new attacks by Cardassian insurgents opposed to the interim governing council set up by the three great powers to rebuild Cardassia.

"Have the spoon heads ever made sense?" Molok roared with laughter. Both T'San and Glover merely glared at him.

"In the interest of comity," the Romulan began, as if Molok weren't even present, "I request that my...colleague...and I are allowed to remain on the bridge, to assess and lend assistance if necessary."

The captain rubbed his chin more forcefully as he pondered the Romulan's offer. Knowing he would regret his decision even as he uttered it, he finally said, "Sure. I see no problem with that."

T'San actually smiled, and Terrence believed it to be genuine. "Thank you." She bowed before asking to be excused. After granting her request, the Romulan moved quickly to the exit. Without asking for anything, Molok followed behind her. Almost out the door, Glover called out.

"Captain Molok!" The Klingon warrior froze in mid-step. He turned slowly to stare at the captain. Rising slowly out of his seat, a vicious look on his face, Glover spoke again, his voice filled with quiet venom. "If you question or countermand my orders on my bridge again, you will find out that today is a good day to die."

Molok's dusky face turned even darker with tempestuous rage, broken a full minute later with a mighty laugh. "I might wind up liking you yet human!" He roared, stomping out of the ready room.

*I hope not,* Terrence thought as he slumped back into his seat.  
.....

### ***USS Aegis*** **(Main Bridge)**

"That's a nasty hull breach," Lieutenant Rojas's delicate cinnamon brown face twisted in disgust at the large gash in the listing freighter displayed on the main viewer.

"Looks like the bridge of the ship was taken out," Cherenkov remarked.

"Magnify." Glover replied. His wife complied. Within seconds, the *Aegis's* forward sensor array had zeroed in on the breach and the tangle of debris and bodies floating outside of the wounded ship. "Life signs?"

"Sensors not detecting any." Jasmine replied, her horror hidden behind a veil of professional detachment.

"What about on the inside of the vessel?" The captain asked hopefully.

"There are at least a dozen life signs on the inside of the vessel," Lt. Glover's voice brightened at relaying the news.

"What species?" Terrence asked.

"Can't get a reading on that," Jasmine frowned. "There's some kind of interference muffling our sensors. Could be the ship's hull composites."

"Captain," Lieutenant Commander Uhnari broke in, sitting on the edge of her seat at the bridge's engineering station. Normally, the Haliian preferred residing near the comfortable thrum of the ship's warp reactor in Main Engineering. However, Glover asked her to come up to the bridge for instant consultation as soon as the *Aegis* came within visual range of the Lissepian freighter. "Sensors have confirmed a forcefield currently protecting the inhabitants inside the cargo vessel. The ship's engines, weapons, shields, life support etc, are all tied into its parabolic generator core. The attack appeared to damage the generator beyond repair. They are holding on by a thread, and if the generator blows...." The engineer didn't have to finish her assessment to make her point.

"How long?" The captain asked instead.

"Two...three hours at the most." Uhnari answered, her voice leeching of its usual mirth.

"Hail them Lt. Glover."

"Sorry sir, but their comm. system appears to be down."

"All right. Have Mr. Huber go to Cargo Bay Three. Two cargo transporters should be able to get all the survivors in one fell swoop."

Seconds later, Jasmine sucked on her bottom lip in response to the data flowing across her console. "Sir, that freighter's hull is lined with *magnesite*."

"Damn," Glover muttered. *Magnesite* interfered with a starship's transporter targeting components, making both targeting locks and re-materialization inside the freighter a hazardous enterprise. Looking to his left, he ordered. "Mr. Cherenkov, I want you and Dr. Amoros to coordinate two away teams. We're going to have to shuttle those people over from the *Aegis*. Take the *York* and the *Henson*." The Russian commander nodded curtly and rose to his feet ready to carry out his captain's orders.

"Hold on!" Molok, sharing the aft environmental control station with the eerily observant T'San, protested. "The ship that attacked this vessel could still be in this region. It could even be cloaked for that matter. I held my tongue when you suggested beaming those people out. That would only be mere seconds when you had to drop shields. But using shuttles will take too long. It will leave this ship too vulnerable to any predators lurking out there!"

"How soon you've forgotten our previous conversation," Glover remarked, swiveling around in his seat to stare at the blustering Klingon. A tense Cherenkov maintained his place at the captain's side, also turning to face Molok. "Get to it Commander Cherenkov," the captain instructed his first officer, but his gaze remained fixed on Molok.

"Yes sir," Cherenkov replied, pointing at Lieutenants Donar and Glover. "You two with me." The two quickly piled behind the commander. Terrence stopped himself from ordering his wife to remain onboard *Aegis*. He didn't want her being subjected to any unnecessary risk, but he also didn't want to look as hesitant and doubtful as he felt in front of either Molok or T'San.

"I think I might be of some use too." Keta volunteered before the trio had made it to the port turbolift. "I'm pretty fluent in Lissepian." The commander's jaw tightened with frustration at the intrusion. Before he denied her request, Glover remarked.

"I agree. Hop to it Lt. Keta."

The Cardassian scrambled out of her seat to join the landing party. The captain caught Cherenkov's look of distaste as the liaison nestled beside him. Glover was ashamed to admit that he understood the sentiment. He had partly acceded to Keta's request to get her off his bridge.

.....

### **Lissepian Freighter *Impai***

Jasmine hated EVA suits. They always felt so bulky and unwieldy, too confining, and frigid to boot. "All right people, my tricorder is indicating we've got survivors behind this blast door." Her voice sounded metallic to her own ears inside the helmet. She could only imagine how tinny it sounded to the other members of the away team.

Without waiting for further instructions, Lt. Keta led the bulky Dr. Amoros and the hulking Lt. Donar to the sooty walls beside the nearly impenetrable door, searching with her hands for a companel. A frequent addition to more successful transport vessels, blast doors sealed off important cargo holds, providing their own separate life support and replicator systems, each powered by multiple parabolic generators dependent on a functioning parabolic core. The corridors connecting the cargo rooms were not afforded that luxury; hence the crew's reliance on environmental suits.

Within seconds, Donar grumbled. "Found it." He pressed a heavy, gloved hand down on a small imperfection in the stained wall, and a panel slid up revealing a darkened set of controls.

"Looks like the release lever is fried." Keta remarked. "Please step away from it Lieutenant Donar and let me take a look at it." For a few seconds, the intense Angosian held his ground, unwilling to allow the Cardassian to take the lead.

"Is there a problem with your audio transceiver?" Lt. Glover asked him.

"No...no ma'am there isn't," He replied, his voice brimming with restrained fire.

“Then step aside and allow the lieutenant to get to work. Every second wasted could mean someone’s life,” added Dr. Amoros, the ranking officer on the Away Team, carefully shifting his sizable girth in a non-discreet manner. The usually boisterous Grisellan was not above using his physical mass to get his point across when he had to, Jasmine had noticed. The equally fearsome Tactical Officer relented, moving a few inches, allowing the slender Cardassian liaison to slide past him.

Jasmine made a mental note to report the obstinate Angosian as soon as she got back to the *Aegis*. Though he maintained a steely, laconic veneer, Jasmine had dipped into her husband’s crew personnel files and discovered how Donar had been crafted by chemicals and conditioning to be a killing machine every bit as ruthless and efficient as a Jem’Hadar. She had known that the Angosian had come highly recommended by Commander Cherenkov. Even though Terrence trusted the Russian’s judgment, the placement of such a dangerous, unpredictable element aboard the *Aegis* filled her with dread, most of all for her husband and his career. She was afraid that the monster the Angosian government had made Donar into would reemerge from the depths of his soul at the wrong time and with disastrous consequences.

Watching the deft form of Lt. Keta work on the door, while the ursine rechecked the items in his medkit and Donar inspected his phaser settings, Glover pushed away her perpetual feelings of doom.

“Got it.” Keta’s happy proclamation punctured her dark thoughts. The blast door slid up into an aperture as the bay’s standard doors retracted. Donar brushed past Keta to enter the room first. The insensitive gesture saved her life. Twin golden beams seared through the taciturn Angosian, spinning him around. He crashed to the deck at Jasmine’s boots. A loud curse emanated from the shadows of the cargo bay, followed by a volley of lanced energy striking both Keta and Amoros. The Cardassian and Grisellan both crumpled to the floor, deadly sparks coursing over their suits. Donar rose again, his metallic scream squawking through her ear receiver as he lunged into the fusillade.

In near paralytic shock, terrified, Jasmine reached for the combadge attached to the left outer breast of her suit. A crippling beam reached the communicator first, filling her world with a thousand knives of agony before she fell into the void.

.....

### **Lissepian Freighter *Impai*** **(Main Bridge)**

“Asphyxiation didn’t cause his death,” Lt. Satel, the *Aegis*’s Junior Medical Officer, calmly stated as he turned the corpse onto its back. Sightless violet orbs glared at Cherenkov from the Lissepian’s pallid grayish face.

"I sort of figured that out Dr. Satel." The Executive Officer remarked, raking the light attached to the wrist of his environmental suit over the gaping, blood encrusted hole in the center of the Lissepian's sternum. "And I doubt running out of air did in the rest of the bridge crew either." He added, sweeping his light over the rest of the small, cramped bridge. The six Lissepian crew were splayed over consoles or the deck. "It appears whoever attacked these guys were good. The Lissepians didn't have a chance to defend themselves it seems. Their attackers must've beamed in and out...a quick strike. The only question is why?" Cherenkov hoped that Amoros' team was making better headway.

"The burn markings on the wounds are consistent with phase-disruptor weapons. Cardassian manufacture." Satel added, as nonchalantly as if he were ordering food from a replicator. The revelation made the First Officer queasy. The bridge's darkness grew more ominous, smothering.

Turning away from the carnage and clamping down his growing anxiety, he walked over to the two elfin Bynars working at the large pool table-shaped master control display at the center of the bridge. "Uno, Dos, have you've got the main computer up yet? I would like to get a look at the captain's log." One of the Bynars hovered over the computer's slick surface, while his compatriot had removed a side panel and had stuck himself in the console's guts.

Tagged "*Uno*" and "*Dos*" by Conn Officer Rojas, the Bynars' real "names" were a string of numbers. The computer specialists didn't protest the monikers. If anything, the nicknames seemed to make them more relatable to the rest of the crew.

The lavender-skinned waif peering at the surface with seeming agitation stopped its inspection to look at him, computations spinning behind its dark eyes as it registered his request. Cherenkov gave the Bynar time to run the information through his microprocessor of a brain, no doubt relaying it through his partner, and then cycling back to give the proper response. "No sir. We haven't. We are having difficulty accessing the mainframe. It is a momentary hindrance that will be corrected shortly."

Without waiting for the First Officer's response, the Bynar returned to its inspection. "Carry on." Cherenkov said anyway, just to have something to say, to maintain the appearance of control even as he sensed that that illusion was slipping away from him.

When the table sparked to life seconds later, it did little to mollify the *reeta-hawk* of apprehension nesting in his insides. "The mainframe is now functioning," replied the Bynar that had emerged from the console, black streaks marring his white EVA suit. Cherenkov waved over Satel, who was still checking for vital signs among the dead crew. The Vulcan followed the commander over to the lighted board.

"Can you find the captain's logs?" Without answering him, the spotless Bynar, pressed a large red button over an inlaid screen. The screen blinked on. The bleeding, torn face of a Lissepian stared back at them.

"*Cardassians....*" Violet blood erupted from the Lissepian's sallow lips. "Everywhere...." The screen went white with static.

"That's all that we could recover." The Bynar replied.

"Keep trying," Cherenkov ordered. "But let's send this tidbit to the captain." He tapped the communicator on his chest to open a channel to the *Aegis*. He frowned when his audio transceiver didn't pick up the familiar chirp alerting him that contact had been established with the starship. He tapped it again, with a bit more force. Nothing happened. "My combadge is malfunctioning. Dr. Satel, try raising the *Aegis*."

The Vulcan complied, his studious expression becoming even more serious when his communicator failed too. "I apparently am having the same problem." He concurred.

"Uno, Dos," Cherenkov looked at the Bynars. In lieu of combadges, the Bynars could use their cybernetic brains to directly interface with *Aegis*'s systems. Both cocking their heads oddly to opposite sides while they sought to commune with the ship's computer, they too came up short. "We are unable to establish a communications link with the *Aegis*." Both said in unison.

"What's going on here?" The First Officer asked no one in particular as he pulled his phaser from his holster and swept it in a defensive circle around the room.

"Commander, I hardly think communication interference, perhaps caused by a confluence of metals and chemicals carried within this ship, warrants brandishing a phaser."

"You rely on logic, I rely on this," Cherenkov waved the energy pistol.

"The human is right." A spectral voice slithered from the aft entrance to the bridge. The away team's attention quickly shifted to the speaker. Even in the cumbersome suit, the First Officer turned around with almost whiplash speed, his weapon aimed squarely at the beefy Cardassian now filling the open doorway. Through the transparent helmet atop his burnt orange space suit, the oily haired Cardassian smiled. "I wouldn't do that," he warned. With surprising deftness for a man with his bulk, the Cardassian moved behind a wall and out of the line of fire, allowing others behind him to shove a furry, ungainly form into the doorway. The massive creature slammed the deck plate, unconscious.

"Your doctor." The Cardassian had returned to filling the entrance. "We also have the other members of your boarding party. Any heroics...." He aimed the phase-disruptor pistol now in his hand at the limp Grisellan.

"What do you want?" Cherenkov growled.



"I've always liked your people," the Cardassian grinned again. "So direct."

"What is it?" The commander asked through clenched teeth. Still smiling, the stout Cardassian sauntered into the room, several other lithe and predatory Cardassians followed each pulling or dragging a prisoner. Cherenkov's heart sank further when he saw two muscular spoon heads carrying an unconscious Lt. Donar. If these Cardassians could immobilize both a fierce Grisellan and the eternally vigilant Angosian, they were a very dangerous band indeed.

Disruptor now holstered, the Cardassian clapped his hands in delight at Cherenkov's predicament. The First Officer couldn't wait until he had the chance to wrap his fingers around the Cardie's fat, scaly gray neck. "My name is Shau Darcis," his voice was conversational, but the Russian was close enough to peer into the Cardassian's eyes, and he saw nothing but the abyss in them. "Formerly of the Cardassian Intelligence Bureau and the Obsidian Order. But still a patriot of Cardassia." The disruptor was again in his hand. "As such, I will not take orders from an inferior, and to prove my resolve." With a casually brutal flick of his wrist, he turned the phase-disruptor toward the Bynars, who had huddled together fearfully by the console. Before Cherenkov could move, both crewmen were enveloped in a dissolving, golden beam.

"No!" The Russian roared, aiming his phaser at the Cardassian. But Darcis was too close for him to get off a shot. The hulking Cardassian grabbed Cherenkov's wrist, and with a force that bit through the metal and plastic of the EVA suit, Darcis crushed his wrist. The phaser clang dully as it hit the metal floor.

Cherenkov sank to his knees, biting back an agonizing cry, hating his weakness. Darcis stood over him, maintaining his iron grip on his broken wrist. The Cardassian chuckled as he raised his own disruptor and brought it crashing down into the commander's faceplate.

The Russian closed his eyes to avoid being blinded as the plastiglass faceplate cracked as easily as his bones had. Small slivers of sharp plastiglass embedded themselves in his skin. Oxygen gushed out of his open suit from the spider web of fractured glass as toxic air seeped in; clogging his lungs. He fell over on his side, his hands futilely clutching his burning throat. Before blacking out, he heard the arrogant Darcis boast. "If all the humans had been as weak as this one, we would've won the war within days." His body writhing in pain and overcome by shame, Cherenkov felt the same way as oblivion took him.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *USS Aegis* (Main Bridge)

"Mr. Zene, try hailing them again." Captain Glover absently tapped the armrests of his command chair, trying to stave off his escalating anxiety.

"Nothing sir," The dark-skinned Elloran manning the Ops station replied seconds later. "I've lost contact with both away teams."

"That's damn peculiar," Glover replied, rubbing his chin as worst-case scenarios began running through his head. Pushing them to the edges of his mind, he turned in his seat to look at Ensign Lomar, ship's Science Officer now at the Science I station. The Kelvan was wearing his bland, though more tolerable, humanoid guise. Kelvans were shape shifters, of a sort, able to alter their appearance to look human. Underneath the placid persona Lomar was a terrifying dark mass of mouths and tentacles. "Mr. Lomar, is it possible that the *magnesite*-laced hull or other chemical compounds or metallic alloys carried by the vessel might be interfering with communications?" Lomar looked through the captain with large, unblinking argent eyes. When he spoke, his voice sounded eerily detached as if his vocal cords and lips were not quite in sync.

"It is possible sir," He said with measured, slow precision. "But it is not likely."

A little over a century ago, a Kelvan vanguard had arrived from the Andromeda galaxy in the hopes of finding new territory to annex for their withering empire. Fortunately, the *Enterprise* and its legendary captain, Kirk, had encountered the scouts. The Kelvans gave up their invasion plans after the *Enterprise* helped them settle a new planet at the edge of the Great Barrier. Since that time, a miniscule, but steady flow of Kelvans had made the dangerous crossing to the new world. Though still not a member of the Federation, Lomar was the first Kelvan to join Starfleet in the hopes that it could lead to a possible future membership for the Kelvan colony.

Terrence couldn't help but notice with irony his own hypocrisy at welcoming the standoffish, by all accounts hideously looking and truly *alien* Kelvan onboard, heralding his entry as a step forward, while at the same time being disgusted with the amiable Lt. Keta for essentially attempting the same progressive strides.

"Something is not right about this captain," Molok intruded upon his thoughts. Terrence huffed at the intrusion, but his heart echoed the same sentiments. His eyes raked the bristling Klingon and the too patient Romulan

commander, sitting side by side, at vacant aft Environmental and Science stations, without weapons at hand, a most unusual sight due to the long simmering enmity between their peoples.

"I'm heading over there," he decided, his gaze never leaving his counterparts.

"Captain, I don't think that is the best idea." Commander Uhnari interjected, uncomfortable in her role as caution-advising Second Officer. "I should lead the next away team."

"Protest noted and logged." Glover said as he made his way to the turbolift, his fear for his wife and his crew roiling his stomach. "But denied. Commander Uhnari, you have the conn."

"I know you don't intend to have us just sit here while you transport over to that vessel?" The Klingon was already out of his seat.

Stopping just before the lift doors, Glover turned to Molok. "That's exactly what I was going to do."

"Captain!" Zene broke in, his voice tight with excitement. "I'm getting an incoming message from the away team. It's Commander Cherenkov's signal."

Stifling a huge sigh of relief, Glover turned back toward the main viewscreen. "Put it on the screen." He ordered the ensign.

"Aye sir."

The captain grunted as the image of a Cardassian filled the screen. Glover noted that the Cardassian was wearing a space suit, sans helmet. The ship mustn't have been as damaged as they thought. *So, it was a trap*, he realized, grinding a fist into his palm. Broad, fleshy features twisted into a predatory grin of triumph, he spoke. "Captain Glover of the Federation *Starship Aegis*, I am Darcis." He said his name as if Terrence was supposed to know it, and maybe he should have, since this Cardassian knew his.

"Where's Commander Cherenkov? What's happened to my crew?" Shoulders bunching with tension, Glover stalked back down the curved deck to stand in front of his seat.

"So direct." Darcis remarked, his eyes becoming slits. "We'll do it that way since you prefer. We want the Founder. If it is not given to us we will kill all of the remaining members of your boarding party." He paused, as he looked down and yanked the ruined, scarred face of Ivan Cherenkov up, by the hair, for the captain and the others to witness. Uhnari's intake of breath sounded louder than the report of a phaser rifle. Terrence's face became an impenetrable wall of granite. Pleased with the reaction, his expression brightening, Darcis said conversationally. "This one," he shook Cherenkov's head roughly, eliciting a groan, "will be the first of many to die. You have twenty minutes to decide."

Holding back his fear, but afraid that his wife might not be in the aforementioned “remaining” left to kill by the brutal Darcis, Glover decided to play hardball as was expected of a starship captain, particularly one who had won a Medal of Valor. He itched to give the order to clear the sky of the offending Cardassians so he could get on with carrying out his mission to Nimbus. “Though I am sure that freighter is not as damaged as we were led to believe, it is still no match for a *Prometheus*-class vessel.”

In response, Darcis looked off screen, glancing briefly back at Glover, his dark eyes filled with murderous intensity. But it didn’t seem to be directed at the captain or the hostages. The camera shifted away from the brute to focus on another Cardassian. This one was female, slender, her dark bundle of hair graying prematurely. She fixed large, unblinking blue eyes on the captain. “Captain Glover, I am Glinn Sulle of the Twelfth Order.”

“Butchers!” Molok bellowed, on his feet in an instant. As a matter of Klingon pride, the Empire had shorn most Federation offers for assistance in their theater of war, preferring to fight the Dominion with the only soldiers they trusted to turn the tide of battle-themselves. Despite the lack of knowledge about the Klingon war experience, almost every Starfleet officer had heard or knew something about the *ves’Lan* massacre.

In response to the destruction of a Dominion base on Torros III by a joint Klingon and Starfleet armada, *ves’Lan*, a Klingon world was razed to ruins by atmospheric bombardment from Jem’Hadar and Cardassian forces, from the notorious Twelfth Order, in retaliation. Hundreds of thousands died in the hecatomb. “I will dine on your entrails!”

Sulle’s features hardened. “I would expect such a comment from a savage.”

“*PetaQ!*” Molok spat.

“Hold it!” Terrence yelled, silencing the fuming Klingon with a subzero stare before swinging around to glare at the glinn. “Glinn Sulle,” he began slowly, seeking to buy time and gauge his adversary. “Of the Twelfth Order,” his tone was almost conversational. “I don’t believe we’ve had the pleasure to meet in battle.”

“We have not...until now,” she replied, the warmth in her voice evaporating with each word leaving her thin, gray lips. “But you were present at the battle to recapture Terok Nor,” she stated. Glover nodded, remembering that “Terok Nor” was the Cardassian name for Starbase Deep Space Nine. “My mate, Gil Coris Sulle died at that battle...possibly at your very hands.” A shadow of sadness flitted briefly across her face.

Glover, not sure what to say, allowed a few seconds of silence to pass before returning to his line of argument. “That is unfortunate,” he began, the pinch of consolation in his voice real. “But it doesn’t justify what you are doing now. What are your intentions toward the Founder?”

"That is no concern of yours *human!*" Darcis pushed his face back into the visual, before Sulle pushed him back out of camera shot.

"We are going to try the Changeling according to Cardassian law," Sulle revealed. "For the genocide she perpetrated on the Cardassian people. This is a Cardassian tragedy, and we have a right to resolve it in our own way."

"A lot of people died, on all sides, in the war." The captain pointed out, contingency plans battling with nightmarish images of a lifeless Jasmine competing for supremacy in his mind. "The Inter-Quadrant War Crimes Tribunal represents all victims of the Dominion."

"I wish that were so captain." The sapient glaze in her azure eyes told Terrence that she really did yearn for that to be the case.

Understanding that talking wasn't going to solve this crisis, Glover went back to playing hardball. "I can't allow you take the Founder. Starfleet officers have sworn an oath to give their lives if necessary. Turn yourselves in for whatever crimes you've already committed. I promise you'll get a fair hearing, but if one more of my people are harmed...." He looked away from the screen to Lt. Karla Weathers, standing by at the Tactical Console.

The brawny woman fired a glancing blow off of the Lissepian ship's bow. Sulle grabbed onto something off screen as the walls around her jarred from the blast. "There's a lot more where that came from. Surrender now."

"We can't do that captain. Too much is at stake."

"The next one will be a quantum torpedo. *Magnesite* hull or not, it will shred through that ship like a knife through *zabo* meat."

Sulle smiled at the mention of a famed Cardassian delicacy. "It is a shame that we never met during the war," her smile genuine. "But I don't think I can allow you to carry out that threat."

"Is that so, Mr. Weathers..." Before the Tactical Officer could respond, Ensign Zene at the Ops station, cried.

"Ship is de-cloaking aft!" Without waiting for instructions, the Elloran split the main viewer screen so that the captain could see both the bow and stern of the vessel.

"Raise shields!" A manta ray shaped Cardassian vessel, which Terrence instantly realized belonged to the large, formidable *Keldon*-class glimmered into existence behind the *Aegis*. With the Lissepian freighter facing them, the captain realized he was caught in a crossfire, and he didn't like it one bit.

"Damn," He muttered.

"*Veruuls*," T'San cursed softly, a cold rage seeping through her impenetrable façade. Glover wasn't sure if the curse was directed at Cardassians or at him.

"Cardassian warship is hailing!" Zene informed him.

"Open a channel," the captain grouched. The viewscreen blinked from the expectant glinn to a charcoal-haired, crater-faced Cardassian. Pitch,

abysmal eyes scoured over Glover from deep-set eye sockets, made even more sunken by the thick ridges encircling the man's brows.

"I am Gul Keshet. Twelfth Order," he said, his voice measured, calm, and weary.

"I take it you're commanding this... 'mission'?" Terrence asked, still stalling for time as ideas ran through his head.

Keshet nodded. "I am, and time is wasting Captain. You now have ten minutes." Before Glover could reply, the gul cut communications.

"Status of that warship?" Terrence asked the stand-in Tactical Officer.

"The destroyer's plasma banks appear to be fully operational." Weathers answered, her voice glum.

"What about the freighter?"

"The aft weapon systems appear to be destroyed, but they do have forward weapons and shielding."

"Just great," Glover replied. Looking over his shoulder, he said. "Commander Uhnari, I need to see you in my ready room right now." Walking toward the small room off to portside of the bridge, he looked back over his shoulder. "Ojana, you too."

"Aye." She said with a start, her eyes still glued to the screen. She smoothed her uniform tunic as she sprang out of her seat.

"What about us?" Molok bellowed. "Do you expect us just to sit here?" One foot already in his private study, Glover looked back at the Klingon and actually smiled.

"Of course not. Lt. Weathers, please escort our guests to their quarters. If either one," he paused, his eyes glued on the bristling Molok, "resists you in any way, stun them into next week."

"With pleasure sir." Weathers remarked, pulling out her phaser and waving it at the miffed Klingon and Romulan to accompany her into the turbolift.

*At least that part was easy,* Terrence thought as he plopped behind his desk and put his head in his hands, macabre thoughts of an injured or dead Jasmine swirling in his head.

.....

### ***USS Aegis*** **(Captain's Ready Room)**

Terrence looked at the two officers sitting across from him in his ready room, and struggled not to laugh bitterly at them, and ultimately at himself. Before the war, and especially during it, he had taken very little counsel from his staff, or even his superiors, he had been so confident and sure about what needed to be done, and how to do it. Now he hesitated, his mind torn with

doubt and fear. He was afraid to make a mistake, terrified of doing anything that might cause his wife any more harm.

And if such a terrible fate came to pass, at least he could tell himself that it was a group decision and that they all shared in the blame. The “great” war hero was nothing more than a coward afraid to make the big decisions.

“Captain, I don’t see that we have much choice,” Uhnari suggested, her petite frame trembling with anxiety. Glover knew that similar, wicked thoughts were probably tormenting her. Though both she and his XO had been fairly discreet about their affair, a good captain, even *tarnished* good captains knew their officers. The marionette Cherenkov, almost machine-like when he had been assigned to the *Cuffe* after the incursion into the Chin’toka System, had loosened up considerably in the past several months. And Aquiel had become more focused in her duties. They were good for each other, in a way that he and Jasmine had once been, and he hoped would be again someday, and there was no way he was going to interfere with that. “We have to give the Cardassians what they want.”

“I disagree sir.” Argued Pell Ojana, her tender, nurturing features turned to marble. “Cardassians can’t be trusted.” And she would know, being one of the lucky survivors from the notorious Gallitep labor camp. “The rest of the crew is dead.” She surmised, her voice cracking. “I’m sorry.”

“How can you make such a sweeping assessment?” Uhnari asked, her voice brimming with barely restrained anger. “There would be no reason for the Cardassians to not keep their word.”

“Keep *their* word?” The Bajoran diplomatic officer looked incredulous. “*Cardassians?*”

“Ladies,” Terrence held up placating hands. Looking firmly into the eyes of each, he replied. “Thank you for your counsel. Ojana, I share your feelings about the veracity of Cardassians, but I don’t, *I can’t*, sacrifice my crew. Not for a Founder.”

“Don’t you mean you’re unwilling to sacrifice your wife?” The Bajoran retorted, wincing even as the last word shot out of her mouth. “Sorry sir,” she quickly added.

Fingers digging into the armrests of his chair, his face flush with anger, a denial of the charge ready to fly out of his mouth, Glover ground his teeth together, refusing to lie to his friend. Instead he looked at the portrait of his wife on his desk, her arm wrapped around him, her smile dazzling with the spectacular Cliffs of Bole as a backdrop. It was a picture taken during their first anniversary, mere months before the war, when he had allowed insignificant things like his career or his own glory to truncate spending time with his wife. Even spending that too brief period each night in her embrace, his mind had always been on making admiral before he reached the half-century mark, besting his father. He had been such a fool then. Mustering the

courage to look the Bajoran in the eye, he said, quietly, "Yes, you're right. I almost lost her once, and I won't allow that to happen again. You may not agree, but I think you understand." He winced slightly at dredging up Ojana's memories of her own family, lost decades ago at infamous Gallitep.

Her green eyes moistening with tears, the Bajoran nevertheless held firm. "But captain," Pell pleaded. "If we give in to Cardassian terrorists, not only will it encourage more Cardassian insurgency against the allied reconstruction effort, but I'm sure the Dominion will not look too kindly upon it either."

"I know, but right now, I don't see any other way out."

"But sir..." Pell began.

"We've got four minutes," Terrence cut her off. "I'm sorry," he said. Tapping a button on his desk's companel, he spoke into its inset speaker. "Security, this is Captain Glover, prepare the Changeling for immediate transport. Take her to the Main Shuttlebay. ASAP."

"Sir?" The shocked young voice asked.

"You heard me," he snapped, cutting off the channel. Standing up, exhaling, but still feeling both the weight of love and command crushing him, the captain said. "Thank you."

Glover then jabbed another button on the console. "Sir?" Zene's expectant voice squeaked through the intercom.

"Get me the *Rakal*."

"Aye."

Seconds later, Glover removed the fear from his gaze when he peered down into the monitor on his desk. Gul Keshet peered back at him, his gaze still vivisectioning.

He moved around his desk and headed for the exit. "Here's what I'm proposing..." He laid out the plan with his best poker face, trying to maintain the illusion of control as much as possible. The Cardassian played along; nodding his head in approval after the captain had finished.

"Acceptable," was all the gul said before disconnecting the comchannel. The captain moved around his desk and headed for the exit.

"Where are you going?" Both Pell and Uhnari asked in unison.

"Somebody's got to pilot that shuttle, and I'm not sending anyone else into harm's way." He nodded curtly, brooking no debate, and then left them alone to ponder the inexplicable human need for self-immolation.

.....

### **Lisepian Freighter *Impai***

The stinging slap brought Keta out of a dark, dreamless sleep. She awoke with a start, instantly realizing that in order to be struck her helmet must be off. On reflex, she gasped for air, dumbfounded when it rushed



through her open lips. Caressing her cheek, she quickly sought to get her bearings.

The young, leering Cardassian standing in front of her made her task all the more difficult. "You *are* a Cardassian." He remarked, his voice a mixture of fascination and revulsion. "What are you doing with *them*?" Without having to describe "them", Keta knew the Cardassian meant the away team. She wondered how many had survived, because she had been sure that she wouldn't when her suit had malfunctioned as a result of a disruptor beam, setting electric fire to her skin.

Knowing the truth would probably get her killed, Keta said anyway. "I am a Security Forces officer." She had meant to say it with strength, but the words squeaked out of her parched throat.

"I told you Mesec," another Cardassian, this one a lanky female, replied. She had been standing at attention by the door in the dim room away from the younger male...*Mesec*, but within easy distance to fire the phase-disruptor rifle clutched in her hands or to alert others in the event of an escape attempt. Keta felt almost proud that fellow Cardassians would regard her with such caution. "She is the worst kind of *vole*." The young woman added. "Even worse than these."

Keta craned her sore neck to follow the sweep of the rifle to see the still unconscious forms of Lt. Glover and Doctors Amoros and Satel, all piled together in a far corner of the room. For some reason, no doubt associated with her Cardassian ethnicity, she was separated from the pile. Lt. Cmdr. Cherenkov and Lt. Donar, or the Bynars were not present. She could only assume that they were dead, or maybe being tortured for information before being put to death. "They fight for their homeworlds, but she-*it*-betrays its own race for *them*." The young woman concluded, her slender frame radiating hostility.

Keta opened her mouth to protest the unfair condemnation, but realized that she at times felt the same way. Instead she croaked. "It's...not that simple."

"Really?" The young woman asked, her anger overtaking her judgment. Stepping over to the still slumping liaison, the woman got on one knee, to look at Keta squarely eye to eye. It was an unfair stand off, due to the fact that the woman's left eye socket was missing its orb. A spider web of vicious, pale scars marred the woman's face. Keta wanted to turn away from the hideous sight, but knew that her life might depend on her toughness. Cardassians had pack mentalities, any hint or smell of fear, and they would be all over you like wild *gettle*.

"One of your Klingon allies did this to me, before..." Her voice broke and she shoved the emitter cone of the rifle harshly into Keta's chin. Though the cold metal bit into her face, she fought not to break eye contact with the

woman, not even to blink. "He carved my face as if it were *tojal* meat. My mother and my youngest brother tried to stop them..." A tear welled up in the woman's remaining eye. Standing up suddenly, she took her rifle and swung it into Keta's face as if her head was a baseball, a game she had learned about when her family had once vacationed on Earth, years before the war had "confined" them to the comfortable refuge of Vulcan's Forge.

Her head hit the floor, pain exploding on both sides, cracking her jaw and swelling her head. Waves of darkness and tears blurred her vision as she tried to sit up and then find a way to defend herself. She heard the fatal whistle of the rifle cut through the air again, before Mesec shouted, "Beroz, no! Her fate is not in our hands." He shoved the fierce woman away from Keta, yanking the rifle from her hands.

Through sheets of pain, Keta made out the wraith rounding on the young man, a keening squeal erupting from her throat. Unfortunately, darkness reclaimed her before she saw how the show ended.

.....

### **Lissepian Freighter *Impai***

Tai Donar thanked the gods for the pain. "I've never seen anything like it," remarked the wizened Cardassian bending over him, as he ran an autosuture over the Angosian's exposed chest. Sometime between being shot and awakening in a paroxysm of merciful torment, the bastard spoon heads had removed his EVA suit, and cut open the front of his black uniform, all in an effort to save him. *Save him?* It didn't make sense. After stealing a glance at the medic, he decided to "play possum", as he had once heard Captain Glover call it a little longer until he could find out. Of course, the aged, leathery skinned Cardassian attending his wound was making that difficult. "His injuries have almost healed." The medic marveled.

"How is that possible?" Eyes closed, Donar nonetheless felt a chill, shadow fall across him as he heard heavy boots come to a stop beside the still kneeling doctor. The voice was deep, imperious and belonged to one accustomed to being answered immediately and with fearful respect.

"I don't know," the older Cardassian admitted. "His physiology is amazing. He would make an excellent specimen for the Central University."

"Will he live?" Another voice, raspy, but definitely female asked. There were tinges of both hope and disappointment in her question.

"Yes." The old man answered.

"Thank you Gil Rumal. At least someone here knows how to perform their job." The female added.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Donar both heard and felt the movement of the heavy boots away from him as the medic-*Rumal*-stood up

with a groan. There was an ugly, threatening tone in the imperious one's voice.

"That Gul Keshet told us not to kill any of the Starfleeters. This one's unusual biology is the only thing that kept you from disobeying his orders." Her words were almost wistful, as if she had wished that Donar had not survived. The Angosian didn't think her regret was aimed at him however, but more so at the more imperious Cardassian. Cracking his eyes open, he made out the large Cardie now facing the smaller, redoubtable female.

"Gul Keshet has no power over me," the stout man rumbled. "The Obsidian Order was autonomous from the Central Command."

"And neither one of those now exist." The woman shot back. "Out here, those things have no meaning. Keshet is the commander of the *Rakal*, and his word is law."

"Is that so?" The large man grabbed the handle of the disruptor pistol holstered on his side. The woman held her ground. Rupal stepped back into his line of sight.

"We don't have time for this!" He barked, as if he were talking to squabbling siblings, which he very well might have been. The larger Cardassian craned his neck to look down at the old man, nudging him with force.

"Attend to the other one!" He commanded. Rupal said nothing else as he turned back toward Donar. The Angosian quickly shut his eyes. Seconds later, he chanced another peek. The medic was now kneeling beside him, gingerly touching the face of Commander Cherenkov. It was the first time that Tai had noticed the Executive Officer there, and he cursed himself for being so inobservant. Taking stock of his surroundings and of the locations of any fellow comrades should've been his first priority, but he had been sucked into the melodrama playing out before him, so reminiscent of the Angosian war dramas he had enjoyed as a child before the Tarsian Wars had unalterably changed his view of war and sacrifice, that he hadn't even realized any other captive in the room.

"There are severe lacerations on this human's face," Rupal noted.

"Of course there are. I put them there." The huge Cardie replied. "He will live."

"No thanks to you," Rupal grumbled. With swift speed, the larger Cardassian moved toward the still crouching medic. Before the old man could respond, the bigger man kicked him in the ribs. Tai involuntarily winced at the wet sound of snapping ribs. The old man keeled over, a mewling sound emitting from his lips.

"Darcis you fool!" The woman shouted. "One more move and it will be your last." Darcis laughed, but he didn't take another step toward the writhing medic. Instead, he bowed with mock gentility.

"Of course Levara." Tai's attention was drawn to an insistent beeping in the far corner of the room, out of eyesight without him moving his head and revealing that he was now conscious. Darcis's heavy boots pounded across the room. Seconds later, the woman spoke again.

"Keshet wants us to split the prisoners into groups. Have Glinn-sed Beroz and Sed Mesec take the other prisoners and board one of their shuttles. As a good faith gesture, they will pilot it to the Federation starship. We will take these prisoners," she paused, Donar only assuming she was pointing or making some kind of gesture toward him and the still unconscious Cherenkov, "with us." His heart swelled with a surprising rapidity at the prospect that the rest of the away team wasn't dead.

"I don't like dividing our forces," Darcis replied.

"What you *'like'* is not my concern. We have our orders."

"But what about Beroz and the others?" Darcis asked, though Tai sensed that the Cardassian cared less about the welfare of the other Cardassians than finding another avenue to express his dissent.

"Take the prisoners," Levara ordered, ignoring him. "I will see to Rumal." Tai closed his eyes again, and forced his body not to stiffen as another shadow fell over him, and he was swept up in Darcis's powerful arms. Thrown like a sack of *kalla* tubules over the Cardie's shoulder, he was both thrilled and unnerved when Darcis also reached down and scooped up Cherenkov, slinging him over his other shoulder.

As the Cardassian stomped out of the room, each step causing a jolt of agony, all Donar could think of was how looking forward he was to fighting and killing this beast. *Soon*, he savored, biting back screams, blinking away tears, *soon...*

---

## CHAPTER SIX

### *USS Aegis* (Main Shuttle Bay)

"Solids never cease to amaze...or disappoint." The Founder stated calmly as she sidled into the seat beside Captain Glover. She placed shackled hands in her lap while cocking her head slightly to the side, her usually fluid movements hampered by the inhibitor collar, to appraise him with a quizzical gaze. The captain ignored her, turning in his seat to address a nervous, skeptical security guard, his phaser clutched in a white-knuckled death grip at the Changeling.

"That will be all Ensign."

"Are you sure sir?" The voice was equal parts concern and relief.

"Yes."

"Aye sir." The guard bowed his head and moved slowly out of the shuttle *Estevanico*, never taking his eyes or his weapon off of the placid shape shifter. Once gone, Terrence pressed a button to close the hatch. It sealed with a hissing sound.

"Where are we going Captain?" The Founder asked, looking at him with eyes that didn't see him. He wasn't sure if that was intentional or if the changeling even needed eyes to see or sense him.

"I'm exchanging you for some of my officers. They have been taken hostage by a renegade Cardassian. Gul Keshet."

"Oh." She replied, nodding her head almost imperceptibly. She turned away from him to gaze out of the view port. Glover returned to finishing his preflight checks. Unable to allow the silence to escalate, he finally asked.

"You have nothing else to say, nothing more to ask?"

"No, you have proved that solids can't be trusted. You will do the thing I failed to do. Even Odo will not be able to convince the Great Link that your kind is not mendacious by nature. If you deliver me to the Cardassians, if you flout your own law, there will be war." Still calm, her quiet voice and patient manner took on an ominously prescient cast.

The captain swallowed a retort as he tapped commands into the shuttle's companel. The *Estevanico* rocked gently as it rose slowly from the Main Shuttlebay deck. Glover eased the ship around until the view port filled with twinkling stars and the scored *Keldon*-class destroyer waiting on the other side of the permeable atmospheric force field.

Per their agreement, Glover had allowed Keshet to move his ship into station keeping beside the Lissepian vessel. The captain thought it might be better for Lt. Commander Uhnari to have both ship's facing her rather than sandwiching the *Aegis*. It would also give her an escape route if she had to

run, and he hoped the impulsive Haliian would have enough sense to cut out if the situation required it.

Glancing perhaps for the last time at the cargo bay as the small vessel moved toward the field, Glover picked out the young security officer among the gaggle of guards staring up at the departing ship, exaggeratedly wiping sweat off of his forehead. The captain wished he could do the same.

Passing through the shimmering field, his heart fluttered as he saw the *York* gingerly crossing the field from the opposite direction. Keshet had apparently kept his word. Terrence could only hope that Jasmine was alive and well among the shuttle's occupants. He would find out the answers for both assumptions soon enough.

.....

### ***USS Aegis*** **(Main Bridge)**

Lt. Commander Aquiel Uhnari leaned over Ensign Zene's shoulder as she peered into the small monitor inlaid in the Ops console. "How is everyone doing Dr. Pham?" Victoria Pham, the gamma shift doctor, rubbed the sleep from her puffy eyes, and stifled a yawn before answering.

"Outside of some minor cuts and burns, everyone will be fine." She stated.

"That's a relief." Uhnari smiled, though she didn't feel relieved. Her mind was both on Ivan, still in the clutches of the Cardassians, and Captain Glover, stubbornly heading into the maw. Behind her, the scene was playing out on the main viewer, the slow moving shuttle *Estevanico* gliding toward the expectant warship *Rakal*. She didn't want to see the ship being swallowed, both figuratively and literally in the belly of the destroyer's shuttlebay. But she wouldn't dare switch off the viewer. The Haliian wanted the bridge crew to be ready to respond at the slightest moment to any deviation from the prearranged plan devised by the captain, or any unexpected, or perhaps *expected*, treachery from the Cardassians. "Inform me if there are any changes in the conditions of the patients Doctor."

"Of course Commander." Pham smiled back at her before deactivating the link.

Steeling herself, and clenching her fluttering stomach, Uhnari turned back around to observe the *Estevanico* as it disappeared into the *Rakal*. "At least that part went according to plan." She said aloud, though she was speaking to herself more so than to any of the other bridge officers. Sensing the knowing looks and agreeing nods of her compatriots, she added, to cover the fact that she had been talking to herself, "If only we can be so lucky about everything else." She walked slowly down the curved ring of the bridge, checking stations, looking every few seconds at the screen. Now it was filled

only with the battered, but dangerous stingray shaped ship, its ventral disruptor array gleaming bright crimson. *They are primed for battle*, she thought. *I hope we are too.*

Aquiel looked across the bridge to the Tactical console, prepared to ask Lt. Weathers for a status report. "Where's the Lieutenant?" The Halian asked the cadet currently manning the station.

"*I don't know sir.*" The jade translator latched at the base of the similarly colored Jarada's neck deciphered the series of clacks made by her long mandibles. Uhnari's brow furrowed.

"She should've been back by now." She replied, again to herself as she tapped the communicator on her left breast. "Uhnari to Weathers. Come in please." Waiting for several seconds, she repeated the procedure. Still receiving no response, the engineer cocked her head to the side and said aloud. "Computer, please locate Lt. Weathers."

"Lt. Weathers is on Deck Five." The computer answered, with a measured female lilt.

"What is she doing there?" Uhnari asked, her stomach tightening with worry. She didn't know much about Karla Weathers, but from what little she had seen of the woman, she wasn't one to dally around. She would've completed her assignment and returned to the bridge as quickly as possible. *Unless something had happened to her, and maybe to T'San and Molok as well?*

"Unable to ascertain." The computer replied. "Lt. Weathers is currently on Deck Five." It repeated, almost as if it were trying to mollify its own suspicions.

"Life signs?" The perceptive, but impertinent Ensign Lomar asked the computer. Uhnari shot him a nasty look for ignoring the chain of command, but was nonetheless grateful for the question because she had been afraid to voice it.

"The lieutenant's life signs are minimal."

"Send a security..." Uhnari's command was cut short by the hissing of the bridge's turbolift doors.

A battered T'San, green blood pouring down her face from a large gash on her forehead, stumbled out of the lift. Aquiel beat the several other officers who ran over to catch the Romulan as she crumpled to the ground. The others formed an awkward ring around her and the commander. Gently cupping the injured woman's chin after propping her upper body in her lap, the engineer's partially telepathic sensitivity was bombarded by the terror rolling off the injured commander in thundering psychic waves.

"*Molok*," she spat through blood washed teeth. "*Molok*," she repeated before passing out.

Uhnari tapped her combadge twice-in quick succession, "Medical team to the Bridge!" and "Computer locate Captain Molok!" The Haliian didn't need psionic abilities to guess the computer's answer before it replied.

"Captain Molok is not aboard the *Aegis*."

"Damn." The engineer whispered, looking past the anxious throng to stare at the predacious *Rakal*. *I hope the captain can handle treacherous Cardassians, a terrifying Changeling, and a crazy Klingon*, she prayed, while bringing Ivan back to her. With Glover before Cuellar, she was sure that the captain was the only man that could. Thinking quickly, she tapped her communicator again. Sgt. Slade, head of the Military Assault Command Operations detachment watching over the three Cardassians that had piloted the *York* back to the *Aegis*, responded.

"Yes?"

"Sergeant, hold those Cardassians."

"But sir," he protested. "The captain left orders for us to allow the Cardassians to return to the *Rakal* after they had delivered our crewmen."

"Who's in command right now Sergeant?"

Seconds of hesitation followed before he groused. "You are sir."

"Follow my orders then."

Uhnari could just imagine the bearish man working his large jaw as he grated. "Aye." Tapping the link off, Aquiel finally decided to sit down in the captain's chair, the tension draining her. She hoped the risky move would give the captain more options instead of less. The next few minutes would prove her sage or fool.

.....

### **Central Command Vessel *Rakal* (Main Shuttle Bay)**

Though the interior of the shuttlebay was stifling, Captain Glover shivered with cold anger. "What did you do to my officers?" He glared at the three, armed Cardassians standing before him, before looking back down at Commander Cherenkov and Lt. Donar; both slumped at the feet of the largest Cardassian. Gul Keshet was sandwiched between the behemoth and Glinn Sulle.

Terrence hid his surprise at Keshet's bantam stature. Three empty *ketracel* white tubes hung from a makeshift necklace around his wide, beige neck, clinking against the clamshell cuirass protecting his torso.

Sulle wore similar dark armor, a rusted Klingon *dk'tahg* tied to her right thigh. Muscles and girth bulged out of Darcis's fit forming black one-piece outfit, sans the standard Cardassian armor. A large phase-disruptor pistol rested in a holster on his hip.



The shuttle *Henson*, which the Cardassians had pilfered, to bring both captive officers aboard the *Rakal*, rested idly behind them, its thruster engines making a clicking noise as they cooled.

"They are none the worst for wear captain, except for the Bynars," Darcis spoke, his voice dripping with bored condescension. "But I had hoped for more of a challenge." Glover moved toward the gloating Cardassian, thoughts of the murdered Bynars filling him with loathing.

"If it's a challenge you want..." The Cardassian stepped over the prone Donar, a rapacious smile plastering his gray face. He slid his disruptor pistol into a side holster and flexed his cable-cord arms.

"Finally, a human with some fighting spirit," he chuckled.

"Stay your hand Darcis." Glinn Sulle warned. "Remember the mission."

"The mission is to inflict as much pain on our enemies as they have on us," he roared, forgetting Glover as he swung his large head followed by his equally hulking body at the slender, but resolute Sulle. "Don't ever forget that!"

"The Federation is not your enemy." Terrence interrupted. "We're trying to help the Cardassian people."

"Good intentions pave the road to ruin, or something like that you humans say," Gul Keshet sliced into the conversation, his rigid bearing and dignified manner shaming both the fuming Darcis and the flaring Sulle. "You *'help'* us by trying to turn us into bastardized, supplicant versions of yourselves. You want to rip our culture, our history, our faith, our contributions away from us, and give us what in return? *Democracy? Human rights? Bajoran* pity? Never." The gul spoke with a quiet, bristling intensity, as gouts of contempt spewed from his black gaze.

"That's not true!" Glover protested, growing hot at the unfair charges being hurled at the Federation. "All we've offered is aid, assistance."

"You've taken away our right to defend ourselves," Sulle replied. "You've disbanded the Central Command."

"And you've left Cardassia vulnerable to its enemies from without and within by sublimating our intelligence apparatus underneath your own." Darcis added.

"But worst of all, your Federation has allowed Klingons to establish imperial control over Cardassian territory. Klingons roost in the Imperial Plaza, making judgments over Cardassian destiny!" Keshet spat on the deck plating, his tightly bound intensity slipping into a paroxysm of quivering rage as his voice boomed throughout the shuttlebay. Instinctively, Terrence reached for the phaser clipped to the belt of his uniform.

"How could I have not seen what seems so lucid now," the mocking voice of the Founder wafted over the maelstrom of emotions, just behind Glover's left ear. "The Cardassians were always more content with

complaining about petty concerns than resolving them. You were not fit to rule.”

Before anyone could react, Darcis had ripped out his phase-disruptor and shot the Founder in the face, the deadly beam sizzling just past the captain’s ear. Almost a second too late, Terrence jumped away from the blast, hitting the ground and rolling to a crouch, his own weapon pointed at the three Cardassians. Instead of firing, he pulled a small, silver device from the pouch clipped to his belt. With his thumb, he pressed the large red button in the center of the device. The collar and shackles fell from the thrashing Founder, flying across the cargo hold, propelled by her frenzied, and flailing spasms. He wasn’t going to allow the Changeling to be murdered without giving her a fighting chance. The move didn’t dampen Darcis’s resolve; he pressed on with his attack, stepping closer to the Changeling, now a black pool on the deck plating.

“Drop your weapon Darcis!” He bellowed. “Now!” He aimed the phaser. Darcis, enveloped by rage, was oblivious to his threat. He poured the energy cartridge of his pistol into the Changeling. The Founder writhed, transforming into an orangish black, sludge as she absorbed the discharge with an eerie silence. Glover still held his fire as Keshet wrapped his arm around Darcis’s gun hand. The large Cardassian wouldn’t budge. The gul slapped the Cardassian, and then clobbered him against a ridged temple with the butt of his own weapon. Darcis continued pumping disruptor bolts into the tormented shape shifter. Stepping back from the relentless giant, Keshet looked at Sulle. She nodded, adjusted the setting on her own weapon, and shot Darcis in the thigh.

The leviathan screamed as the beam lanced through his leg. He turned again toward Sulle, cutting off his weapon, as he aimed it at the glinn. She smiled as she pierced his other thigh with another shot. Darcis fell with a thunderous crash to the deck, his pistol flying from his grasp to slide underneath the *Henson*. He flopped around the deck for several minutes, until shock enveloped him, and he passed out.

Glover slowly returned to his feet, clipping his phaser back on his belt only after both Keshet and Sulle had sheathed their weapons. The captain couldn’t stop himself from flinching when a hand, burning through the cloth of his uniform, clamped onto his shoulder. He craned his neck to look into the pained eyes of the Founder, wisps of smoke curling off her still congealing form. Terrence looked from her to the Cardassians. Both watched the scene with rapt, almost lascivious interest.

“We will take the Changeling now.” Keshet stepped toward him. Glover instinctively stepped backwards.

“Not until I get my crewmen.” Looking away from him, the gul nodded to his right and then to his left. Out of the shadows, several hefty Cardassians

appeared, grabbing both Donar and Cherenkov. As they lumbered toward the open hatch of the *Estevanico*, the smoldering air was rent by the whine of a transporter beam.

Glover pulled his phaser, grabbing Keshet around his scaly neck. Pressing the weapon's emitter cone against the gul's temple, the captain hissed. "What's going on?"

"That's not one of our transporter beams!" Keshet growled, as he struggled against the captain's firm grip, "It's one of yours!" Glover's concentration slipped as the realization dawned on him that the Cardassian was telling the truth as the blue transporter beam materialized into the bulky form of Molok.

"Today is a good day to die!" The rampaging Klingon roared as he thumbed the activation button on the phaser he carried, striking Glinn Sulle, and then the two soldiers that had just placed Cherenkov in the shuttle.

"Levara," Keshet breathed, taking advantage of the distraction caused by Molok's appearance to wrest free of the captain. He stomped down on the captain's foot, while going down on one knee as Terrence fell back, his injured foot throbbing, his phaser momentarily forgotten. With lightning speed, the wiry gul grabbed the captain's arm before he had completely removed it from around the Cardassian's neck, and with surprising strength, flipped the captain over his back.

Glover flew through the air, wind gushing out of his lungs, pain lacing his back as he smacked into the shuttlebay's hard deck plating. Before the captain could rise up, the barrel of a phase-disruptor rifle was pressed hard into his left nostril. He looked defiantly up at the amber-eyed Cardassian holding the weapon. The woman merely nodded her head, daring him to make a move. Terrence maintained his position, but saw out of the corner of his eye that at least a dozen Cardassians had flooded into the hold to join the melee. A throng of the soldiers had surrounded both the Klingon and the Founder. Molok, now using his hands, was dispatching Cardassians with merciful glee. Unable to get a shot at him in such close quarters, but perhaps also anxious to get their hands on a real, live Klingon, the Cardassians were throwing themselves into the brawl. The captain could barely make out the Changeling. Apparently still weakened by Darcis's attack, the Founder was hemmed in by a circle of armed soldiers.

The woman guarding Glover took her eyes off of him for a few seconds to take stock of the fight as more Cardassians poured into the bay. The captain hoped she enjoyed the last thing she ever saw. Large, swarthy hands clamped around the Cardassian's neck and snapped it with ease. She fell in a heap on top of Glover.

He threw the lifeless body off of him, mindful to grab her disruptor rifle. Lt. Tai Donar, his scarred, sculpted chest heaving through the tear in his

uniform, helped Glover to his feet. "I should be helping you," the captain couldn't resist the quip as he glanced at the wheezing, perspiring Angosian. He had never seen the man in such bad shape.

"Earth humor," he gasped. "I never cease to grow tired of it."

"A joke Mr. Donar?" The Angosian merely shook his head.

"An observation." He replied dryly, before adding. "Captain, we've got to get out of here."

"I know," Glover answered. "Head to the shuttle. Get it prepped. Can you do that?"

"Yes sir," Donar replied, hesitating. "But what about you?"

"I'm going after the Founder...and Molok too." He added with a sprinkle of reluctance.

"But captain..."

"Don't have time for it!" Terrence snapped. "Get moving before the Cardassians realize we're still here." Without saying another word, the Angosian turned from him and dashed into the *Estevanico's* hatch.

At the edge of the pulsating mass of elbows, knees, and bludgeons, Glover dipped his head as he waded into the throng. He grunted, and bit back several curses as the struggling Cardassians inadvertently struck him as they sought either to fight the Klingon or run away from him. Even Glover found himself impressed with Molok's prowess. Even the Klingons he had fought during the brief conflict that had flared between the Klingon Empire and the Federation as a precursor the Dominion War had not fought with such ferociousness or displayed such strength. He was glad that they didn't, or he probably wouldn't be here now, being pummeled by a Cardassian mob to save two former enemies.

Swinging the rifle like a baseball bat, Glover plowed his way through the mass. The captain almost got his head cleaved off as a result. The vicious, curving blade of the *mek'leth* sliced the air just in front of him, its tip nicking his quickly turned cheek. Somehow, Molok had snuck two of the weapons past the *Aegis's* security protocols. Lt. Donar would not be pleased to hear that. The Klingon was wielding both blades with deadly accuracy, cutting off anything that got in his way. The ailing Founder had surprisingly curled herself at his feet, barely shielding her face from the kicking and stomping of the Cardassians. Pushing himself past the group, Glover grabbed hold of Molok from behind. He nearly lost his grip as his head exploded in pain when the fierce Klingon head butted him. The captain next felt the cold, blood soaked tip of a *mek'leth* cutting into his throat.

"Glover!" Molok laughed. "This is a glorious battle, heh? Worthy of song!"

"We've got to get out of here!" Terrence shouted over the din. "Help me get the Founder!" Without taking his eyes off of the Cardassians, Molok hollered back.

"You take the Changeling. I will continue to fight, to cover our escape." The captain nodded his assent, a bit surprised that the Klingon agreed so quickly to his plan. Klingons were not one's usually ready to leave the site of a battle, or any fight really, especially one that could actually be worthy of a Klingon opera. If Terrence had known any Klingon playwrights, he would surely have had Molok's amazing performance immortalized.

The captain reached down, and placed the Founder in a fireman's carry over his shoulders. He was again surprised at how light; almost weightless the Changeling was. She snuggled around him, allowing him to more effectively use the disruptor rifle to cut a swath through the Cardassians. Molok was right on his heels, blocking, parrying, thrusting, and slicing with his twin blades.

The yawning hatch, with a feverish Lt. Donar hunched over the controls, beckoned just beyond Terrence's reach. The hum of the *Estevanico's* engines filled the air as his mind zeroed in on solely completing his objective, the noises, and violence around him fading into the background of his conscious thought. The captain forced himself not to smile as he placed a foot on the welcoming floor of the shuttle. Even the stern Donar broke into a grin as he turned around, and saw the captain. He twirled the disruptor around his trigger finger. "Thought you were someone else."

"Sometimes *I* wish I was someone else." Glover grinned. A force buffeted his back. Turning around to upbraid Molok, for once good naturedly, the captain's grin evaporated as a sphere of flame rushed towards him.

\*\*\*\*\*

## II JUDGMENTS

### CHAPTER SEVEN

#### *USS Aegis* (Main Bridge)

The arctic vacuum of space quickly devoured the bright, red-orange flames spouting from the *Rakal*. Lt. Commander Aquiel Uhnari leaped out of the captain's chair, eyes riveted to the screen. "What the hell just happened *now*?" The Haliian was still miffed that Molok had been able to disarm Lt. Weathers, giving her a nasty concussion, and then beamed off of *Aegis* onto the Cardassian ship, throwing Captain Glover's plan completely awry. She, along with the rest of the bridge crew had been waiting innumerable anxious minutes, bathed in the garish red light of red alert mode, for the result of the Klingon's foolhardy action. And now they had it. Wreckage, twisted metal and broken bodies spat onto the pristine canvas of stars, an affront to its glacial, eternal beauty.

"Apparently there was some explosion in the starboard docking area of the Cardassian warship." Cadet Nsin responded, the translator's tinny computerized voice barely audible over the loud clacking of the excitable Jarada's mandibles and pincers. "There was a hull breach."

"Survivors?" Uhnari glanced at both the Ops and Science stations, knowing their sensors were more sensitive in detecting bio-signatures. Lomar responded first:

"Sensors detecting several Cardassians, an Angosian, and one human life sign. There is too much interference." He mumbled with a mild strain of annoyance, his placid features wrinkling with distaste. Aquiel's heart both soared and sank as she realized that only one human-Ivan or the captain-had possibly survived whatever had happened on the *Rakal*. And she felt like a traitor for praying to the gods that it be her lover, hungry to be in his arms, to touch his mind and share his soul again. She blinked away the evil, terrible, but true thought as she looked at the listing *Keldon*-class vessel. "What about the bodies in the debris field?"

"Scanning," Zene responded. Seconds later, he looked up at the expectant commander, shaking his elongated head, his shoulders sagging with disappointment.

"Damn." She cursed, her skin growing hot with fear as her anxiety took hold. "Are the *Rakal*'s shields down now?" She snapped, her nerves fraying.

"Aye." Nsin responded.

"Beam out our people," she turned to look at the screen, unwilling to give in to the impulse to flee to the dark, almost gothic comforts of Main Engineering. "Now!"

"Beam out successful." Uhnari rubbed imaginary beads of sweat off of her crested brow.

"Good job Mr. Nsin." She smiled at the insectoid. It observed with the two large, compound pairs of eyes set on the sides of its head for a couple of seconds before nodding. "Now, scan that ship again for any other human life signs." Aquiel fought against the urge of running down to Sickbay to see which human had made it off of the *Rakal*. Not until she had exhausted all of her options for saving the remaining crewmember, and until the *Aegis* was safely out of harm's way.

"*Rakal* is firing!" The cadet said, its multifaceted vision watching both its tactical display panel while also maintaining 'eye contact' with the lieutenant commander. Amber beams of energy erupted from the destroyer's port flank.

"Evasive maneuvers!" Uhnari sat back down in the captain's chair, grabbing the armrests, flinching in anticipation of the destruction about to rain upon the starship, her prayers already going out to those caught in the wake of the volley. She closed her eyes momentarily, as the bridge rocked and the dim lighting grew even dimmer, winking out for several seconds, before being restored. She opened her eyes, and quickly took in her surroundings. There were no sparking, smoking consoles, leaking plasma conduits or flames. For that she was grateful, but even more so because she was not greeted with the sight of more seared, shattered, and bloodied comrades. She had seen too many over the last few months. "Damage report?" Uhnari glanced at the crew.

"Minimal damage. No casualties. Shields holding at 72%" Nsin reported.

"It's the Lissepian ship commander." The oddly quiet Lt. Rojas remarked, lines of worry crawling across her round face. "Look!" Aquiel took the helm officer's advice.

"Core breach is imminent," Lt. Mercer at the auxiliary Engineering console, called out.

"More power to forward shields," Uhnari commanded, gripping both armrests tightly again. "This won't be pretty." Though the *Aegis* could warp away to a safe distance before the Lissepian ship's parabolic core exploded, ripping across subspace, she decided to gamble that the rest of the crew also shared her desire to retrieve both the missing crewman and the Founder; whatever the risks.

Seconds later the freighter exploded, the viewer's sensors filtering the blinding intensity of the blast as the ship flared into oblivion. Aquiel wished

that the ship's shields could similarly adjust to the shockwave produced by the explosion. Caught full force in the shock wave, the ship pitched to the starboard side, trying to ride through the gale. Overstressed systems sparked around her, filling the bridge with thick smoke and flames. Uhnari dug into the leather armrests, and she planted her feet. She blinked through the stinging mists of foam that rained down on the bridge courtesy of the fire suppression system spread through the ceiling bulkheads.

She heard Lt. Mercer curse in pain behind her before going silent, but she didn't want to swivel around, and see what her heart already knew. The blast had thrown Lt. Rojas from her station as well. On unsteady legs, she retook her seat, a sliver of white bone poking out of the shredded arm of her uniform. With her good hand, she began tapping commands into the flight control console to keep the bucking starship on a steady course. "Medical team to the bridge!" Uhnari screamed after flipping a toggle on the command chair. Seconds later, the maelstrom ended as quickly as it had begun. Within minutes, Dr. Pham and two nurses were on the bridge, attending to the casualties.

"Ship's status?" Aquiel looked at Nsin. The arachnoid, firmly rooted at its post, in no small measure due to having six legs, responded. "Shields are down to 34%. Twelve casualties and two fatalities reported in on Decks 7, 9, and 12, but no permanent damage to warp engines and no hull breaches."

"May the spirits bless their journeys," Uhnari prayed, looking at the screen. The viewer filled with the smoldering remnants of the freighter, sliced apart with ease by the *Keldon*-class destroyer. "What about the *Rakal*?" She asked. "Did they survive?"

"The Cardassians are attempting to activate their cloaking device." Lomar informed her. "But they appear to be having difficulty successfully engaging it."

"What?" She swung her head from Nsin back to the main viewer.

"A distraction." The Kelvan Science Officer answered. The *Rakal* flickered like a dying candle as the dark waves of the cloaking field struggled to take hold. "Disable that thing now Mr. Nsin!" She snapped. "I'm not letting those murderers get away!" The plating beneath her feet shuddered as the Jarada released several phaser blasts at the *Rakal* from the starship's dorsal phaser bank. They passed cleanly through space as the warship shrouded beyond their ability to detect.

"Full spread, photon and quantum torpedoes; all phaser banks!" Uhnari whirled around, a snarl in her voice. "We'll light this patch of space up. Cloak or not, their minimal shielding won't be able to withstand such a volley." *But neither will the last remaining crewmen*, the thought knifed through her mind before she dismissed it. "On my mark..." Before she gave the order to fire, Lomar interrupted her.



"I detected a warp signature right before the cloaking device was engaged. They've gone to warp sir."

"How is that possible?" Aquiel looked over at the absent Engineering console, manned only minutes before by the deceased Lt. Mercer. She winced with regret and her own shame at being unable to look death in the face, failing to give the departed junior engineer at least that much respect.

"Ships shouldn't be able to warp with hull breaches, but apparently the *Rakal* has," Lomar picked up the slack.

"Track their ion trail," grouched the Haliian as she turned away from the screen, struggling not to choke on her anger and frustration.

Seeming to understand the meaning behind her action, the Science Officer's voice was even tighter and devoid of emotion when he replied. "The destruction of the Lissepian freighter and its warp core engines has irradiated this sector of space, erasing their ion trail. The massive discharge of disruptive energy into the already volatile subspace field would surely engulf the *Aegis* as well as the *Rakal*. Our weakened shields might not hold."

"*'Shields might not hold?'*" Uhnari challenged, though she already knew what she had to do. Her shoulders' slumping almost as if in imitation of Lt. Zene, Aquiel turned next to the Elloran. "Mr. Zene, send an Alpha-One channel message to Starfleet Command. Tell them we've got a situation...."  
.....

### **Central Command Vessel *Rakal* (Shuttle Bay)**

"Impressive," a ragged Gul Keshet remarked as he gazed at the scorched, but seamless portside wall of the *Rakal's* shuttle bay, unable to tell where the wall ended and the Founder began. Only mere minutes ago, there had been a jagged hole in the wall, the result of an explosion he had caused to prevent Captain Glover from completing his escape. The crafty move had punctured the ship, sucking men, equipment, and material out into the unforgiving stars. The death of any loyal Cardassian was a tragedy, but he promised the sacrifices made today would not be forgotten.

"Indeed," Glinn Sulle managed between intakes of breath, her lungs still greedily sucking in air. Both a medical team, headed by Gil Rumal and an engineering team, led by Chief Tech Lajal had already arrived, clearing the deck of debris, both metal and organic. "It's a mystery as to why the Founder has covered the breach. I thought Changelings didn't need oxygen," she whispered. "She could've easily slipped through the hole and left us all to asphyxiate."

"Don't give it any ideas," Darcis chided, his words slurring as he massaged his bandaged thighs. He lazily swatted away another nattering

medic and limped to stand beside Keshet, opposite Sulle. The reek of the medicines coursing through his system, dulling his pain and keeping the behemoth semi-conscious was almost overwhelming. "Despite your intervention, I sufficiently weakened the thing. Her fate is tied to our own, and the shape shifter knows it."

The gul could feel the hatred radiating off of the intelligence agent, even in his drugged state. If he didn't act to close the rift between Levara and Darcis soon, he feared that Sulle would soon end up dead. He didn't want to lose Levara, the closest thing he had to a friend, to family since the death, the noble sacrifice of his wife Nebel. He would never dishonor her memory by taking Sulle into his bed or his house, but he had taken her into his confidence.

A twinge of frustration pinched Keshet's heart. As much as he cared for Sulle, he couldn't rid himself of Darcis...just yet. In the wake of Dancus's assassination, Legate Tarkon had completely capitulated, joining his tripartite masters in actively shutting down True Way cells throughout the Union.

The ranks had been severely gutted. Crushed by Nebel's death, hounded by his oppressors, with dwindling funds and armaments, Keshet had almost pondered, for a few seconds at least, turning himself into the authorities, if only for the well being of the soldiers under his command. He had even considered cobbling his forces with those gathering under the Crimson Shadow banner in the Crolsa system. Keshet had decided against it. The Shadow's leader, a charismatic young gul named En'Roel was too rash for his taste. His was style too unpredictable, motivated by romanticism and exhortation rather than careful planning and ruthless execution. Keshet hadn't begrudged any of his soldiers who had decided to cast their lots with the dashing En'Roel. If he had been a younger man he might've joined them too. Alas, not only had many of his fighters flocked to Crolsa but so had most of the sinecure from the movement's network of financiers. The True Way had been on the verge of total extinction.

But Darcis had arrived at his hideout on Celtris III, a dark angel bearing *leks* and gifts of armor and ordnance. The most important of which had turned out to be the *Rakal* itself, equipped with a Klingon Class IV cloaking device, that according to Darcis had been plundered from a captured Maquis raider, one of a many tactics the foreheads had used to stifle the ambitions of the Union since losing Raknal V during the long Betreka Nebula standoff several decades past.

The *Rakal* had used the cloaking device to great effect, raiding allied shipping, restocking their forces, and today to escape the Federation's clutches despite the occasional glitches caused by the barbarian machinery's incapability with Cardassian technology.

Gifts such as the cloaking device, their new base Razad Kor, and the flight schedule of the *Aegis*, supplied by Darcis through some shadowy benefactors, kept him alive for now; Or at least until he could pierce the crafty spy's veil of secrecy to deal personally with their patron.

If for no other reason to but thank them for the bold stroke that Darcis told him the gifts were for: the capture, trial, and execution of the Founder. Not only would it reaffirm Cardassian strength throughout the quadrant, he could think of no better way to ensure that his wife's sacrifice would not be in vain. Eliminating Darcis to work directly with his benefactors was merely topping on the *larish* pie.

The gul should've felt exultant. His soldiers had once again performed well despite the obstacles thrown in their path. He had taken on a *Prometheus*-class starship, the largest and most powerful of Starfleet's vessels, helmed by one of the Federation's best captains, and he had won. Not only was the Founder Leader, the butcher of millions of Cardassians in his custody, he also had netted Captain Terrence Glover and the cursed Captain Molok, both notorious war criminals against the Cardassian people. He should've been joyous, but he wasn't. He was tired. Empty. *Lonely*.

He missed Nebel, wished she were here, and would forgo vengeance against the heinous Founder to have her by his side again. With a sigh he turned away from the buzzing activity in the shuttle hold, and away from the brewing hatreds of his First Officer and Intelligence Observer.

"Good work," he said aloud, to the various crewmen milling about the bay, in front of and now behind him, injecting a strength he didn't feel into his voice, "your actions today bring us one step closer to the liberation of our people." The hold erupted into cheers. A practiced smile crept over his marred face. Pointing at a stack of unscathed wooden crates tucked into the far right corner of the shuttle bay, Keshet crowed, "Today we were as indomitable as our *kanar*. After your duties, drink your fill. That's an order!" More lusty cheers rang throughout the room.

Sulle lightly touched his arm. "Do you think that is wise Gul Keshet?" she dared asked. "We are several days away from Razad Kor, and if our cloak doesn't hold, we need each soldier sober and alert."

Keshet paused to look at the offending hand on his arm. Levara, realizing her mistake, ripped her hand away from his arm as if it were a serpent coiling to strike. He smiled again, this time it was more intimate, and glacial, for her and the ever observant Darcis.

"Great victories must be celebrated. Today was such a day. Tomorrow may be different, so let them cling to today for a little while longer."

"Gul Keshet is correct," Darcis shook his fleshy head. "Tomorrow might be a different story indeed." He hunched his large shoulders as he rose to tower over Glinn Sulle.

Meeting his dark eyes, her rasp deadly quiet. "Indeed."

"Glinn Sulle, make sure that once Lajal is certain that hull forcefields are fully operational again, and atmospheric integrity is assured, that you scrape *that*," he paused to flick a deceptively casual thumb in the direction of the Founder. The engineer's technicians were scouring the false wall with scanning devices, "is removed and secured in a holding cell."

"Yes milord." Levara stood at full attention, her blue eyes flashing with competent obedience.

Rubbing his own reddened, aching eyes, Keshet dreaded returning to his cramped stateroom, stacks of musty legal books and padds strewn over his desk and floor. But he knew it was necessary, if he was to honor Nebel satisfactorily. He would bear any burden to do so, pay any price.

Reaching the bay doors, he glanced back into the hold at Darcis, a bottle of the sweet brown liquid already at his plump lips. *I've already ransomed my soul, my love*, he gazed up into the bulkheads, past them, into the heavens, *I pray that it is worth it*.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **(Shau Darcis' Private Chamber)**

The fog of *kanar* evaporated instantly when Darcis placed the hypospray against the fat of his neck. With a pleasing hiss, the antioxidant coursed through him, chilling the numbing effects of the alcohol.

He didn't answer the insistent chime of the incoming message on his desktop computer, until he felt he was of sufficient mental capacity. Even if the Obsidian Order was no more, it had drilled into him the importance of maintaining an image of control. Straightening his black robe, he ran a large hand over his face, and smoothed his hair.

Darcis then glanced over at the young man, one of Lajal's technicians, tangled comfortably in his bed sheets. "Pretar," he cooed. He waited several seconds for a response; the console's beeping building in his ears. Unwilling to take a chance on being overheard, he quickly rifled through his small desk, producing another hypospray. With a grace belying his girth, he glided over to the bed and quickly poked the lovely Pretar with a sedative. His thin lips parted with a sigh.

Sighing himself, he plopped down before his monitor, now satisfied to activate his encryption protocol. Within seconds, the viewer flared to life. An annoyed Romulan glared at him.

"What kept you?" The Romulan demanded, his avian features pinched with impatience. Darcis had never seen his counterpart so ruffled before. His small, careful smile hid his titanic pleasure at finding a pressure point to be exploited at a future date.

"Colonel Viredis," he nodded in false deference.

"What kept you?" Viredis repeated.

"That is no concern of yours," Darcis allowed a hint of venom to pepper his response. "You have my attention now. What do you want?"

"The Founder is secured?"

"Of course. Not only that but we also have Capt. Glover of the Starfleet ship *Aegis*, and a Klingon captain. They both should be able to provide a wealth of tactical and strategic information."

"The Founder is our only concern," the Romulan lied, before adding. "And of course Keshet. He will pay for his crimes against the Romulan people."

"I believe that his wife was the one who blew your Sub-Admiral to bits," Darcis replied, seeking to find additional emotional fissures.

Viredis exhaled before smiling. "You never cease in your games Shau Darcis. Not during our time together at Internment Camp 275, or now. In that way you are very Romulan and that is why the Tal Shiar tolerates you."

"I'm glad someone does," he quipped.

"Does Keshet suspect anything is amiss?"

"Of course not," Darcis scoffed. "I am not an amateur in the ways of deception."

"Of that I am well aware," Viredis smiled, the gesture more chilling than the medicines that had crystallized the *kanar* in his system. "When will your ship arrive at Razad Kor?"

"Four days."

"I look forward to seeing you soon then." Without waiting for a response, the Romulan severed the communication link. The blackness on the screen mirrored Darcis's thought.

*Why did he have to bring up Camp 275?* He thought, stretching his arms around to stroke at the cable-like scars running along his back. Both he and Viredis had served as part of Enabran Tain's joint Obsidian Order-Tal Shiar strike force, determined to wipe out the changeling threat in a bold preemptive strike.

But the Founders had beaten both organizations at their own game. A shape shifter posing as a Tal Shiar colonel led them into an ambush. Jem'Hadar warships had wiped out most of their combined fleet. The few survivors had been scattered to internment camps across the Dominion.

At Camp 275, Darcis, who had considered himself a master in the arts of torture and interrogation, had discovered that he was merely a novice. But he had remembered each infliction, his eidetic memory storing them all for future reference. Some he even planned to use on his new prisoners.

He sat at the desk for a few more minutes, cursing with regret that Pretar would not be lucid until morning. With nothing to do, and the steady

march of the chronometer beginning to hammer his eardrums, Darcis decided to visit his prisoners. Slipping out of his robe, leaving it on the floor, he pulled a charcoal gray tunic and pants from his closet. Fully clothed within minutes, he stretched, wiggling his toes inside his thick boots.

Pulling a knife and a small, oval Klingon *agonizer* from his desk, Darcis hobbled out of his quarters, favoring his still tender thigh wounds. *If I can't sleep tonight, they won't either*, he thought, smiling as his large frame flushed with anticipatory pleasure.

.....

### **Sisko's Creole Kitchen (New Orleans, Earth)**

"Can I count on your endorsement Samson?" Retired Admiral Norah Satie, currently leading incumbent Martin Santiago in the polls in the 2376 contest for the Federation presidency, asked. The burning in her eyes was less than severe than usual.

"Now why would you want to ruin our lunch?" Admiral Sam Glover playfully asked. The lanky man leaned back in his seat, running a hand through his salt and pepper hair. "I thought this was supposed to be a platonic lunch date."

"It is," Norah smiled, coquettishly batting her eyes. "I didn't lie when I said I wanted to see you." She cooed, revealing a softness he hadn't witnessed in her since their days at Starfleet Academy.

Glover finished his *Altair water* before speaking again. "I'm still wearing the uniform. You know it's improper for me to endorse any candidate for political office."

"Henry Thomas did." Satie said proudly. Sam knew that had to be a coup of sorts for her because Admiral Thomas had shut down her rabid investigation into suspected Romulan sabotage on the *Enterprise-D* several years ago. Norah, who had been instrumental in uncovering the neural parasite conspiracy that almost engulfed the whole of Starfleet over a decade ago, had un-retired to root out a similar conspiracy. But the customary zeal that he admired in the woman had consumed her, turning the inquiry into a witch hunt. Receding in disgrace back into retirement, Satie had returned to the public stage with a vengeance, challenging President Santiago for the top spot, hitting the beleaguered Cygnian hard on his handling of the Cardassian relief mission as well as his post-war Federation security policy.

With the news detailing new insurgent violence in the Cardassian territories, the haphazard responses to recovery efforts elsewhere throughout the Federation, the refusal of the Romulans to extricate themselves from the Benezar system, and continuing fears of Changeling infiltration had ignited Satie's steady rise in the polls.

"Admiral Ranar, your predecessor has also endorsed me." Satie replied. "I could really use your help Samuel. You know you agree with me."

"To tell you the truth, I do agree with you...not on all the issues, but most. However, I think it would be unseemly for the head of Starfleet Security to openly endorse President Santiago's opponent, especially so soon after Leyton's coup attempt." The rogue admiral's attempt to inject Starfleet into the Federation's domestic politics still left a stain that even the gratitude Starfleet had engendered during the Dominion War had yet to absolve.

"I used to wear that uniform too," Satie replied, a slightly hurt tone in her voice. "Even though I've left the Fleet, I've never abandoned the Federation, or what it stands for, and right now I fear that a vast majority of our citizens, with Santiago being chief among them, don't know what the Federation stands for."

Not wanting to get entangled into a political discussion, but bowing to its inevitability, Sam, hating himself for doing so, asked. "How so?"

Norah's eyes brightened at his question. She had always been a bit of a pedant. "Martin is pushing to annul the currently standard blood-screenings for all high ranking Starfleet and Federation officials. He has already presented legislation to the Federation Council on this matter. To propose something, so soon after the war, when the Founder who started it has yet to face justice is preposterous."

Glover nodded without replying. His department had created the guidelines and procedures for the blood screenings, put in place to block further Changeling infestation into Starfleet Command. Though Changeling's could mimic humanoid blood, the fake gore would revert to its natural gelatinous state if separated from the shape shifter for a few seconds. Though the war was over, Glover had spoken himself on numerous occasions, facing some stiff opposition in some quarters, to maintaining the blood screenings and several other crucial security measures to make the Federation's leadership and information centers less vulnerable to parasitic, Changeling, or terrorist assault.

"And don't get me started on Santiago's timid handling of those Cardassian militants."

"Then don't," Glover had said a little more sharply than he intended.

Ignoring the barbed comment, Satie continued. "Ceding the Crolsa system to the Klingons displays weakness and a tolerance of lawlessness that is unacceptable. I can't fault his prosecution of the war, but he is losing the peace."

Sam looked around the small, dimly lit bistro, his practiced eye searching for any Federation News Service reporters hidden among the diners. Joseph Sisko was generally pretty good at securing an atmosphere of privacy for some of the more notable personages to grace his Creole

restaurant. Norah Satie, surging presidential candidate, surely ranked among one of his most famous. It was a credit to the man's tenacity that Glover hadn't spotted any furtive media hounds, slinking around the eatery, recorders at the ready. Glover made a note to commend Joseph the next time he saw him.

Despite the fact that his son Terrence counted Joseph's son Benjamin as one of his best friends, the admiral had dined at *Sisko's Creole Kitchen* for the first time shortly after his appointment as Security Chief two months ago.

Since then he had been hooked. Dapping absently at his mustache with a napkin, Glover used his other hand to summon one of the wait staff. "I'm sorry Norah, but I've got to go. You know how it is."

"Yes, I do," she smiled back, her eyes blazing like a furnace. "Thank you for your time."

The admiral quickly keyed in a code into the pad the Tarkelean waiter handed him. "I'll take care of the bill."

"Why thank you sir," Satie's voice dripped with faux Southern American charm.

"When you're back on Earth let's try this again. Absent the politics."

"As attractive as I find your offer, I don't think that will be possible," Norah said with profound sincerity. "Because the next time I return to Earth, I will be coming as the president-elect."

"I don't know whether to laugh or cry at that assertion."

"Me neither."

\*\*\*\*\*

## **Admiral Glover's Private Office**

"Come," Admiral Glover said, tugging the wrinkles out of his tunic as the doors to his office slid open to reveal Captain Tryla Scott.

*Why are you here?* He thought as he rose in greeting, stretching out a hand that she quickly grasped and pumped as soon as she reached his desk. "Hello Captain Scott, this is quite a surprise. How may I be of assistance?"

The old admiral couldn't help but admire the poise of the famed captain, the youngest person ever to be promoted to the rank. Her smooth walnut brown skin and the lithe curves of her body only enhanced the impression of grace and vigor. He could see why his son had fallen for her all those years ago. Of course Terrence had never told him about their affair, but he had his sources. He would be damned if he allowed his son to go out into the cosmos without finding a way to keep an eye on him someday.

Releasing the captain's hand, Sam peered at her for several awkward seconds, scanning her dossier in his mind. Despite her confident appearance, Tryla Scott was still a troubled woman. Her stellar career had taken a



damaging blow when she had become possessed by the neural parasites intent on conquering the Federation almost a decade ago that Satie had uncovered. Sam was certain that that event had played a major role in the dissolution of her relationship with his son.

She had left Starfleet a year after the conspiracy had been thwarted by Capt. Picard of the *Enterprise*, joining the Nyberrite Alliance on the fringes of charted space. She had worked for the Alliance for several years, doing what, neither he nor Starfleet Intelligence, weren't exactly certain, before returning to active duty after the second Borg invasion of the Federation in 2373. The Borg attack followed by the outbreak of the Dominion War left Starfleet in need of good personnel, especially captains.

Despite her mishaps, Tryla still had a clique of admirals singing her praises and she was reinstated to the captain's chair without much investigation. Of course, the captain had done nothing, during or after the war, to warrant a full investigation. However, the thought lay coiled, along with many others, like serpents in the nether reaches of the admiral's mind. "Please sit down," he gestured to one of the two black leather chairs facing his ebonite desk.

Scott quickly made her decision to sit in the one closet to the large window that took up an entire wall of his office. The busy night sky blazed with the lights of buzzing hover cars. It almost simulated the streaking stars. Just like Terrence, she seemed more comfortable in space, he noted. Despite being a possible security risk, he found himself liking the woman on a gut level instantly. But he still liked Jasmine more. Sam couldn't help but smile at the thought of his daughter-in-law, before repeating his offer, "How might I help you Captain?"

"I came to ask *you* that question sir." She replied, her voice strong, her eyes clear and focused on him. Taken aback by the captain's bold manner, Sam did his best to hide his surprise. He retook his seat, and propped his elbows on the hard, polished surface of his desk.

"And how might you help me *Captain* Scott?"

"It's about Terrence," she said with an almost stony detachment. Glover's stomach clenched. The admiral quickly locked his hands together to keep them from shaking.

He forced himself not to scream. "What about my son?" He asked as calmly as he could, his voice tight with restraint.

"He's been kidnapped by Cardassian militants."

"What?" The admiral gasped, a jabbing pain in his chest. "How?" His genetrionically replicated heart, courtesy of the Borg attack on his DS5, his old command, always picked the wrong time to act up.

"The *Aegis* was attacked." Captain Scott answered, breaking both protocol and decorum when she slid close to the admiral's desk and placed her hands over his own. Her hands were trembling too. "About 6 hours ago."

"Six hours ago?" His screech subverted to a harsh whisper. "Why wasn't I informed?" His eyes narrowed. "And why are *you* informing me of this?"

"Because both Starfleet Command and Starfleet Intelligence are still scrambling to divine the details and sequence of events as to what happened today and why."

"So how did you find out?" Scott removed her hands and placed them back on her lap, sliding backwards in her chair to a comfortable, and Samson noted, *safe*, distance.

"Other sources informed me."

"And those sources are?"

"I'm not at liberty to say Admiral."

"What if I order you to *Captain*?" He barked.

"You can try, but I wouldn't recommend it. It won't get you too far."

"So, why are you here and what does this have to do with Terrence?"

"My...associates...felt I would be the best person to deliver this news, and our offer, since Terrence and I were close once." She paused, her large brown eyes softening her hardened face. "You knew that didn't you?"

"Yes," Sam rasped, a sudden tightness in his chest briefly squeezed the oxygen from his lungs. "Jasmine?" He managed to wheeze out. A shadow flittered across Scott's face at the mention of his daughter-in-law.

"She's alive, but several of the captain's crew didn't survive. The Cardassians absconded with Terrence, a Klingon captain accompanying the mission, and the Founder. *Aegis*, sans Terrence, is currently on its way back to Deep Space Nine."

"What?" A low burn spread slowly over his torso. He hadn't been taking his medication like he was supposed to, and it was coming back to bite him in the ass at exactly the wrong moment. Sam clutched his chest. "How?"

"Are you okay Admiral?" Captain Scott started from her seat, her detachment evaporating into the tense concern expected of a Starfleet officer. He nodded, waving away her offer of help. He yanked a desk drawer open, and pulled out a hypo. The admiral, hands quaking, applied the small canister to his neck.

"What...do you want?" He said after a few anxious minutes.

"We believe that the insurgents' strike on the *Aegis* was made possible with the help of intelligence and weapons provided by either Klingon or Romulan operatives."

"Klingons? Romulans? But they're our allies!" He leaned back in his seat, the fire in his chest abating.

"What they are," Scott replied, her eyes now becoming as unyielding as her face, "is preparing for the next war. And we must do the same."

"Go on."

"One of our 'allies' is working in concert with insurgents to disrupt the reconstruction effort, to fracture the tripartite alliance by poisoning public opinion on allied homeworlds. As the attacks grow more fantastic, the casualty rates sky rocket, the Federation will be forced to abandon the Cardassians before the situation has been sufficiently stabilized. We believe that one of our coalition partners is waiting in the wings for our disengagement, so that they can absorb the Union into their sphere of influence."

"If what you say is true, surely it must be the Romulans supplying the militants."

"That would seem the most logical theory," Scott replied, her fingers now steepled. "Both the Romulans and Cardassians have a history of working together, albeit with disastrous results in the Omarion Nebula. And Klingon-Cardassian relations have never been more strained, even more so than during the Betreka affair and the Klingon invasion of Cardassia Prime. However, we have learned that what is most logical or obvious usually isn't. The well-documented enmity between the Klingons and the Cardassians would provide a perfect cover dispelling any notion of those two peoples ever working together. Also, the Klingons could be trying to reclaim their sovereignty over Cardassian territory outright, using the insurgents to remove the Federation and Romulans leaving them a free hand in administering the war-ravaged territories."

"And how did your '*sources*' come by this information?" Flecks of steel resurfaced in the admiral's frayed voice.

"Does that really matter?" challenged the captain. "All that does matter is that Terrence's life, and the lives of billions, hang on what we do next. With your help we can save Terrence, the Founder, and expose the clandestine connection, turning intergalactic opinion against the conspirator government, destroying whatever designs they have for the Cardassian people, or against Federation interests."

"What do you want me to do?" Sam's voice filled with skepticism.

"Simple," Scott awarded him a curt smile. "The *Aegis* crew took two Cardassian soldiers into custody. We need to glean as much information from these prisoners as quickly as possible. Of course, my associates can't simply walk onto Deep Space Nine and interrogate the prisoners without the proper clearance. We need you to authorize security clearance for them."

"I can't do that. It's against the law."

"It's amazing what you can do when someone you love is at stake."

"How could you do that? How could you use my son's life as a bargaining chip? I thought you were his friend?"

"I am his friend, that's why I'm here now. My associates are the only ones who can help him. They are not bound by red tape or bureaucratic oversight. They will do what ever it takes to defend the Federation. So will I. The question is: Will you?"

"I...can't."

Scott looked at the chronometer on his desk. "Time is passing Admiral. What's more important, your career or your son's life? Don't you think he and Jasmine have seen too much tragedy in their lives all ready?"

"Who are your associates? What organization do you represent? Do you think I'm going to just give two strangers, from some shadowy group with opaque motives, security clearance to two important prisoners? With possible war with an ally or even the Dominion in the balance?"

The captain nodded. "Very well." She leaned closer to the desk, her voice a conspiratorial whisper. "I'm not supposed to reveal this...but I see your point. There is a bureau, extremely top secret, authorized in the Starfleet Charter predating even the birth of the Federation. The bureau was charged with defending Earth, and now the entire Federation, against all threats to our way of life."

"You mean Section 31?" Sam lost his breath again. The captain's eyes widened with shock. "I thought they were a rumor."

"It's not a rumor."

"How did you, a decorated, celebrated Starfleet Officer, get mixed up with such an extralegal outlaw group?"

"I thought the same thing about them when they approached me," Scott began, whispering again as her eyes took on a misty, far away look. "Right after the Academy. I had blown them off as pranksters at best, as deluded militarists at worse. But I had been wrong. The neural parasite invasion, followed by the Borg, and then the Dominion had proven that there is a place, a necessary place, for Section 31 in the Federation." She paused to catch her breath, her eyes now clear and boring into the admiral. "I assist them from time to time, and they assist me. They also granted me the permission to offer assistance to you."

"I don't want their *assistance*," Admiral Glover huffed. "If anything, I should have you detained for even offering it." He moved to activate the comchannel on his desk.

Scott quickly reached across the desk and grabbed his hand. "What you *want* is your son back. Section 31 is the only real option you have. By the time Starfleet Command, and God forbid, the Federation Council review every little particle of information and evidence of the abduction, it will be too late." The captain released his hand. "The choice is yours."

The admiral's hand hovered over the activation switch for several seconds before he removed it. "My God," he breathed, his head hanging with shame, his body felt every septuagenarian ache and strain, the embers of fire in his chest stirring. "What are you asking me to do?"

"I'm asking you to do everything you can to save not only your son's life but the fragile peace."

"Okay," he whispered, voice barely audible. "You've got it."

---

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### *USS Aegis* (Observation Lounge)

Even through subspace, Admiral Shanthi's gaze burned holes through him. Ivan Cherenkov melted in his seat, unable to maintain eye contact with the steely Fleet Admiral. He ran a nervous hand over the fresh scars lacerating his face.

"Let me summarize what you've just reported Commander," the admiral's voice was sharp, accusing. Her stern, darksome face filled the large, rectangular view screen in the *Aegis's* observation lounge. The Executive Officer noticed several of his fellow officers squirming under Shanthi's frigid scrutiny as well. "The *Aegis* diverted its course to Nimbus III to respond to a distress call from a Lissepian freighter. Captain Glover ordered two away teams to lend assistance. But it was a trap, sprung by a renegade Cardassian gul named Keshet. Both away teams were captured, and Captain Glover then agreed to trade your lives for that of the Founder Leader?"

Cherenkov briefly looked around the table. Commander Ojana, Lt. Glover, Lt. Donar, Dr. Amoros, Lt. Rojas, and Aquiel, each in various stages of distress nodded their agreement with the sequence of events. Only Ensign Lomar maintained an air of emotional detachment. Cherenkov doubted if the Kelvan even had emotions. Right now, he wished he could've been so fortunate.

"Yes sir," he answered, after completing his silent survey.

"Unacceptable," Shanthi concluded. "What kind of commanding officer would pull such a reckless, foolhardy stunt, with the stakes being so high? And what kind of senior staff would go along with such a scheme?"

"It wasn't a scheme," Aquiel replied, her cheeks blushing dark with anger. "The captain did what he had to do to save lives."

"And I guess you did too when you ordered a retreat instead of pursuing the enemy?"

"Cloaks are next to impossible to penetrate sir. You know that," Cherenkov interceded.

"Correct Commander," Shanthi relented an inch. "But the decision-making evidenced by Captain Glover was of poor quality. I can only assume that his personal," she paused, brown eyes flashing towards Jasmine Glover, "affected his ability to be impartial." The captain's wife's face slicked with fresh tears. Turning away from the screen, Commander Pell rushed to wrap her arms around the woman's trembling shoulders. "A concern of Command that in retrospect has proven apt."

"With all due respect," Commander Pell begun, arms still around the shattered lieutenant, her gaze on the screen, but the admiral cut her off.

"And Captain Glover's mistake was compounded by a crucial lapse in critical thinking by his support staff. The fact that no one raised any formal protest gives me great concern. Once *Aegis* reaches Deep Space Nine you will remain docked until further instructions." Shanthi swiped at the screen to silence the audible grumbling. "Furthermore, I want the insurgents you captured placed in the custody of Colonel Kira and station Security Chief Daneeka."

"I see no reason for that!" Cherenkov forced himself not to yell, his face reddening with pent up frustration. "You're going to let that junta member interrogate prisoners that we captured?"

"You don't have to see anything. All you have to do is follow orders Commander," Shanthi fixed her dolorous gaze solely on him; her next words no less chilling despite their carefully measured delivery. "And if that is a problem for you Commander, I can have the prisoners beamed aboard the *Defiant* immediately." The reference caused Cherenkov to break eye contact again to look out of the lounge's window at the compact; weapons studded *Defiant* streaking gracefully alongside the *Aegis*. "As a courtesy, your Security Chief can assist in the interrogation of the prisoners. Shanthi out."

As soon as the screen blinked off, Cherenkov mumbled an archaic Russian curse before he slid the mask of command back over his face. "You heard the Admiral people," he replied, surprised by how calm his voice sounded. "Thoughts?"

"We're screwed," Lt. Rojas replied.

"My thoughts exactly," agreed Cherenkov.

.....

The Past...

*The fire kissed him like a lover, its warm intensity flared quickly into an unbearable, searing heat that devoured him, running up the pants legs of his uniform; The smell of burning cloth and flesh overwhelming him. He leaned back in his seat, ignoring the pain, his eyes focused on the screen. Several escape pods, mere slivers of silver among the cluttered wreckage of similarly burning and shattered starships, chugged toward the protective shields of Destroyer Group Three.*

*Only a few more seconds...Punctuating the thought, the Cuffe shuddered again, the entire aft bank of consoles erupting in sparks. Shards flew past his head, one grazing his ear. He added the pain to the growing list of injuries. The roar of rending metal and frightened screams almost muffled the weakened voice of his stalwart Tactical Officer, Lt. Meldin: "Sir... shields... are... gone. The next good hit...." The Benzite gasped as his console exploded in his face. He fell with a muffled thud to the deck.*

*Glover couldn't look at him, afraid that seeing a shaft of metal piercing either the young man's blackened chest or face would force him to acknowledge his own pain and impending death. The ship rattled again.*

*"Juanita," his voice sounded oddly far away, as if it were coming from someone else's lips. "How many more seconds?" He refused to leave the bridge until all of the escape pods from the Roanoke, the Tuskegee, and his own ship had made it to safety. He was proud that his senior officers had all chosen to stay behind with him, knowing it meant certain death as the Cuffe sought to shield the pods from the orbital weapons platforms ringing Cardassia Prime. The platforms had already destroyed both the Roanoke and Tuskegee and were seconds away from shredding the Cuffe.*

*"They've made it!" Ensign Rojas cried, looking back at him, her radiant smile breaking through her soot covered face.*

*"All of you get out of here!" He yelled, as he tapped several commands into the inset displays on his command chair, a ravenous curl of flames running up his thigh. "Transferring helm and tactical control to the conn now."*

*Rojas frowned, stiffening in her seat. "I'm not leaving you sir."*

*"That's an order!" He screamed, more from the now undeniable pain than from anger at her insubordination. Rojas merely turned back around in her seat. She looked back at him.*

*"Could I have helm control back sir?" Glover couldn't help but smile as he granted her request. He looked around the rest of his ruined, smoky bridge. The remaining officers kept at their posts.*

*"A damn fine crew," he croaked. "A damn fine crew. I can't think of a better group of people I would rather die with." A deep voice chuckled in his ear, followed by a hollow click, and a cool soothing foam spread over his lower body.*

*"Feeling's mutual," a blood drenched Cherenkov smiled, a small extinguisher in his hand. The captain smiled back.*

*"Incoming!" Rojas screamed. The screen had shifted to its port sensors. A tide of crackling, deadly energy was ripping through space directly toward the unprotected ship. He closed his eyes, thinking of his mother, his father, his wife....*

*\*\*\*\*\**

*And then she was there, in his arms, the splendid meteor shower over the sweeping Cliffs of Bole lighting the sky above them. He ran his fingers through her soft, sable hair, rubbing his nose in it, sucking in its clean, sweet smell. Jasmine playfully jabbed him in his ribs.*

*"Hey!" He yelped. "What was that for?"*

*"You're missing the meteor shower Terrence," she flashed a smile at him, pointing at the ambient falling rocks. "You have a life time to put your hands on me," she laughed, shyly batting her long eyelashes. "Enjoy the show."*



*“Seen one meteor shower, seen them all,” he replied, wrapping his arms around her. She pulled his arms tighter. Her mocha skin was soft, warm, and inviting. But he forced himself to wait. Jasmine’s Starfleet career had consisted of one stationary engineering assignment after another. The admittedly breath taking sky showers over the Cliffs of Bole were one of the few times she got to see dazzling spatial phenomena.*

*Born on a space ship and growing up on space stations, he had spent more time above planets than on them, and after seeing some of the countless wonders and terrors the galaxy had to offer, Terrence found that his most treasured discovery had been when he had met Jasmine in the docking bay of Deep Space Five three years ago. Once again, his father had known something he didn’t and he had pushed for Terrence to meet her. After he had, he knew that his father had been right, and he displayed his own brand of doggedness to forge the bonds between them despite the demands of duty.*

*He had taken every opportunity he could to visit the station, to court the serious, reserved Jasmine, eventually winning her heart. When she had said yes to his marriage proposal, he feared he might actually spontaneously combust with joy. It had been a feeling he had only thought would come over him when admiral pips were placed on his collar. But he had been wrong.*

*Though they hadn’t spent much time with each other since their marriage on Casperia Prime, they made the most of the scant time they did. Terrence had called in a lot of chits and he relied on his father’s pull to get some time off to spend their first wedding anniversary at the celebrated Cliffs of Bole.*

*Leaving the Cuffe, his prized first command, in the hands of Comm. Kojo, his hardnosed Kriosian XO hadn’t even bothered him once since he met his wife at Casperia’s spaceport. Tall, striking, a flower patterned sundress molding perfectly over her shapely curves; the sight of her had even wiped away his concerns about the growing threat of war with the Dominion.*

*But the desire to be back on his bridge, to be at the forefront if the tightrope navigated by his friend Ben Sisko finally snapped, had begun to tug at him. Ambition was his oldest lover, outlasting the redoubtable Tryla Scott, his first serious relationship, and now struggling to wrest his heart from Jasmine. But ambition was a cold, empty mistress, taking much and given little in return. Terrence had already giving away too much time to it already, taking on assignment after assignment instead of spending more time with his wife. He resolved that he wouldn’t let ambition destroy his happiness with Jasmine; the only real and true happiness he had ever known.*

*The last week had been incredible, filled with passion, love, and a lot of catching up. On their last night together, before duty called them both back to their respective stations, he figured he could grant her this small thing, without the interruptions demanded by both his heart and his loins. He was certain that his patience would be rewarded later on.*

*"I love you," he whispered into her ear, nibbling it afterwards. She sighed in response.*

*"I love you." Jasmine replied, rubbing his arms, and reaching up to place her hands over his. "You're going to be a great father someday." She craned her neck to kiss his cheek, and then lick the bottom lobe of his ear. "Let's get started," she breathed, pushing his arms away from her, before she grabbed one of his hands and led him back into their apartment from the balcony.*

*Not protesting, Terrence followed his wife, his eyes focused on the soft sway of her hips. Not wanting to spoil the mood, but unable to keep his mouth shut, he asked. "But what about the meteor shower?"*

*Jasmine said nothing as she quickly unzipped her sheer hunter green dress, carelessly flinging it into the corner of the room after she had stepped out of it. She did the same with her undergarments. Standing before him naked, she ran her bright hazel eyes over her toned form before looking back at her husband. With a surprisingly impish smile, Jasmine replied, "Seen one meteor shower, seen them all...."*

*\*\*\*\*\**

*The Orion's thick, verdigris blood oozed slowly over his fingers, its sticky warmth drowning the cold steel of the blade in his hand. Shocked, horrified, a sick thrill coursed through him as he looked into the dimming eyes of the alien, the first being he had ever killed.*

*Oblivious to the sounds of fighting and dying around him, all he heard was the Orion's faltering heartbeat; all he saw were the alien's indigo eyes fluttering against the gathering darkness.*

*It had all happened so fast. Only minutes ago, he had been standing on the Kitty Hawk's cargo transporter pad with Captain Gorik, Commander Awokou, Security Chief Lee, Deputy Security Chief Weiss, and a Special Missions force. And then in a flash he was here, in the middle of the humid, teeming Orion slave market, peering into dozens of numb eyes looking out at him from their cages. So conditioned to despair, so broken to the possibility of freedom, none of them had reached out to the Away Team, none of them had even realized or dared dream that their liberation was at hand.*

*Before he had had time to ponder the profound depths of their wretchedness, the slavers from the Orion Syndicate had fallen upon them like a pack of wolves. An ensign, a year out of the Academy, he had only fought in battle simulations under regulated conditions. The zing of real energy weapons, the clanging and bite of metal, the screaming, the blood, the cursing, the chaos, seized him with such fear at first that he had frozen, a perfect target for any Orion that saw him. So overwhelmed, he hadn't even seen the large Orion prop the arbalest across one of his broad forearms.*

*Lt. Lee had grabbed him, pushing him behind a cage, taking the metal shaft meant for him. She fell beside him, the argent bow quivering in her pierced, bloodied chest. He pulled her out of the line of fire, tugging at the bow but stopping after she grimaced with pain. Already, the pallor of death was upon her. Convulsing for several seconds, she gasped suddenly before closing her eyes. Crouching behind the cage, dozens of hands reaching through their bars to tear at him, some pleading, some spitting, some crying, he had pulled away from them all, stunned that the lieutenant had given her life for him.*

*From the moment he had asked the captain to be switched from flight control to security, she had been one of his harshest critics, finding him wanting in almost every category. He had spent countless hours talking to his friends aboard ship about what a taskmaster she was. He had been convinced that her criticism sprang from a personal animus, perhaps some deep-seated jealousy perhaps because he was the son of an admiral. It hadn't been the first time he had encountered such misperceived people, and he had known it wouldn't be the last as he continued very vocally to climb the ladder to the Admiralty.*

*Looking at her still form, he realized that perhaps he had been wrong. Lee had been willing to sacrifice herself without a moment's hesitation. It had never been about him, it had always been about the team. In his quest to make admiral, it had always been about him, want he wanted and when he wanted it. The epiphany rattled him to his core, lighting a cleansing fire in him. Determined not to let Lee's sacrifice go unanswered, he had bounded from behind the safety of the cage, into the midst of the battle; his phaser slicing into every green body that he saw carrying a weapon. Cutting a path through the mob, he had almost made it to the circle of Marines surrounding the captain, when a large staff smacked his gun hand, shattering his bones.*

*Instinctively clutching his hand, he whipped around to face a massive Orion leering down at him, a sparking electric prod in one hand, and a long, curved blade in the other. "This raid has cost the Syndicate a lot of money!" He roared, spittle flying from his mouth. "You and your crewmates will barely be worth the amount to start up our operation elsewhere," he rumbled, before smiling maliciously, "but it will be a start."*

*Biting back the pain throbbing from his broken hand down the length of his arm, he called on the rigorous training Lee had imposed upon her Security team, to dodge and evade the fierce Orion as he sliced the air with the blade before trying to poke him with the prod.*

*Looking madly for his phaser while he continued to avoid being stabbed or shocked, he had decided on doing the unthinkable, something that he was sure Lt. Lee was already despairing of from the afterlife. The Orion had grown sloppy with each missed stroke. His anger fueling his movements, they become longer, looping, throwing the big man off balance.*

*He had quickly realized that the slaver was using the dagger to push him into the direction of the electric prod. The Orion didn't want to kill him, only incapacitate him for processing. The thought of one of their agonizing neurolytic restraints being attached onto his neck, of his soul being slowly crushed by pain and the loss of hope, fueled him with the resolve to rush the Orion. Grabbing the bigger man's knife hand with his good one, he pulled with all his strength; the surprised Orion stumbled right into his on rushing head. His head exploding as it connected with the green alien's jutting jaw, he struggled to remain conscious, blinking away his swimming vision.*

*The Orion had fallen back, more stunned than hurt. Pressing his advantage, he grabbed the Orion's knife hand, and bit hard into the man's large thumb, nearly ripping it off, dark green blood spraying into his lips and down his throat, coating his face. The slaver howled as the knife dropped from his hand. He quickly picked up the knife, looking up just in time to see the Orion charging at him, the prod glowing an angry crimson shade, enough power coursing through it to kill him.*

*He sidestepped the Orion's wild jab, plunging the dagger into the rampaging alien's throat. A verdant geyser erupted from the alien's neck, drowning his face and hands in even more blood. He ripped the knife from the wound as the large man slumped to his knees before hitting the floor, the sound lost in the cacophony of the firefight raging around them.*

*He stood watch as the shroud of the next life covered the Orion, figuring he owed the slaver that much for taking his life. A meaty hand clamped down on his shoulder, shattering the solemn mood. Expecting another attack, he whipped around, the knife flashing in his hand before he embedded it into the shoulder that the hand belonged to.*

*Captain Gorik howled, his porcine features twisting in agony. "Stabbing the captain is one sure sign of how not to make Admiral Mr. Glover," the Tellarite grumbled....*

*\*\*\*\*\**

*He had seen death, and he had inflicted it, but he had never learned how to cope with it. Sitting alone in the Launching Pad, at the old table that he, Ben, and Cal had held forth at on so many memorable occasions, Terrence peered out the window into the darkened street. Just beyond the famous San Francisco Gate Bridge, rose the spires of Starfleet Headquarters. The streets were bustling, air cars zipping across the sky, as people continued on with their lives, a simple thing that felt impossible for him to do.*

*The Launching Pad was quiet tonight and he was glad for it. He had heard from one of his planet bound friends that the raucous bar of his college days had recently been on a decline, facing stiff competition from the Quantum*

*Café that had opened up across town. It was the spot that all of the new recruits, the up and comers were going to, people like he used to be.*

*"Buy you another drink?" The voice was rich, filled with sorrow. Calvin.*

*"Nothing too strong for him though. You remember that time on Pelios Station when that Arcturian fizz put him under the table." Another voice, deeper, but with a hint of needed mischief. Benjamin.*

*He forced himself to turn away from the busyness on the other side of the window to gaze at his two closest friends. Both of them smiled, though he read the pain behind the forced expressions. Neither one had been good at hiding their feelings. Ben ran a nervous hand through his hair after Terrence had remained silent for almost a minute, staring at his friends, but looking into the past.*

*"It's going to be all right." Calvin said, sliding into the booth beside him. Ben sat on the other side. An attractive Andorian waitress materialized at the table, taking their orders. Within seconds, she had returned with a sweating mug of Guinness Stout for Calvin and a shot of Saurian brandy for Ben. The prescient Andorian also placed another cognac in front of Terrence, swooping up his empty glass with nimble grace.*

*"Cal's right," Ben added. "It's just going to take some time. That's all."*

*Ignoring them both, Terrence spoke. First to Calvin: "How's Gretchen?" Cal couldn't help but smile at the mention of his wife.*

*"She's doing fine. She sends her condolences."*

*"So do Jennifer and Jake." Ben added again. "And my father. We're staying in New Orleans for a couple of days. We want you to come by."*

*"I'm staying with Gretchen's family in Berlin. I'm sure they wouldn't mind extra company. They're always asking why we don't bring more people over when we visit Earth. Now's not a time to be alone."*

*"I'm not alone!" He said, a bit too loudly. Several patrons looked over at the booth. "My father was at the memorial service."*

*"We know, we were there," Ben replied.*

*"Thank you both for being there," Terrence smiled wanly. "I know it must've taken a lot for both of you to get time off from the *Okinawa* and the *Gallant*."*

*Both friends waved away his admission of gratitude. "Captain Leyton practically shoved us out of an air lock to attend the service," Ben said.*

*"And Captain English wanted me to tell you that she was sorry that she couldn't attend the service herself. She had once served with your mother on the *Independence*."*

*"Wow, that must've been some time ago," he remarked, his eyes misting over as he was overcome by memories of his mother. She had kept a scrapbook of sorts, filled with actual photographs of the various ships she had served on and the many things she had seen.*

*Each month, she would send him something, and he would rush from school to the mail center of whatever starbase his father was stationed on, to see what his mother would send him next. He was probably eight or nine when his mother had served as Tactical Officer aboard the Independence. "A long time," he whispered, unable to stop the tears from flowing down his face. Calvin locked a strong arm around him and Ben reached across the table to squeeze his shoulder. "I barely even knew her," he said between sobs, "and now she's gone."*

*Only a week ago, his lover and Commanding Officer Tryla Scott had called him to her ready room, her face wet with tears. Looking up from the small screen on her desk, she had told him that the Tombaugh, with all hands, had been lost in deep space.*

*Unable to process his feelings, he had just stood there, saying nothing, refusing to feel anything. He had declined her offer to attend the service, fearful that it might draw attention to their clandestine romance, and he also wouldn't entertain her entreaty to divert the Renegade from its mission of mapping gaseous anomalies in the Aries Sector, to return to Earth to attend the memorial service already being planned to commemorate the sacrifice of Captain Blackwood and his brave crew.*

*Instead he had requested, and eventually whittled down her reservations, to pilot a shuttle on the long, lonely trip back to Earth. After the ship's Counselor cleared him, Captain Scott had agreed.*

*The memorial service for the crew of the Tombaugh had been very solemn, tasteful, officiated over by the Fleet Commander-in-Chief and broadcast across the Federation. His mother had always striven to be a hero, to have her name placed before the pantheon of Starfleet legends, such as Archer, Garth, Kirk, Sulu, and Garrett.*

*But as it often is with life, the dream doesn't match the reality. Her role in the Ghorusda disaster, in which 46 crewmembers of the Adelphi had perished, including its captain, as a result of a mishandled first contact, had tarnished his mother's reputation, and destroyed decades of careful planning. He remembered how excited she had been when she had told him that the Adelphi had been chosen to represent the Federation in first contact proceedings with the reclusive Ghorusdians.*

*Deitra had revealed that the success of the mission might earn her the captain's pips she had been yearning for ever since her Academy days.*

*Ambition had probably tied his parents together far longer than any feelings of love that they might've one time had shared. There was an almost unspoken rivalry between the two that only intensified after his father had been promoted to captain after coordinating a strong Federation response to the Romulan attack at Khitomer, while serving as commander of Starbase 24 along the Klingon border. Jasper Glover's star continued to rise, with choice postings*

*at Starbase 23 and Starfleet Headquarters, his logistical skills factoring into Federation success against the Talarians, Cardassians, and Tzenkethi.*

*His mother's career was the opposite. A strong woman, with fierce opinions and razor ambition, she had not made many friends among her colleagues, resulting in myriad postings and very little upward mobility.*

*Captain Darson of the Adelphi had decided to promote his mother to XO, "twenty years late", she had once written to him. But Darson had mistaken her obstinacy for strength of will. Not the most perceptive or empathetic man himself from what Terrence had heard, the two of them, along with an unstable Betazoid first contact specialist, had plowed through sensitive cultural protocols, offending the Ghorusdians and leading to the captain's death.*

*He didn't like admitting such truths about his mother, and he figured that no one would. But as he thought about her and all the times he had spent with her, all the letters she had written, all the arguments he had overheard, Terrence realized that his mother was not an immortal, not a saint, but he loved her anyway, and he would miss her deeply.*

*Chastened by the "Ghorusda Disaster", she had intimated to him that she might leave the Fleet, but Captain Blackwood had stepped in and given her another chance at redemption by serving as his Executive Officer on the Tombaugh.*

*He had never seen her happier than when she had revealed a tidbit about her last mission, investigating a transmission from the ghost ship Raven, similarly lost in deep space a few years earlier. The Tombaugh had perhaps suffered whatever fate had befallen the doomed crew of the Raven. Terrence was certain he would never know and perhaps it was best that he didn't. At least his mother would be remembered as a hero, as a symbol of courage and idealism. He could think of no better epitaph for her.*

*Terrence wished he could say those things to his friends, wished that he could express such feelings to his father, but he couldn't. So, he said nothing. Instead he put back on the mask that had grown so comfortable for him since childhood. He knew his friends saw through it, but he also knew his friends cared enough about him to let him continue with the masquerade. Making a show of looking around the sparsely populated bar, he remarked. "Solok couldn't make it huh? I was looking forward to another debate about logic." He winked at Ben, who scowled in response.*

*"I've learned a few more things than I knew then." He replied, his defensiveness only half playful. Once, during the Launching Pad's heyday, a somewhat toasted Benjamin Sisko had challenged the anal Vulcan Solok to a debate about, of all things to choose, logic. Terrence still remembered the smug superiority draping the Vulcan's neutral features. He was certain Solok enjoyed tearing Benjamin apart in front of the entire bar. But of course, a Vulcan would never admit to enjoying anything.*

"Like what?" *Calvin moved in.* "Challenging Klingons to head butting contests?"

*Rubbing his forehead, Ben replied.* "Hey, Dax put me up to it." *He laughed at the memory.* "The honor of the Federation was at stake."

"So was a week of reconstructive surgery," *Cal chuckled.* "By the way, where is that crazy Trill?"

"Who knows," *Ben rolled his eyes.* "All he told Captain Leyton was that he'd be back. He did have a big smile on his face though."

"I can only imagine," *Terrence smiled, his heart frigid.* "Wish it were me...."

\*\*\*

The Present...

"Captain? Captain? Are you alright?" Leathery hands touched his face, followed by a wet cloth. He winced, his raw skin enflamed by contact. Eyes snapped open. There was a Cardassian squatting in front of him, a nervous smile inching across her face. *There had been another Cardassian another time, smiling at him. Insolent. He had placed his phaser against the spoon shaped crest in the middle of his forehead, pressed the trigger...*

"Captain?" The voice seemed far away, the words muffled. "Captain?" The voice was inside his head, tearing through the scrambled dreams, the tortured nightmares. "Captain?" She asked again, her voice fraught with hysterical concern.

"It's the cortical implant." Another voice issued from above, slithering into his consciousness. The Cardassian in front of him froze, her dark eyes filling with fear. "Give him a few moments. The side effects are only momentary. A Breen device," the voice added casually, "but our Cardassian minds are too strong for it. Humans, Klingons, on the other hand..."

"Monster!" She spat. The woman was Keta, from the Security Forces. It was coming back to him now. There had been the melee aboard the *Rakal*, the near escape, the fireball, and then nothing. Followed by oceans of torment.

*More memories flashed through his mind, recent ones: Soothing balm over his wounds, kind words from a man called Ruma... Rough, scaly gray and brown hands holding him, their vise-like grip enflaming his blistered skin, Darcis holding a gleaming blade that cut through his uniform as if it were paper. Naked, exposed, vulnerable...Clothed in a poncho-like shift, his burned, blistered arms and legs bare...Hunger, fear, anger, shame...barren, humid walls of his prison...licking the salty rock for moisture...Darcis's chamber, the sting of the implant being thrust into the back of his head... His muscles palsied uncontrollably as the hellish rush of memories took hold. . How long had he been here? Had they seen the shivering?*



"Sometimes," the other voice, haughty, controlling...*Darcis*...replied. "When I have to be. We in the Obsidian Order wear many masks."

"You haven't been in the Order since the Dominion released you after the Order's ill advised strike in the Omarion Nebula. You were one of its chief proponents and architects I recall." Another voice. Raspy. Goadling. *Glinn Sulle*.

The captain tried to look around without moving or drawing the Cardassians' attention. He could only hope that both Cherenkov and Donar had both survived the explosion. There didn't appear to be anyone else in the darkened cell except him, Keta, and their jailers.

Ignoring the dig, Darcis instead said. "You can stop the subterfuge human. I know how long it takes for a Terran to recover from a cortical implant session."

"Where are we? My crew? The others?" He croaked, his voice dry. Keta immediately raised the wet rag to his mouth, and squeezed a few merciful drops of water over his cracked lips. For the first time, he noticed that one side of the lieutenant's face was bandaged. Whatever they had done to him, and he had yet to take a self-inventory, it had appeared that Keta had received even worse treatment. Despite his own feelings about Cardassians, his instinctive need to protect the people under his umbrella-even temporarily, flared within him. "What did you do to her?" He demanded, trying to stand up, but regretting it as a thousand blades of agony knifed through his body. Keta eased him back down, propping his head against the warm rock wall behind him.

"The Changeling is currently in our interrogation chamber," Darcis beamed. "And we are arranging something special for the Klingon. Your First Officer and the Angosian got away, but they were insignificant. A starship captain is a more worthy prize."

"Razad Kor, an abandoned listening outpost in the Badlands," Sulle answered, with enough forthrightness for Terrence to believe her.

"And what *I* did to *her*," Darcis interrupted, "is none of your concern." He smiled, cracking his large knuckles. "The information you *both* provided will help serve our cause immeasurably."

"And what cause is that?" Glover asked, his cloudy mind hungry for any information he might be able to use to escape, or at least get out a message to Starfleet.

"Restoring Cardassian sovereignty of course," Gul Keshet stepped into the mouth of the cavern. "We had hoped to net the Founder and try her for her crimes, but fate has been fortunate. In addition to the changeling, we also can try a human, a Klingon, and a race traitor. It's pitiable that we couldn't also capture a Romulan or Breen. However, your trial and execution, broadcast across subspace, will send the message that the True Way is the

real power on Cardassia, and that the Cardassian Union is still a force to be reckoned with."

"Execution?" Glover quipped. "I guess the trial's outcome is already decided huh?"

Keshet looked down, scouring him with his black gaze, his thin lips draw into a hard line. "It appears that you know very little about the Cardassian legal system, by far the most efficient in the quadrant. Only the guilty are tried and punished. Gil Rimal shall serve as your *nestor*. Glinn Sulle your *conservator*. You will be executed in five days."

"Then what's the point of going through a show trial?" The captain's anger briefly muzzled his pain.

The gul pursed his lips; his eyes alight, obviously enjoying giving a primer on Cardassian jurisprudence. "The trial will only serve to reaffirm what is already self-evident. We were betrayed by the Dominion and now are occupied by the Federation Alliance. The True Way continues the work of Legate Damar and the Cardassian Liberation Front. Your admission of your crimes will fire the Cardassian soul to throw off all of its shackles and reclaim our heritage, absent your perversions."

"Perversions?" Terrence scoffed, unable to control himself. "I guess providing food, medicine, and shelter are too subversive for you?"

"It weakens the Cardassian will to do for ourselves." Sulle chimed in, but her eyes were locked on the gul. "We have survived famines, plagues, wars. We can survive this."

"No one...is disputing that," the captain replied, his voice catching as a needle of pain raked across his chest. *Calm down*, he told himself, *don't get too worked up*. "We're just trying to help you. We want to avert the mistakes of the past. We want to live in peace with the Cardassian people."

"Mistakes?" Darcis crowed. "What '*mistakes*'? Everything the Union has done was for the survival of the Cardassian people." Both Keshet and Sulle nodded their heads in agreement.

"That's not true!" Keta's voice was thick, as if her tongue was swollen. Chris was certain that was probably the case due to her injuries. "We raped Bajor, we joined the Dominion, and we started this gods forsaken war." Six pair of eyes impaled Keta. Fighting his pain and prejudices, Glover sidled next to her, placing a blistered arm around her quivering shoulders.

"She's right." He replied.

"She's misguided." Keshet retorted.

"The product of a dissident, disloyal household," Darcis sniffed. "The Order knew all about Jobal Keta and his Federation ties."

"You lie!" Keta broke from Glover's grasp. Too weak to stop her, she stood angrily before the larger, insolent Cardassian. "He was loyal to Cardassia. Cardassia wasn't loyal to him."

“And he thought the Federation would be for his children?” Darcis laughed, his dark eyes flashing in the gleam of the dull orange lights ringing the walls of the cell. “He was a fool, a traitor, and you’re presence here,” he poked a thick finger into Keta’s right breast, “proves me right.” Keta’s slap didn’t even turn Darcis’s head. With languorous ease, he pushed the petite Cardassian back against the wall of the cell. Cracking her head against the solid rock, she slid down to the floor, wrapping her arms around her bare knees, struggling not to cry.

“My father was no traitor. My father was no traitor....” She repeated over and over.

Keshet shook his head sadly at the sight, before replying. “Captain Terrence Glover, Sial Keta. Make your peace with whatever gods you believe in. Your trial will begin tomorrow.” He exited the cell, followed by Sulle and lastly by Darcis, who looked back to rain spittle on both Glover and Keta. Before the captain could respond, the hulking Cardassian had crossed the threshold of the cell, a forcefield activating in his wake.

Terrence slid over to Keta again, and wrapped the trembling woman in his arms, after only the barest hesitation. He stayed by her side until her trial began.

---

## CHAPTER NINE

### Deep Space Nine (Bajoran Temple-Promenade)

Jasmine Glover stood in the archway of the Bajoran temple, oblivious of the life passing behind her on Deep Space Nine's Promenade, enticed by the soothing scent of incense wafting from the darkened, sepulchral environs, but hesitant to step inside.

Though she had always felt that there was a spiritual component to life that made it more than just a series of random events, Jasmine had never sought to define what that spiritual component was. The prospect had often tempted her while she had been convalescing in her biobed at the massive Spacedock orbiting Earth in the wake of the holocaust in the Tyra system.

And after that nadir, faced with long, grueling months of rehabilitation ahead for her, Jasmine had sought to find the spiritual balance she had always believed in but never explored. Until that time she had viewed life as one complex machine or equation that could be worked out with time, patience, ingenuity, and effort. The senseless slaughter unleashed by the Dominion War had disabused her of such naïve notions, leaving nothing but pain, doubt, and fear in its place.

Shutting herself off from almost everyone, including her family, but especially her husband, only accepting the occasional visit from her father-in-law Admiral Glover, the man impervious to her attempts at evasion, Jasmine had sought to mend her spirit as well as her body. While on Earth, she had used almost every hour not spent in physical therapy or psychological evaluation, studying theology, first the myriad Terran religions, and then expanding her search to extraterrestrial religions, particularly Vulcan, Deltan, Andorian, Bajoran, and Klingon.

Though she was sure her Vulcan associates would be off put at her description of *IDIC* as a religion, with its emotion, faith based connotations; Jasmine couldn't help but see it as such. She had gained much insight into herself by reading the revered Vulcan *Kir'Shara*.

Being a human, she could see the "logic" in adapting and combining tenets in the *Kir'Shara* with those of the Terran *Bible*, among many other works to deepen her understanding of life, the universe, but most importantly answer the eternal question of why "*bad*" things happen to "*good*" people.

The long climb out of the pit all seemed for naught as she stood at the Temple's door, the soft darkness within the chamber, whispering to the voracious abyss flowing out from her own heart, threatening now to engulf her.

Jasmine closed her eyes, trying to shut off the spigot of memories of Terrence rushing through her mind. She loved him so much. He was the kindest, strongest man she had ever met, and all she had done was turn him away, shut him off, but she had to. She couldn't risk losing him by letting him in, by telling him the truth. Though her readings had reinforced the oft-spoken comment that the truth made one free, the phrase didn't apply to her. It had been turned on its head, and if she gave in to the impulse she risked losing what little remained of her life before it had been ripped asunder, both figuratively and literally.

"Lt. Glover...Jasmine? Are you all right?" There was a light touch on her shoulder. The Ops Officer involuntarily jerked, twisting her head, her muscles tensing for an attack. Instantly recognizing the identity of her "attacker", Jasmine straightened rapidly to stand at attention.

Pell Ojana stepped back, her face creasing with concern. "It's okay Jasmine. At ease." Placid control quickly retook the Bajoran's features and voice. "I'm worried about him too."

"I know." Jasmine whispered, failing to completely smother the edge in her voice, as a twinge of unexpected jealousy pinched her heart.

"Were you going into the Temple?" Pell asked, pursed lips finally breaking her neutral expression. "Stupid question right?" The Bajoran gestured at the Ops Officer, noting Jasmine's location at the Temple's entrance.

"Not as stupid a question as you might think." Jasmine admitted. Though she had only gotten to know Pell Ojana in the short time she had been aboard the *Aegis*, Jasmine knew that her husband and the composed Bajoran shared an enigmatic relationship dating back to his teenage years. Ojana knew more about Terrence than she probably ever would.

"Let's go in," Pell urged, gently grasping Jasmine's hand and leading her into the sanctum before the lieutenant could protest. Inside, scented candles cast a soothing, meditative glow. The sanctuary was empty, and Jasmine was grateful for that. Already feeling out of place in the shrine, she definitely wasn't in the mood for pep talks or condolences from a member of the Bajoran faithful. Pell let go of her hand, walking over to an altar with unlit candelabra on it. While the Bajoran lit the candles, Jasmine's attention was drawn to a box-shaped vessel nestled in an alcove adjacent to the altar.

*An orb*, she gasped as recognition dawned on her. Inside the box resided one of the Bajoran Orbs, hour glass-shaped energy vortices created by the wormhole aliens to communicate with the people of Bajor. Or so the Bajorans believed.

"The Orb of the Emissary," Pell Ojana whispered, her voice reverent. "The Emissary used it to bring the Prophets back to us." She explained, a beatific smile stretching across her face.

The *Emissary*, Jasmine nodded. Captain Ben Sisko. She had never met Benjamin Sisko, though her husband had spoken of him often. Plus, the exploits and travails of Deep Space Nine were quite well known to the Deep Space Five station crew. Many of her compatriots were envious of the notoriety received by the frontier starbase; she hadn't been among that number. Facing down Cardassians and Jem'Hadar were not her idea of career advancement.

She walked up to the container, mindful that an invisible forcefield protected the orb. "Have you ever had an 'Orb Experience'?" She glanced at Pell. Behind the Bajoran blazed a row of newly lit candles.

"No," the counselor shook her head, her voice wistful. "I've never been so fortunate. The Prophets have never spoken to me in that way."

"Hmmm," Jasmine replied, returning to gaze at the orb vessel. "So, you believe that the Prophets speak to you? That you've been '*Touched*' by them?"

"Of course. I couldn't have survived Gallitep without them."

Unable to stop herself, Jasmine, her mind swirling with familiar images of death and fire, asked. "What about all the others who died at Gallitep? Why did the Prophets save you and not them?"

Pell's green eyes darkened; her gentle, open face closed around the question as it seized her mind. After several interminable minutes, she spoke, her voice riveted with pain. "I don't know. I've asked the Prophets, many others, and myself the same question. I have yet to receive an adequate answer."

"Because maybe there isn't an answer." Jasmine offered, not wanting to say hurtful things to the Bajoran, but unable to escape the destination of her inquiry. "Maybe cruel, evil things happen for no reason. Maybe there is no higher authority guiding our actions, at least a caring one anyway. Are you familiar with *deism* Lt. Pell?"

Taken aback, Pell stammered. "It is an Earth belief," she replied. "Positing that God or some universal force created the universe and then abandoned it. That God doesn't intervene. That such divine intervention is not necessary, being that the universe can't be improved upon, that it is self-regulating. Yes, I've heard of deism." She finished, her voice filled with disbelief.

"And you don't believe in it, or see the reason in such a belief?"

"No, my life has taught me, shown me, that the Prophets, God if you will, have a plan for all of us." Pell held up a quick hand to silence the question forming on Jasmine's lips. "I don't know what that plan is. Only the fortunate, like the *Emissary*, have had that plan revealed. I think for most of us, life, *living*, is about discovering the path laid out to us, and deciding if we are strong enough to travel that road."

"So, you never once questioned the Prophets?" The Ops Officer asked, again unable to stop herself, wincing even as the words escaped from her lips. "Even, during the darkest days of the Cardassian occupation? Even when you watched whole families perish at Gallitep?"

Pell's eyes filled with tears. She did nothing to stop them from flowing down her face as she wrapped her arms around her waist, a quiver coursing through her body. "I questioned the Prophets then. I question them now. Every day. I've never been afraid of questioning the Prophets. I've been more afraid that one day they might answer and that I can't live up to what *they* might ask of *me*."

"I'm sorry," Jasmine caressed the woman's wet cheek, wiping away her tears. "I shouldn't have said that. It's just...."

The commander grabbed Jasmine's hand and squeezed. "I know. This isn't about me. It's about Terrence. I care for him too. He really helped me get back on my feet, rediscover my purpose. The Prophets speak through Terrence. He will persevere. He loves you, and he will return to you. Of that I have no doubt."

"Thank you so much for saying that," Unbidden tears blurred Jasmine's vision. "You've been such a good friend to him. He loves you for it. He's told me so. I just wished that I had your faith."

"You don't need my faith," Pell remarked. "I have enough for both of us."

Jasmine smiled, and gave the Bajoran a strong hug, pulling back when Pell groaned. The Ops Officer's face darkened with embarrassment. "Sorry," she said, before spoiling the moment with a lie, "Sometimes I forget about my cybernetic arm."

Pell nodded, saying nothing. "Come with me. I'll show you some ancient Bajoran meditation techniques."

"The *Iponu* Stances?" Eyes alight, Jasmine recalled. "I've had little practice with them. Part of my therapy."

Nodding again, this time with approval, Pell quipped. "Glovers' never cease to amaze me."

"Me either," she smiled, feeling better than she had in days. "Let's get started," she began when her communicator chirped. She tapped it lightly with her inorganic hand. "Lt. Glover here."

*"Priority message from Admiral Samson Esau Glover, Starfleet Security."*

Looking askance at Pell, a shadow of despair flickering over her face, Jasmine mouthed "Sorry", but said aloud. "I'll take it in my quarters onboard *Aegis*."

*"Acknowledged."*

"Glover out." She deactivated the link. "Got to go," she offered.

"Tell Admiral Glover I said hello and that I will pray for his son." The Bajoran smiled.

"I will." Jasmine said, stepped out of the quiet, dim temple into the blaring light and sound of the Promenade. Her mind focused on returning to the *Aegis* to take the Admiral's message, she barreled into a wiry sliver of black and gray. "Sorry," she gasped, looking up for the first time. Her breath hitched as her lungs froze, as a glimmer of memory tried to break through to the surface.

The lithe Trill smiled at her, an appraising twinkle in his eyes. "No need to apologize, mistakes happen." His voice was pleasant enough, but his gaze was penetrating, dissecting. There was something shadowy about him that went far beyond his tanned skin, or the even darker splotches running from his temples down the sides of his face.

.....  
Jasmine backed away from him, without appearing to do so quickly. "Probably cases of mistaken identity on my part." The lieutenant forced a smile. "I apologize. If you'll excuse me," she moved around the wiry Trill on her way to her quarters.

Jasmine felt the man staring at her retreating back for several seconds. Moving more quickly, merging into the throng, she was afraid, not but sure quite why, to look back.  
.....

## **Deep Space Nine (Quark's Bar)**

Aquiel Uhnari gagged as a pulpy seed went down her windpipe. Her throat sore from coughing up the trespassing seed, her voice strained, she nonetheless smiled. "Quark, this is real *Muskan seed punch*. Much better than Federation replicators." She held up the sweating mug of thick, orange liquid. "My compliments."

"Nothing but the best," Quark leered as he propped his elbows on the table. "A man in my profession learns very quickly that the best merchandise attracts the best customers."

"I'm one of your best customers?" Aquiel smirked, batting her eyelashes. "This is my first time at your establishment. What have I done to deserve such praise?"

"I have lobes for that sort of thing," Quark offered. "Trust me."

"*Trust* a Ferengi?" Commander Cherenkov grumbled, plopping down in a seat beside Uhnari. "Now that's an oxymoron if I've ever heard of one." Pale scars, the fading traces of the dermaplast treatments to repair multiple lacerations, still covered his face. The Russian glared at the barkeep. "We would like to be alone."



"That's uncalled for." Uhnari chided the human. Turning back to Quark. "Sorry about that Quark."

His diminutive form rigidly straight, his face a neutral mask, the Ferengi replied, with just a hint of distaste. "No problem. I'm sure you have much to discuss," he glimpsed at the latticework of scars. "If you need anything, and I mean *anything*, Commander Uhnari, I am at your service." With a curt bow, the Ferengi sauntered away.

Cherenkov sighed. "Glad he's gone."

"What's with you?" The engineer tried to keep the edge out of her voice, but failed.

"How can you even ask that question?" The Executive Officer snapped, the volume of his voice attracting the attention of several onlookers. Recognizing what he had done, he lowered his voice. "Captain Glover and the Founder have been captured by the Cardassians. They could be dead by now. And it's my fault."

Aquiel had dreaded this moment, but knew it had to happen. She had only hoped it had come in a much more private setting. Cherenkov had been mercurial since the tongue-lashing he had received from Admiral Shanthi.

"It's not your fault. None of us could've anticipated that the Cardassians had set an almost perfect trap for us."

"But I should have. That's my job." He shook his head, refusing to see the logic of her reply. "I should've been faster. I should've blasted that fat Cardie Darcis clean through his spoon head at first sight!"

Aghast at the virulent prejudice spewing from her paramour, Aquiel stammered. "You...you really don't mean that. Do you?" Ivan Cherenkov merely looked at her, his eyes icy, blue flints.

"I've never seen this side of you. Never heard you make those kinds of comments," Uhnari shook her head in disgust, before rising from her seat. "I don't like what I'm seeing right now."

"Wait," Cherenkov ordered, his hand shooting out to clutch her. "Let's talk about this."

"Not right now," Aquiel replied, wrenching her hand free from his grasp. "I thought more time together might help you get through this. But I'm not sure about that now. I'll talk to you later." Cherenkov raised mid-way out of his seat, before sitting back down, his hands retreating under the table, his face as glacial as the cold fire that had blazed from his tongue.

Unwilling to let Cherenkov, much less the denizens of *Quark's* see her cry, she turned away from Ivan and tore out of the bar, in such distress that she didn't see the slender, dark Trill nimbly take the seat beside the Russian that she had vacated. Nor did she hear the man say to her lover, "Bravo performance. Now, let's get down to business."

"Who said it was a performance?"

.....

## Deep Space Nine (Detention Center)

Tai Donar saw much of himself in Glinn-sed Beroz: seething anger, bristling defiance, and unyielding pride. Roughly grabbing her shredded face, with its one empty socket staring into his soul, he recognized that they were both very scarred people.

"You will tell us what we need to know," he warned, his thick fingers squeezing the Cardassian girl's chin. A rain of spittle erupted from her lips. Donar pulled the lieutenant's face close to his. Bearing the full menace of his glare down upon her, his jaws clenching with barely restrained rage, he whispered. "Don't do that again."

"Leave her alone!" Sed Mesec pounded against the duranium wall separating his cell from his compatriots. "Don't you touch her!" The young Cardassian's fierce pounding rumbled like thunder. The Angosian ignored him, his focus returning to Beroz. The female snarled at him.

"Or what?" she jeered. "Starfleet is weak. Your *rules*, your *procedures* won't allow you to injure us. Only scare us, and you're not doing a good job of that."

"Is that right?" The Security Officer asked, thick fingers digging into Beroz's tan, leathery chin.

"That is right," Daneeka interrupted. "And you know it is." Donar grumbled as he looked over at the woman. The station's Security Chief had heretofore been blessedly quiet, assuming the role of observer as he had proceeded to interrogate the prisoners. Though he had preferred to question the suspects alone, Admiral Shanthi had given Daneeka control of the proceedings, a snub at the actions or inactions of the *Aegis* crew in handling the *Rakal* incident.

But so far that decision, or any of his actions, hadn't merited many results. After hours of questioning, threats, bluffing, and mild physical contact, he was nowhere closer to knowing the destination of the *Rakal* or the structure or scope of Keshet's operation. The intense mental and physical conditioning of the Cardassians had even made them impervious to Vulcan mind melds or Betazoid telepathy.

Each stymied second meant lost time on recovering the captain or the Founder, and to averting a second war with the Dominion. Though the Founders' hadn't responded to the kidnapping yet, he was certain that they still had their tentacles in the Alpha Quadrant, and would learn about it shortly if not already mulling over their responses. Donar also knew with grim certainty that if any other authority than the Nimbus III Tribunal executed the Founder Leader, the Dominion would consider it an act of war.

He didn't fear war like many of his colleagues. He had been honed to fight, trained to kill since his youth. Death meant nothing to him. There was existence and then there wasn't, it was as simple as that. However, honor and duty did mean something to him. Donar was a member of an organization pledged to defend life and promote peace. And in this capacity he would do all that he could to fulfill his commitment even if it meant, ironically, that he had to kill to do so.

Flexing his large arms and shoulders, Donar exhaled away his gathering anger. "Do you have a better idea?" He challenged his Bolian counterpart.

"Look, I've been fighting Tzenkethi and Cardassian thugs for almost twenty years," Daneeka shrugged, her lips upturning slightly. "I've interrogated more than my share." Her smile slowly turned into a frown as she approached the control pad by the cell's door and deactivated the forcefield. Stepping into the steel gray cell, her face now a grimace, the human said. "And I know all their pressure points." She cracked her knuckles. "Mental and physical."

"*Voles!*" Beroz croaked, though pinned in Donar's grip, the young woman remained defiant. "You Feds are the true criminals."

Daneeka came to stand over her. "And what would you call that attack on the *Aegis*?"

"A blow for freedom." Beroz wrenched her face free from the Angosian, pulling away from him and to her full height. He made a move to subdue her, but Daneeka placed a restraining hand on his knotted shoulder.

"Freedom?" Daneeka crowed. "What do Cardassians know about freedom? All your people know how to do is conquer and enslave."

"That's not true!" Mesec squealed. "The Cardassian Union helps other races maximize their resources, improve their cultures!"

Facing the wall, Beroz remarked. "Silence Sed!" Mesec's voice cut off immediately. Turning back to glare at Donar and Daneeka, Beroz gloated. "Only inferior species are conquered."

"Is that why the Cardassians lost the war?" Donar quipped, picking up on Daneeka's strategy.

"We were betrayed!" Beroz screamed.

"Oh yeah?" Daneeka scoffed. "How can *superior* species ever allow themselves to be deceived?"

"It was the leadership; they were *weak*, infected by alien influences, making peace with the Bajorans and Federation, demobilizing our forces, leaving us vulnerable to the Klingons!" Beroz spat.

"And so what do you hope to accomplish by kidnapping a Founder?" Donar asked.

"Don't you see," Beroz peered at them with her remaining eye, before blinking and turning away. "Of course *you* wouldn't. We are exercising our power, showing the Cardassian people that there is a way back to strength that doesn't subsist on handouts from the Federation, Romulans, or worst of all the Klingons."

"We?" Daneeka laughed, her voice mocking. "Doesn't look anymore like a run down ship with a deranged crew that got lucky. The Bajoran resistance *took down* the Cardassian military, *forcing* them to retreat from Bajor. And then they managed their affairs in the aftermath so successfully that *they* are now giving the Cardassian Republic aid."

Beroz spat on the floor, before rounding on the Security Chief. She took a wild swing, which Daneeka easily sidestepped, grabbing the unbalanced younger woman's arm and driving her into the floor. Daneeka slid her arm around the recalcitrant Cardassian's neck, applying pressure to her carotid artery.

"What is this organization?" She snapped.

"You'll know soon enough." Beroz croaked through a hail of tears. Daneeka tightened her grip. Mesec was back at the wall, throwing his whole body against it with no effect. Tai found himself in the unusual position of suggesting restraint.

Hands palm out in placation, the Angosian uncharacteristically pleaded, "Lt. Daneeka, restrain yourself!"

"You don't outrank me," she retorted, her knee like a dagger in the Cardassian's spine. "I don't take orders from you." Donar grabbed the slender Bolian and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her off the inert Cardassian.

Donar grunted when the thrashing woman head butted him, but he didn't release her until they were outside of the cell. Quickly activating the forcefield, Tai turned to face Daneeka. "What was that?"

"Getting results," she replied, her voice steeped with frustration. "I found out more than you did."

"Like what?" He challenged.

"Well?" Daneeka began, shrugging. "I don't really know." She admitted.

"A start." A voice said from the entrance to the station's holding cells. Both Donar and Daneeka whipped around to glare at a sultry Orion female, her mane of raven hair and deep green skin alluring even in Starfleet black, gray, and red. Leaning, almost languorously against the doorframe, the Orion tapped lazily on a silvery padd. Donar chided himself for not hearing the door hiss open.

"How long have you been standing there?" He growled.

"Long enough," her beautiful features creased with disapproval. "I thought Angosian auditory senses were as sharp as Vulcans." She remarked.

Bright with embarrassment, Donar grumbled, "Who are you?"

"Commander Cyia Bast, Starfleet Security. As of this moment, these prisoners are remanded into my custody."

"On whose authority?" Daneeka's heated retort beat the Angosian to the punch.

"Admiral Samson Glover, Director Starfleet Security," the Orion replied, holding up the padd she had been holding. Donar's eyes widened at the mention of Captain Glover's father. He yanked the padd out of her hands, skimming over its contents. Abruptly nodding, Donar stood at attention.

"Sorry sir."

"No harm done," Bast smiled warmly, but her eyes were frosty. "I will now question the prisoners alone."

"Hold on just a minute," Daneeka began. "*Fleet* Admiral Shanthi has requested that I take part in any interrogation of the prisoners."

"Admiral Shanthi's office will be informed of any findings," Bast offered. Trying to buy time, Donar glanced over at the huddled Beroz.

"The Cardassian female needs medical attention."

"And she'll get it...*after* I am finished. Dismissed Lieutenants Donar and Daneeka."

\*\*\*\*\*

The instant the Detention Center's doors swooshed closed behind them, Daneeka rounded on the Angosian. "I can't believe the nerve of that woman! How dare she kick us out of my office?" Tai didn't respond, his mind far away from his own boiling sense of frustration. He was instead thinking about Admiral Glover. "Adm. Shanthi and Colonel Kira both will hear about this!"

Though he knew that Admiral Glover had personally overseen security arrangements on Nimbus III, even he was surprised with the speed in which the admiral had gotten his people to Deep Space Nine to question the terrorists. It underlined the seriousness that this threat posed to the fledging peace.

Without saying a word, Donar left the simmering human to stew, while he stalked the station's corridors, stonily ignoring station personnel as he boarded the *Aegis* via an airlock, intent on regrouping in his quarters. He wasn't surprised that Commander Cherenkov and a specter from both their pasts were waiting for him. The ghost was almost a head shorter than Donar, and his wiry frame was not as chiseled, but he was still a formidable and dangerous opponent. Running a dark hand through closed cropped inky hair, he tried to smile at Donar. "Tai." He nodded.

"Naim Elfar," Donar remarked with distaste, turning from the Trill, gazing instead at a determined Cherenkov. "What's really going on here?"

.....

"The future of the Federation," Ivan remarked, his flair for dramatic foreboding still intact despite Admiral Shanthi's recent drubbing, grinding his fist into his open palm.

"Of course, what *else* could it be?" Donar mirthlessly quipped.

## **The Great Link (Gamma Quadrant)**

Of all the emotions roiling through the Great Link, the one Odo found most disgusting was smugness. The capture and impending execution of one of their own by renegade Cardassians, under the noses of Starfleet confirmed their suspicions that the Federation, even if it was being honest about its peaceful intentions, was not strong enough to hold back its more vengeful neighbors. If a ragtag band of Cardassians could successfully attack a Federation starship, abscond its most notorious prisoner, and escape into the ether of the cosmos, what hope did Starfleet have to prevent the Klingons or Romulans from invading the Gamma Quadrant en masse?

Odo found the views of the others most distressing because deep down he knew they were right. Though he had objected to the continued placement of Changeling spies among the Alpha Quadrant powers, this instance had proven the action prescient. All that remained now was to craft a response to the Cardassians' terrorism. The ongoing debate raging within the golden sea spread out before him was going as he had expected, which depressed him even more. Unable to continue arguing on behalf of the Federation, he had sought to remove himself from the debate, to "recharge his batteries"; one of Chief O'Brien's more frequently used idioms.

Odo sat upon the solitary rock jutting out of the sea formed by the merging of Changeling bodies and souls. For an innumerable stretch, he had sat upon the rock, his back turned away from the others, his eyes searching the stars, his "heart" swelling with thoughts of Kira. He had sent Nitala'Rax to her to mollify any suspicions left by the Federation Alliance regarding the intentions of the Dominion. He had sent his word that the Founders would honor the treaty signed by the Founder Leader of the Dominion's Alpha Quadrant forces. Though he knew most would be skeptical, he knew the colonel would believe him, and defend him with her last breath. Even more than the deaths that were to come once the Founders had finished their debate, he was saddened that he had failed to keep his word to her.

"No matter the naivety of your views, you were never one to run from an argument," the voice behind him said. Laas, recently joining the Link, with several more Changelings he had found on his journey to retrieve the hundred Changelings sent out by the Dominion decades ago to serve as living probes, had been chosen by the others to talk "sense" into Odo. The Link

made too much of their previous association, and they gave Laas too much credit to actually think that he could ever do such a thing. "The mono-forms have abrogated their own treaty. We must protect our own."

Glancing back at the tall, imposing Laas, Odo grumbled. "The Federation did no such thing. Our own *sources*," he deigned not to call them spies, "have informed us that it was renegade Cardassians, terrorists belonging to a group called the True Way." The former constable of Deep Space Nine paused as he remembered the reactionary group, formed in opposition to the Cardassians making peace with the Bajorans. The True Way had made an attempt on the life of the Bajoran First Minister Shakaar in addition to killing two Bajoran officials and blowing up the Starfleet runabout *Orinoco*. After the Klingons invaded Cardassia, he had heard very little about them. But it was apparent that they were looking to return to the galactic stage in a major way.

"Solids are solids, their groupings or self-imposed boundaries will never hide that fact," Laas stated with a world-weary sagaciousness. "If it weren't the Cardassians, it would've been the Klingons, the Romulans, the Breen, the Son'a, or factions within the Federation itself. This is a test of our resolve, and we must meet it."

Looking at Laas for the first time, Odo replied, "You are correct. It is a test, and the way that we pass it is by giving the Federation enough time to deal with the situation. The Founder agreed to stand trial, and the Federation promised it would be fair in its judgment. Starfleet will address this."

"In five of their days?" Laas's voice drowned with incredulity. "Even if they genuinely wished to save her, they are pressed for time. The Cardassians were nothing if not punctual creatures."

Though Laas had spent most of life in the Varala system, far away from the Cardassians, his disdain for all humanoid life forms had made him receptive to the prejudicial views many of the Founders held for the Cardassians. Already, it had become a truism among his people that Cardassian incompetence and egotism had lost the war, and not the bravery, and dogged desire for freedom among their opponents. The myopia of his people never ceased to amaze Odo. *How could they fight to remain free from oppression by solids by becoming enslavers themselves?* It was a prescription ripe for failure, but the Founders, deities to the Vorta and Jem'Hadar they had created, believed themselves blameless for the hatred reaped upon them, and incapable of making the bungling mistakes that lost the war, which was the most fatal form of self-deception.

"What has the Link decided?" Odo asked, his voice gruff as his impatience took hold. He was in no mood to restart the debate.

Laas began to speak, a rejoinder ready to leave his lipless mouth, stopping when Odo's question registered. A look of surprised annoyance

crinkled his smooth, unformed face. "The Link has decided to send a contingent of Jem'Hadar warships to Deep Space Nine to secure the wormhole. If Starfleet fails to rescue the Founder, we will not stand by and allow one of our members to be murdered. We will find her if they cannot. If we both fail, then she will not die alone."

Odo shook his head, a cold smirk twisting his own unformed features. "That's just what I expected you to say." But unlike the others in the Great Link, he derived no smugness from being right. For not the first time in his life, he wished he were wrong.

---



### III EXORCISMS

#### CHAPTER TEN

##### **Razad Kor (The Badlands)**

His eyes were enflamed by the brightness of the lights hanging overhead. Glover raised a blistered arm to shield them from the painful illumination, but a brutish Cardassian guard yanked his arm down to his side, thick fingernails digging into his raw flesh. The iron chains of his shackles clanged.

"Don't move," he warned. Terrence glanced at the young man, a blood red mask covered the lower part of his face, leaving on the scaly ridges around his eye sockets and forehead visible. He poked the hard emitter cone of his rifle into the captain's flesh before returning to his previous position just behind Glover. "Keep your eyes to the front," the man whispered before becoming as silent as the stone in the cavern entombing the proceedings of this kangaroo court. Seeing no need to incur further pain at the moment, Glover complied, burying his simmering hatred deep within him. *Tomorrow it will be me*, he thought.

Vaguely similar to an Earth courtroom, a podium, with a Cardassian Union flag hanging from it, had been set up in the rear of the cave. On the left sat a row of chairs filled with the youngest members of the terrorist cell. To the right was an empty witness stand. A quivering Lt. Keta sat in a highly raised chair facing the podium. Glover and the other offenders sat in chairs placed safely out of reach. A cordon of Cardassian soldiers, cuirasses gleaming, their faces masked surrounded Terrence, a battered Molok, and a subdued Founder. Both Molok and the Changeling had been similarly shackled.

The cave was ringed with cameras recording the proceeding, as a raft of lights hung from the ceiling to rid the murky warren of shadows. The imposing Darcis hovered among the patches of darkness, moving from one well to another, as if trying to find the perfect spot to observe this mockery.

The kindly medic Rumal, serving as his legal counsel fidgeted as he approached the podium, Gul Keshet staring imperiously down at him and everyone else. Glinn Sulle, serving as the prosecuting *conservator*, was already at the bench, her arms crossed in a sign of discomfort. Traditionally, Rumal playing the role of *nestor* for all of the accused in this legal charade traditionally did not address the court. However Glover had been adamant

that the man move to abrogate these entire procedures due to the questionable jurisdiction the court claimed to have, especially since the Cardassian Union was now a defunct political entity.

Rumal had done his best to dissuade Terrence from pushing for a mistrial; to convince him, and the other offenders, as well to confess their crimes. 'Confession is good for the soul', he had muttered time and again during the consultations. Of course, the captain would confess nothing. Watching the portly man gesticulating awkwardly before the bench, Glover couldn't help but feel sorry for him. He hoped that his obstinacy would not result in the doctor being punished. Keshet seemed unfazed by the flailing man. He shook his head slowly, pointing in the direction of Keta. Head slumped, Rumal moved to stand beside the young woman.

The gul looked next to his right. On cue, the young militants began rapping their knuckles against their seats, creating a hollow ringing throughout the cavern. Once it died down, Keshet cleared his throat, causing all of the cameras in the cave to turn towards him. His scaly, marred features scrunched as severe as Terrence had yet seen, the gul began. "Citizens of Cardassia. I am Gul Aldur Keshet of the Twelfth Order, as extinct now as the Central Command that once defended our noble Union. Today we begin the real rebuilding process, not through some alien concept of government thrust upon us, but by trying, convicting, and punishing those who are truly responsible for losing the war and our current difficulties." With a flick of his hand, the cameras and lights converged on Keta, Terrence, and the others. The captain squinted, forcing himself not to show any other signs of weakness. Instead he kept his gaze focused on Keshet.

"The Founders, the Federation Alliance, and collaborators, they are all scavengers, robbing us of our place in the sun, and in short order the True Way will deal with all of them. These are but the first." The gul leaned back in his seat, a skeletal smile creeping over his face. "We begin with the trial of Sial Keta, the daughter of infamous defectors Jobal and Siene Keta, both of whom deserted the Cardassian people for the permissive comforts of the Federation. During the war, Sial Keta conspired against the Cardassia by working with Starfleet Command to turn Cardassian culture against her own people. After the war, she continued expressing her self-loathing by working in league with the occupying governments. Keta's crime is collaboration, and death will be her punishment for this capital offense." He paused a second, before bellowing, "Begin!"

Sulle smoothly left her seat and approached the bench. Turning dramatically, the cameras capturing her reptilian face in a pleasing light, the glinn batted her blue eyes before starting. "Gentlefolk of Cardassia, I am Glinn Sulle, Twelfth Order. I will be serving as *public conservator* during these proceedings, and I will show through evidence and testimony that each of the

accused, beginning with Sial Keta, had committed war crimes, punishable only by torture and death, against the Cardassian Union.” Pausing for a hair split second to exhale, Sulle continued. “I will ask you now, before *Archon* Keshet, *Nestor* Rumal, these cameras, and the Cardassian people, to confess your crimes. We promise you that your death will be painless.”

Rumal whispered into Keta’s ear. Terrence’s stomach twisted with sick anticipation. He hoped that she wouldn’t break, even though he understood if she did. In the deepest, most shameful corners of himself, he had almost confessed after the last interrogation session with Darcis. But his love for Jasmine and the Federation, and his position as a Starfleet captain, had kept him hanging on. He wouldn’t relent to these thugs by being weak, by legitimizing their terrorism.

Keta’s head bobbed. “I will confess nothing.” She spoke, her voice cracking. Sulle’s eyes darkened.

“So be it. I call Sial Keta, daughter of Jobal and Siene to the stand.” Rumal helped the fragile woman, thin, bruised arms and legs weighted down by iron shackles, shuffle to the stand.

Glover was proud of the young woman as she sat defiantly before the *archon*, her head high. Unbowed. The captain had seen so much of the malignant side of the Cardassian nature for much of his life in Starfleet, especially during the Dominion War, that he had allowed himself to erase all worthy traits from the Cardassian character, even excising the concept of character from the spoon heads. He saw now how wrong he was. He had allowed his hatred and love to blind him, to harden his heart to carry out the brutal business of warfare, but in the process had forgot that not all Cardassians believed or supported the ruthless regimes of Dukat, Damar, and Broca. But his new insight was tempered by the fact that he would not change anything he had done during the war. His love for Jasmine, his need to avenge her and so many others still burned brightly within him.

Sulle circled the redoubtable young woman, her hands clasped around a golden data rod held behind her back. “Please tell the court why you were onboard a Federation warship?” Her rasp was soft, her words sibilant.

“I was serving as the Cardassian Security Forces liaison officer for the extradition of the Founder Leader to Nimbus III to stand trial. A *real* trial,” she added. The glinn stiffened at the dig, her features sharpening. She stroked the hilt of the phase-disruptor pistol strapped to her thigh. Terrence’s heart caught in his throat because he thought Sulle was about to strike or shoot the defiant Keta. Instead, Sulle turned to the cameras and the audience and smiled.

“So, you are a member of the Cardassian Security Forces?” Keta nodded. “I take that as a yes?”

“Yes,” she grumbled.

"The Security Forces that replaced the Central Command, dismantled by the Federation Alliance at the end of the war?"

"Yes."

"And who governs the Security Forces?"

Keta exhaled loudly before answering, twisting her neck to follow the still circling Sulle. "The Diet has recently assumed control of the Security Forces after the election of Professor Natima Lang to Premier. A position your man Legate Tarkon lost I believe."

"We don't support *vole bellies* such as Tarkon or yourself!" Keshet thundered, striking the bench with clenched fists. Sulle stopped her pacing to round on Keshet. She said nothing, but merely looked at him for several tense seconds. The glinn only continued after the diminutive Keshet had settled down. Glover could almost imagine still feeling rays of heat emanating from the smoldering gul.

"Before this so-called handover of control, who controlled the Security Forces?"

"The Civil Authority."

"And they are?"

"I am tired of this charade."

"Shar-raid?"

"It's an Earth word," Keta began, but Sulle lunged at her, beaming in triumph.

"Even now, with her life and honor at stake, she reveals whom she truly identifies with. The *humans*," the glinn said the word, as it was a disease on her tongue.

"No," Keta's chains rattled as she raised her hand in protest. "That's not what I meant."

"Then what did you mean? Hmmm? Tell us." Keta merely stared at Sulle, her mouth open in shock, her face flushing with emotion. Terrence couldn't be sure if frustration or shame were responsible for the intense coloration. The glinn turned from the hapless Keta to approach the trial bench.

"I present this data rod to the court," Sulle offered the gleaming rod to Keshet, who quickly snatched it from her. He held it up to the light, the slender rod glinting in glare of the cameras now affixed to it. "The device includes detailed information regarding Glinn-sed Keta's activities during the war, including several of her analyses of Cardassian culture, society, and politics for Starfleet Command. Information used by the Federation against her own people in countless instances."

"Such as?" Glover realized the words had come from his lips at the same time as Keshet and Sulle shifted their raptorial gazes towards him.

"Silence human!" Keshet said.

"No." The chains clanked as Glover made to move from his seat. "This is a mockery of justice. A kangaroo court!" He bit back the pain as the guard behind him cracked his shoulder with the butt of his rifle, somehow remaining on his feet. Eyes welling with tears, he managed to spit out. "This is a set up! You're the real traitors to Cardassia!"

"Restrain him!" The *archon* roared. His head exploded as the cold steel of the disruptor rifle made contact with his head. His vision swam with fat black spots as he slumped to the floor. "Continue your presentation *Conservator* Sulle," was the last thing he heard before he succumbed to the warm murmurings of a slick, enticing darkness.

.....

## **Deep Space Nine (Ward Room)**

Ivan Cherenkov snarled as the image on the screen abruptly blacked out. "Those bastards!" He planted his feet to the floor and gripped the armrests of his chair to prevent himself from hurling it across the Ward Room. Aquiel briefly placed a calming hand on his knotted shoulder. He yanked away from her, regretting the harsh gesture as soon as he had done it, but knowing it was the right thing to do, if not necessarily the right way to go about it. Fraternization was one less charge he needed to be brought up on. He knew she was still in mourning for Lt. Mercer, the first death under her command. He knew he should be there for her, but he just couldn't. Too much was at stake. In order to save them all he would have to risk losing her, but there was no other way.

"I agree," Colonel Kira Nerys replied as she moved to turn deactivate the screen. "But that doesn't change the fact that the True Way has the Founder and your captain, along with the others, or that the trials will continue. And I know from personal experience that Cardassian jurisprudence is nothing if not efficient."

"So, what are our options?" The normally quiet Lt. Glover asked, her eyes red and bleary, the healthy sheen gone from her walnut brown skin.

"We're grounded remember," Tai Donar grumbled, looking first at Ivan and then at the Bajoran colonel for a glimmer of hope. Hope that went unanswered. *For now*, the First Officer vowed to himself.

"There are four starships-the *Sutherland*, *Phoebe*, *Abubakari*, and *Robert Lawrence*- combing possible escape routes, several of which lead to the Badlands. But so far, there haven't been any substantial leads." Security Chief Daneeka offered.

Commander Ousanas Dar turned in his seat to the two Starfleet Security representatives hovering at the door to the Ward Room. "Did the

prisoners reveal any information that could be of use to us? Like, where the Founder and Captain Glover are being held?"

The Orion slinked forward, her dark green lips twisted in a smile, but her amber eyes were cold. "So far they have proven most uncooperative." Behind her, the dark, stoic Trill merely nodded.

"I find that hard to believe with all of the screaming coming from the holding cells," Daneeka glared at the two security agents.

"Neither the Bajoran government nor the Federation condone torture," Kira warned. "I will have to investigate this allegation."

"The Cardassians are a little vocal," the Trill stepped forward, "but I can assure you that our interrogation methods are legal. We invite anyone to observe us. Are we gentle? Sometimes no, but the fate of billions is at stake."

"And we're still at square one," Jasmine uttered, her grief melting her usual wall of reserve. "You all saw that broadcast, you see what they've did to my husband and that poor Cardassian girl. We've got to do something; we've got to save them!"

"I agree Lt. Glover," Commander Dar shook his head. "Perhaps I should take over the interrogation of the prisoners."

"Absolutely not!" The Trill replied, his face darkening with anger. "Our authority comes expressly from Admiral Glover."

"I know a few admirals too son," Dar snapped back. "One of which is the Commander-in-Chief of the Fleet. I don't think Admiral Glover outranks her."

Kira quickly silenced the Trill's retort by slicing through the air. "Now is not the time for infighting. We need to figure out what we're going to do and then how to handle the Klingons and Romulans." Ivan nodded. He was certain that both of their governments had received the trial footage splayed all over the newsnets, and were similarly crafting responses to this outrage.

"Colonel Kira is right," Ivan spoke up, "perhaps Commander Dar could speak to some of his admiral friends and see if Admiral Shanthi would lift her suspension, and allow us to join in the search. Anything is better than just sitting here, waiting on Captain Glover to be executed."

"I agree," Kira responded, looking to her First Officer. "Commander Dar?"

"I'll see what I can do," Dar answered.

Uncharacteristically wringing her hands, the tempestuous Bajoran colonel sighed. "Now I've got to meet with Commander T'San and Captain Kreng to inform them of our 'progress.'" She looked at Ivan and then the rest of the assembled officers. "Meeting," before she could dismiss them, her combadge chirped. Tapping it lightly, the colonel replied. "Colonel Kira here."

"Colonel," the voice answered. "A Dominion warship just came through the wormhole, weapons running hot, and it's headed for the station."

"Red alert!" She yelled, bounding out the door, the others scrambling to catch up. "I'm on my way."

\*\*\*\*\*

## **Deep Space Nine (Operations Center)**

Cherenkov stood by the turbolift in the back of the circular Operations Center, the ganglion of Deep Space Nine. Aquiel fidgeted by his side. He had barely spoken with her since their argument at *Quark's*, one he had partly designed to spare her from not only the threat to her career posed by Naim Elfar, but also the threat to her life, and of her love for him if she had learned about some of the more unsavory aspects of his service to the Federation. She was the best thing in his life, *ever*, and he didn't want his past to ruin it. He would rather destroy what they had than see the light dim from her eyes, and the warmth leave her smile and touch as her love turned to revulsion. Ivan wanted to touch her, to pull her close to him, but he restrained himself, instead focusing his attention on the screen.

Against the dazzling golden and azure backdrop of the Bajoran wormhole, a large bug-shaped ship streaked through space. His stomach tightened with memories, as a hush ran through the Operations room. He and so many others had fought against such ships, had watched friends and dreams die at the hands of similar machines of death.

"Dominion warship hailing," a young, muscular black man standing at the Tactical Console, on the other side of the room, replied.

"On screen," the colonel ordered. The Jem'Hadar representative, Nitala'Rax stood beside Colonel Kira in the pit of the command center. Seconds later, the translucent face of a Vorta smiled down at them, its dark eyes twinkling with merriment. "Colonel Kira," he replied, looking her up and down before his eyes swept over the rest of the officers, "assembled guests." He frowned slightly. "*Charge d'affairs* Nitala'Rax." He paused, as the light returned to his shining eyes and his gentle, elfin features. "I am Eilif, a humble servant of the Founders. It is on their behalf that I have been sent, with more ships to follow, to help assist in recovering our Founder from the vile clutches of the Cardassians."

"More ships to follow?" Kira asked, voice dripping with suspicion.

"Of course," Eilif said cheerily. "They are just on the other side of the wormhole. We didn't want to cause too much of a stir...after the recent difficulties between our nations. Once again, *I* offer a personal apology for the behavior of the rogue Jem'Hadar who wreaked so much destruction upon your homeworld." He threw up his hands. "Those kinds of behaviors can be

expected when people forget their place.” His gaze bore into Nitala’Rax. The Jem’Hadar warrior returned the glare.

“We don’t dwell in the past,” Kira replied. “Nitala’Rax’s presence here, as well as his honorable conduct, has been proof enough that there can be peace between our peoples.”

“And we are here in the interests of peace.” Eilif profusely nodded, carefully avoiding acknowledging the colonel’s comments about Nitala’Rax.

“It’s amazing that the Dominion has learned about this unfortunate incident so quickly all the way in the Gamma Quadrant,” Commander Dar weighed in. “How is that possible?”

“The wonders of Dominion technology I suppose.” Eilif sniffed. “May our ship dock at your station?”

Kira hesitated for a few seconds. “In addition to Starfleet ships, we also have Romulan and Klingon soldiers here,” the colonel warned. “In fact, your unexpected arrival has made me late for a meeting with their representatives.”

Eilif clapped his hands. “Excellent. What better way to show our peaceful intentions than to attend this meeting with two of our most bitter former foes.”

“Thanks for inviting yourself,” Kira quipped.

“It was the least I could do,” Eilif smiled, the sarcasm lost on him, “I’ll be seeing you shortly.” The screen blinked off. The colonel turned to the Tactical Officer. “Lt. Easun, coordinate docking and security arrangements for the Dominion ship. I guess we have more guests.”

“More fun for you huh?” Dar grunted.

“Lucky me,” Kira grumpily replied.

.....

### ***USS Aegis*** **(Cherenkov’s Quarters)**

“I want in,” Lt. Jasmine Glover’s tall, slender frame barely filled the entrance to Cherenkov’s quarters.

“Into what?” The First Officer tried to play coy.

“Now’s not the time Commander,” Jasmine replied, as stern and determined as he had ever seen her. “Admiral Glover has informed me about the Security specialists.”

“Is that so?” Another voice said from inside the commander’s darkened room. The guttural voice of the Trill she had run into a day ago. “Let her in Ivan. We’ll need all the help we can get.”

Relenting, the muscular Russian moved aside, Jasmine sliding past him. Seated around a metal table in the quarter’s small kitchen area was the Trill, his Orion partner, Tai Donar, Pell Ojana, Lt. Rojas, and Sgt. Curtis Slade,



mission leader of the Marine contingent specially assigned to *Aegis* in order guard the Changeling.

As far as Cherenkov was concerned, they had done a piss poor job. He wished that Command would've given them a Special Missions team instead. But a lot of them were spread throughout Cardassian space, tamping out insurgent brush fires.

"Juanita?" Jasmine gasped in surprise. "I suspected the others, but not you."

"Captain Glover is like a father to me," the Flight Control Officer shrugged. "I would do anything for him, career be damned."

"And you do understand what we are proposing could mean the end of all our careers, plus stockade time if we are caught." Ivan intoned gravely.

"My career vs. my husband. No contest." Jasmine replied, plucking a rolling chair from behind a desk terminal to sit beside Lt. Rojas. Cherenkov retook his seat at the table.

"Commander Dar informed me less than an hour ago that his appeal to reactivate the *Aegis* crew has been denied."

"Damn Shanthi," Donar cursed, the vehemence directed at a superior officer momentarily stunning Jasmine. She had spent her brief time aboard *Aegis* wrapped in her own cocoon of isolation and pain that she really didn't have any idea what her crewmates were like or how they acted away from their superiors. "She's been after us since the Kesprytt III mission."

"I know," the Trill replied, rubbing his right arm, but looking at Jasmine. He smiled briefly, the gesture meant to be reassuring no doubt, but it only added to his menacing countenance.

"So, what is Plan B?" Pell asked.

"First," the Orion woman, her smile much more alluring than the Trill's, interjected, "I'm curious to know what Admiral Glover told you about us."

"First off, your names are not Cyia Bast or Devol Adan." Both nodded, the Trill's jaw tightening at the revelation. "And neither one of you hold the rank of Commander in Starfleet Security." As truthful as she was willing to be, Jasmine leaned back in her seat, trying to be nonchalant as the tendrils of fear curled in her stomach, "He told me that you were undercover Starfleet Intelligence officers and that you were going to do whatever is necessary to return my husband to me." The Orion nodded, her dark green eyes flashing in contemplation.

"Yes, that is correct."

"And to that end," the Bajoran retook the floor. "What is our contingency?"

"We take the *Aegis* anyway," Cherenkov answered. A current of surprise ran through her at the audacity of the plan.

"Take it where?" Rojas, similarly shaken, asked.

"The Badlands. An abandoned mining post called Razad Kor." The Trill answered.

"And where did you come by that information?" Pell asked.

"We were less than forthcoming in the briefing the other day," the Orion admitted.

"So, you lied?" Jasmine probed.

"No, we were merely selective in what we chose to report," the agent replied. "Galactic peace is at risk, and we didn't have time to wait for the Federation Council or Starfleet Command to dither away at a response. Sometimes quick, covert action is needed to preserve liberty."

"Who gives you the right to make that decision though?" Jasmine couldn't help herself.

"This isn't the time for a civics lesson lieutenant," Cherenkov barked before the Orion could reply. "This is our plan, time is of the essence. You said you wanted in, so there it is. Are you in or out?"

"I'm in," she whispered.

"Good, if memory serves, you last served as an engineer on the *Mandela* before switching to Operations Management. Am I correct?"

"Yes," Jasmine forced herself to speak, as memories of spewing, voracious green plasma coolant, devouring her arm and leg as the *Mandela's* engines ruptured, ripped through her mind. The interfaces for her artificial limbs tingled at the recollections. "I was an engineering officer...a long time ago. But the *Prometheus*-class engines are very complex. Where is Commander Uhnari?" Jasmine was a bit surprised that the Halian, known for occasional bouts of impulsiveness was not among the cadre of renegade officers. A mission like this, breaking the rules to save her commanding officer and friend, seemed right up her alley.

"This is strictly a need to know mission," Cherenkov snapped. "We don't want the circle widened. Do you think you can master the *Aegis's* engines or not?"

Wanting to say no, afraid to step back into a starship engine room again, the denial froze in her throat at the thought of Terrence, whom had risked his life and was suffering now, for her. She wouldn't be his wife, or his partner if she couldn't at least do all she could to rescue him now. "I...I can do it."

Cherenkov's lips thinned into a tight smile. "Good."

"So, what's next?" Rojas asked.

"Razad Kor is located in the Badlands, which you all know is a part of space riveted with plasma storms and spatial anomalies, creating an almost natural defensive barrier against any forward rescue attempt," the Orion replied. "In addition, the Cardassian prisoner Beroz informed us that there are at least two orbital weapons platforms defending the terrorists' hideout."

"Damn," Rojas muttered. "The last time I went against those things was at the battle of Cardassia Prime."

"They were responsible for destroying a lot of starships by themselves," Donar added, nodding solemnly. "How do we counteract that?"

"For one, we don't make ourselves an obvious target," the Trill answered.

"Well, how do we do that?" Donar asked; his voice strained with frustration.

"A cloaking device."

"The Algeron Treaty forbids the Federation from using cloaking devices," Pell said. "It's not like we can just order one from the replicator."

"There is one Federation starship that has a cloak," Juanita offered. "The *Defiant*."

"Correct Lieutenant," the Orion beamed. "We're going to borrow it."

"You can't be serious!" Jasmine gasped, pushing away from the table in disgust. "That's a Starfleet vessel."

"She's serious," Donar replied.

"But how are we going to do that?" Pell asked.

"You're not condoning this are you Pell?" Jasmine looked at her, trepidation roiling in her eyes. The Bajoran nodded, before turning away from the Operations Officer's frantic, searching gaze. She next turned Cherenkov. "Please tell me Commander, there's got to be another way."

"If there is lieutenant, I don't have it," the Russian grumbled.

"What about the *Defiant's* crew?" Rojas asked, "With that Jem'Hadar warship out there, they will be alert. I don't think we're going to be able to 'borrow' it without a fight, which I don't think is a good idea in light of the circumstances. Plus, it might damage both ships, the first line of defense Bajor and the station have." Jasmine nodded vigorously in support of the helmsman's point.

"The procedure will be surgical," the Orion almost purred. "There should be few setbacks and minimal damage, if any, in appropriating the ship's cloak."

"I can't help but believe that you're being selective with your description of how 'easy' it will be," the Operations Officer retorted.

"There are also Klingon and Romulan warships docked here to defend the station in the event of a Dominion attack," Donar offered.

"Would you like to entrust the lives of Federation and Bajoran citizens solely to the Klingons or Romulans?" Jasmine retorted. "I wouldn't."

"Now's not the time for a morality play Lt. Glover," snapped the Trill. "Your husband, the Changeling, and myriad lives are hanging on our actions. If the Founder is executed, there will be an armada of Dominion warships plowing through the wormhole, decimating everything in their wake. A

Second Dominion War, can you imagine that? How many more billions will die?"

Jasmine's veil of sadness was pricked by a surprisingly gentle touch. Cherenkov looked deeply into her eyes. "Jasmine," he said softly, the first time he had ever called her by her given name, "are you in or out?"

"In," she meekly replied, biting acids sloshing in her belly. The First Officer merely nodded.

"Good." Turning from her, his mien instantly hardening, Cherenkov began issuing orders. "I want Commander Pell and Lieutenants Donar and Glover to head to *Aegis's* bridge. We can run the ship from there. Extended shore leave at DS9 and Bajor has already been issued, so the ship should be close to empty. Your task is to clear the rest of the ship and man your stations, awaiting further orders."

"My soldiers can assist you with evacuating the ship and any other tasks you require," Sgt. Slade, his baldhead glistening, waded into the conversation. "We've been ready to leave this station and take it the Cardies for days now."

"Good, Sergeant," the First Officer replied, "but I'll need you with me." Slade's eyes widened as a smile etched across his hard features, but he said nothing in return.

"What are you going to be doing?" Pell asked Cherenkov and the operatives. "How are you going to get the cloaking device? Something tells me that you're not just going to ask for it."

"Leave that up to us," the Orion operative smiled, "I can be pretty persuasive when I choose to be."

.....

## ***USS Defiant***

### **(Main Engineering)**

"Can I see it?" Ensign Hetis, the *Defiant's* new conn officer, purred, "Please?" The striking Boslic female reached down and stroked his chin. The Ferengi melted from her touch, closing his eyes in spite of himself, savoring the brief contact.

Nog, serving double duty as chief engineer for both the station and the *Defiant*, allowed a far too infrequent heat to suffuse him as his prominent lobes throbbed with restrained lust. Shocked and embarrassed by the primal energies surging through his loins, he pulled back from the junior officer, tugging on his tunic as he straightened to his full height, which was still almost a meter shorter than the helmsman.

Projecting an air of dispassionate authority in his voice, hoping the squeaking was just a figment of his imagination, Nog intoned. "I am sorry

Ensign, but you need a Level Seven Security Clearance to have access to the ship's cloaking device."

Ensign Hetis pouted, her puffed out indigo lips looking more delicious than tube grubs. "Nobody has to know," she smiled conspiratorially. "It can be between just you and me." Within a split second, she had filled the gap he had created between them, heat and an alluring musk overloading his senses. The young officer had never shown any romantic interest in him before. If anything, he had seen her spending time with Lt. Easun. Perhaps the tensions rifling through the station following the appearance of the Dominion warship was creating strange behaviors among the crew. He shut off the dozens of questions running through his mind: *Was the ensign really coming on to him? Was this a joke? Had the jokester Lt. Easun put her up to it? If so, why? Perhaps his Uncle Quark had some hand in it? Were they all taking bets on how he responded? And what about fraternization? Though the Ferengi in him felt that almost any sexual assignation was appropriate, his Starfleet training had taught him otherwise, and that combining work with pleasure was a dangerous mixture.*

"I...can't...allow that," he managed to stammer, backing against a gunmetal wall, his heart pounding in his lobes.

"A pity," Hetis's playful pout turned into a hard frown. "I would've been very grateful." She caressed his left ear, and he slumped against the wall, as waves of pleasure lapped over him. A deserted engine room, a beautiful, insatiable woman.... this was better than any holosuite his uncle had programmed.

"We can't," he breathed.

"I know," she whispered back. "Because you ruined it." Before the words had registered in his mind, a sharp pain shot through his ear. Eyes flapping open, he realized that the ensign was pinching his ear.

"Owwwww!" He wailed. "Stop that!" He tugged at her wrist, but her grip was like iron. There was a flash of silver and he saw the hypospray in her hand before she pushed it against his neck. A sharp sting was followed by a cool, numbing sensation traveling slowly down his body. Sliding to the floor, struggling to keep his eyes open, the last image Nog saw of Hetis wasn't even Hetis at all. In her place was a beautiful Orion, her amber eyes radiating carnal fire.

"See what you missed out on?" She whispered before her image wavered to be replaced once again by that of Ensign Hetis. Nog passed out before he could respond.

.....  
***USS Defiant***  
**(Main Bridge)**

Lt. Easun frowned. The dark skinned Deltan looked up from the Tactical console at Commander Dar. The graying XO had only come to the bridge minutes ago and appeared to already be engrossed in a status display inset on the armrest of the command chair. "Sir?"

After a few seconds Dar looked up at the much younger officer. Only the intricate web of lines across his face hinted at the commander's advanced age. "Yes Mr. Easun?"

"Sir, the cloaking device is offline."

"What?" The commander didn't try to hide his surprise.

"Yes sir. My terminal just informed me that the device has been deactivated." Easun pointed to the blinking red light on his interface as confirmation.

"Get me Mr. Nog," Dar ordered the cadet at Operations. She looked up seconds later, confusion and apprehension in her eyes.

"No response sir."

"Try him again." The commander had leaned up in his seat, elbows on his knees. The cadet tried again, and nodded with disappointment a hairbreadth later.

"Computer, locate Mr. Nog."

"*Lt. Nog is in Main Engineering,*" the computer replied.

"That's odd," Dar stroked his chin. "Is there a problem with his communicator?"

"*Lt. Nog's communicator is functioning within normal parameters.*"

"Computer, why is the cloaking device offline? Did Lt. Nog disable it?"

"*Unknown,*" the computer answered the first inquiry, pausing a moment to digest the second. "*Unknown.*"

Easun's chest tightened with fear. He had only recently arrived at the station when a band of Jem'Hadar infiltrators strafed the Bajoran village of Vehlo. With a whole shipload of Jem'Hadar now right outside the station, he couldn't help but think they might have a hand in this mishap.

"Is Mr. Nog the only other person in Engineering?"

"Affirmative."

"And you say that his communicator is functioning?"

"Affirmative."

"Is he running a diagnostic or test that required him to take the cloak offline?"

"Negative."

"Hmm." Dar pondered. Unable to take the suspense, Easun rose out of his seat.

"Sir, permission to investigate?" He offered, anxious to untie the knot that waiting for the eventual scythe to fall had tied in his stomach.

Dar looked him, a twinkle in his eyes. "You're too young to be so suspicious. I would prefer that you maintain your post Mr. Easun. With that Jem'Hadar ship out there, even if it is docked, I want our weapons systems primed and ready. I'll go down to Engineering. I'm sure it's nothing." The commander smiled reassuringly.

"But sir?"

"That's an order Lieutenant," Dar replied, good-naturedly enough as he slid out of his seat and vacated the bridge.

\*\*\*\*\*

### ***USS Defiant*** (Main Bridge)

Lt. Easun forced himself not to look at the chronometer. Though it had been less than ten minutes since Commander Dar had left the bridge, which meant that he might still be en route to Engineering, Easun still had to force himself not to open a communication link with the commander. Instead, he began wrapping his knuckles against his terminal, a valve to release his pent up nervous energy. Something just didn't feel right. But he had to admit that he had felt that way ever since the *Aegis* had disembarked from the station with the Founder. Though he knew Captain Glover was a war hero, and the *Aegis* was one of the fleet's most tactically advanced ships, he still would've felt better if the *Defiant* had been assigned the extradition. He couldn't help but think things would've gone differently with Commander Dar at the helm and him at Tactical.

Wrapped in his own anxieties, he was oblivious to the groans and glares of his fellow crewmates at his incessant noise making. Only the swooshing of the aft door got his attention.

Commander Dar strolled through the entrance. Lt. Easun forced himself not to jump from his seat. "Sir!" He winced at the nervous pitch of his voice. "Is everything all right in Engineering? The cloak is still offline."

The First Officer's eyes narrowed as a scowl covered his face. "Lieutenant, what are you talking about? I'm just returning from the Ward Room. What happened in Engineering? What's wrong with the cloak?"

Before Easun could reply, the scythe fell.

---

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### *USS Aegis* (Main Engineering)

Jasmine Glover tried to ignore the large plasma coolant tanks ringing the gently vibrating cylindrical warp core, its pulse causing the toxic liquid to slosh ominously, as she patched the *Defiant's* pilfered cloaking device into Main Engineering's computer. Her anxiety wasn't helped by "Commander Bast", the Orion impatiently tapping her foot behind her.

"Is it in?" She asked for the umpteenth time, her cool veneer thawing. Jasmine ran a spanner over the cloak before slowly getting to her knees. "Is it operational?"

"I think so," she replied, wiping her damp forehead with her free hand.

"Think so?" The Orion pursed her ample lips. "This is not the time for guessing games Lieutenant."

"Think so is good enough for me." Cherenkov was hanging in the open door of Main Engineering, his face and uniform smudged in several places. Slade stood stoically behind him. "Is the device's theta radiation emissions within safe parameters?"

"Yes." He nodded with approval.

"Get these engines ready to go now Lieutenant."

"Yes sir," Jasmine swallowed her fear, shoving the frightful memories that hung about her like a shroud to the fore corners of her mind, as she turned to Master Display Console sitting in the middle of the room. She quickly ran a series of calculations, then commands. "Impulse engines activated sir," she looked up, and forced herself not to flinch as the ship's four-nacelle engines whined to life.

"Good work," He tapped his combadge. "Bridge, this is Commander Cherenkov."

*"Rojas here."*

"Raise shields, ready phasers, and lay in a course for the Badlands maximum warp. I'll be there shortly."

*"Aye sir."*

Cherenkov looked at Jasmine once again before waving for the Orion to follow him to the bridge. "We're going to get him back Lieutenant. I promise." The lieutenant merely nodded, unable to speak as her throat closed up with emotion, ashamed that she herself wasn't as sure that she would ever see her husband alive again. The First Officer nodded once more before dashing down the hall, Sgt. Slade and the Orion following him.

Now alone in the cavernous, gloomy and empty Engine room, the steady thrum of the warp core her companion, chronometer, and judge,



Jasmine slumped into one of the many vacant seats surrounding the core, wrapped her arms around her midsection, and let the hail of tears hit the interface unmolested.

.....

## **Deep Space Nine (Ward Room)**

Colonel Kira's communicator chirped the second after the trembling passed.

"What was that?" Commander T'San asked, gripping the edge of the Ward Room's conference table.

"More Dominion treachery!" Sneered Captain Kreng of the *I.K.S. Jeqqlj*, pouncing from his chair as he pointed an accusing dagger at Eilif. The two Jem'Hadar soldiers at the Vorta's side moved to protect him, causing Nitala'Rax, heretofore standing quietly behind the colonel to move to intervene in the brewing melee.

"I can assure that my ship has nothing to do with this!" Eilif protested. Kira ignored them all. Hitting the combadge so hard she winced:

"Kira here!"

*"Colonel, this is Commander Dar, the cloaking device on the Defiant has been stolen, by at least two persons impersonating myself and Ensign Thetis."*

"What?" She asked, stunned. Kreng, still standing, glared at the Vorta.

"Sounds like Changelings to me!"

"There were no Founders aboard our ship."

"But you can't verify that Changelings did not commit this attack, an attack on a Federation vessel at a Federation station, and the theft of a loaned Romulan cloaking device. Each act alone constitutes an act of war." T'San replied, icy fury in her voice.

"And you can't prove that a Founder did perpetrate this act," Eilif answered.

"Not yet." Kira, wary and skeptical of Eilif's veracity, replied. "We will get to the bottom..." The lights flickered, and the station rattled again.

*"What was that?"* Dar asked, still online.

"You tell me," the Bajoran quipped. The intercom buzzed before the room filled with tightened voice of Lieutenant Okala.

*"Colonel Kira, the Aegis has raised shields and is trying to disembark from the station without authorization!"*

"I told we were not at fault," Eilif beamed. "I am sure that the *Aegis* is the source for all this commotion."

"We'll see," Kira replied unsteadily. She spoke into the communicator on her right breast. "Mr. Dar, prepare the *Defiant* for battle."

*"Yes ma'am. Dar out."*

Looking up at the ceiling, she spoke in the direction of the intercom.  
“Hail them Lt. Okala. Once again, I’m on my way.”  
.....

***USS Aegis***  
**(Main Bridge)**

On the verge of jettisoning his career along with twenty years of ingrained loyalty, all Cherenkov could think about as he slid into Captain Glover’s chair on the Main Bridge, was the small, black oval clipped to the slender waist of the Orion, whose real name he had learned was Elexa Liris. With a pinch of guilt for staring too long at the seductive operative, the First Officer asked, almost shyly. “That’s a portable hologenerator huh?”

“Wish we had had a couple of those on Kesprytt,” chimed Tai Donar, steady at work behind the Tactical Console.

“Me too,” the XO remarked.

“Deep Space Nine is hailing us,” Pell Ojana, manning the Ops station, informed him. “It’s Colonel Kira.”

“On screen.”

“Commander Cherenkov what are you doing?”

“Trying to save Captain Glover and prevent the Cardassians from starting another war.”

“You know that I can’t allow you to do that.”

“I don’t think you have any choice.”

“I’m not going to release the docking clamps, and I have reinforced the shielding around your ship. Tractor beams are also standing by. Plus, the *Defiant* is prepped and ready to go. In addition to that, this station is fully capable of taking on an armada of ships. Despite your ship’s tactical specialties, it would be hardly a match for that. Return the cloaking device and we’ll talk about this.”

“Talk about what? Now’s not the time for talking. It’s time for action. Release us or I will be forced to fire on DS9, and I don’t want to do that Colonel.”

“I have my orders, and you have yours. You know I can’t release the clamps.”

“So be it. I’m sorry Colonel.” Cherenkov sliced a stiff hand across his throat, a gesture Pell interpreted to sever communications.

“Sorry Nerys,” the Bajoran Diplomatic Officer said softly as she cut the link.

Cherenkov looked quickly around the nearly deserted bridge, now more alien with the lack of the usual bustle that he had become far too familiar and comfortable with during his brief tenure in Starfleet. Liris and Elfar sandwiched him, occupying his usual seat, along with Pell’s. Both had

converted the consoles attached to their seats to tap into the ship's computer to keep the ship working smoothly in the absence of hundreds of crewmembers.

A tense Donar awaited his orders at Tactical, while Jasmine had returned from Engineering to operate the bridge's Engineering Station. Though he would've preferred that the lieutenant remain down below, he knew her history and he could be pleased enough that she had marshaled enough courage to go to Engineering at all, in such close proximity to its deadly radiation and plasma. Only Sgt. Slade appeared out of place. An infrequent visitor to the bridge, he sat idly at Environmental Controls, glancing ever so often with desire at Donar's station.

"We handled our part, but was your mission successful?" Elfar asked.

"We'll find out in about 30 seconds," Cherenkov grated. He took a look behind him. Slade grinned from ear to ear, his hard black eyes gleaming with anticipation.

.....

## **Deep Space Nine (Operations Center)**

"Colonel, we have a problem." Lieutenant Okala Lahn replied, wrinkling her ridged nose as he latched on to his terminal as the station rumbled again.

"Really?" Kira quipped, the unsteady floor, knocking her into the rooted Nitala'Rax. His eyes narrowed with disapproval at the unexpected contact, but he said nothing. The colonel quickly righted herself. "Go on."

Before the Bajoran science officer could reply, the colonel's combadge beeped again.

*"Dar here,"* his voice was strained, harried.

"Yes?"

*"Colonel, the Defiant's systems have shut down."*

"What?"

*"We're dead in space."*

"How did that happen?"

*"Lt. Nog's best guess is that the imposters who stole the cloaking device also downloaded a cascade virus-variant into the ship's computer core. From what we can tell, there's no permanent damage. Just enough to allow the Aegis to effect a speedy escape."*

"Well that's not going to happen," Kira declared. "Get the *Defiant* up and running Commander."

"Aye."

"Uh...Colonel?" Kira rounded on the reticent science officer.

"What is it Lahn?" She snapped.

"Sensors indicate that the station's fusion core has also been infected with a cascade virus."

"Is the station in danger?"

"Not really sir."

"Then *what?*" In response the station trembled again, and the lights, followed by every computer system went out, plunging the Operations Center, and no doubt the entire station into a fathomless, terrible darkness.

"That." Lieutenant Okala murmured.

.....

### ***USS Aegis*** **(Main Bridge)**

Cherenkov toggled a switch on the armrest to open a ship wide channel. "Good job everyone." Despite the dire situation, taking action felt good. "Commander Pell, what about those docking clamps?"

"The moorings have automatically released once the station's systems shut down. They're going to have their hand's full directing traffic for the untethered ships alone, without trying to contend with us too."

"Lt. Rojas, take us out one quarter impulse. Prepare to go to warp at my mark."

"Aye Commander."

"Sir, Klingon, Romulan, and Dominion vessels are all powering their weapons and engines." Tai Donar's gruff announcement put a damper on the First Officer's mood.

"Not a problem. Raise shields." He swiveled the chair around to look at Lt. Glover, hunched over the Engineering Console. "Lt. Glover, engage the cloaking device."

"Yes sir." The lights dimmed as the cloak came online, draining an inordinate amount of power from the ship's systems. Even the regular beeping, whirring, and thrumming of the ship's computers became quieter, more solemn. "Cloaking device is engaged."

"Let's get the hell out of here then. Warp 5 on my mark." Before he finished giving the order, the bridge shuddered.

"That was a disruptor blast," he replied, looking over at Lt. Donar. "Damage report!"

"No damage. Shields holding. It was a warning shot I guess. From the Klingon ship."

"How can they see us through the cloak?"

"We are using a Romulan cloaking device, and there is a Romulan ship out there. Also, Klingon cloaking technology is similar, and the Dominion long ago devised an anti-proton scan to counter the effect of the cloaking device." The Angosian surmised.

.....

"Damn." He turned next to Naim. "So, why did we need a cloaking device in the first place?"

"It wasn't intended for this stage of the game. Only to elude Razad Kor's weapons platforms."

"Oh." Cherenkov nodded. "Lt. Glover, deactivate cloak. Let's show them what *Aegis* is capable of." The lights flickered to full intensity seconds later as the ship's systems returned to full power. "Sgt. Slade, inform your men in the middle and lower hulls to prepare for tri-separation."

From the Environmental Console, Slade quickly tapped the commands into the interface. "You got it." He replied seconds later. "My soldiers are moving into position now."

Cherenkov paused for almost a minute. "Mr. Donar. Initiate multi-vector assault mode."

.....

### ***IKS Jeqqlj*** **(Command Bridge)**

Seconds after coalescing on the bridge of the *Jeqqlj*, Colonel Kira Nerys regretted her next decision. "Captain Kreng, disable that ship with whatever force you have to." She ordered.

The robust Klingon glared at her for her impertinence, before whipping his head around to shout at the corpulent female manning the Weapons Console. "B'Hel, *BaH!*" Crimson fire erupted against the shields of the sleek *Aegis*.

"Report!" Kreng said as he plopped down in his command chair, the colonel taking up position beside him. B'Hel turned in her seat, sweat streaming down her dusky face.

"Shields holding. Minimal damage."

"Fire again! This time use photon torpedoes." B'Hel jerked her jowly head before turning to initiate the order. Kira both heard and felt the release of two torpedo launchers. Kreng clutched his fist in triumph when they connected, the intensity of their twin detonation briefly overwhelming the light filters for the attack cruiser's main viewer. The colonel covered her eyes, peeking through the fingers of her hand after several seconds.

"Now that should've gotten their attention Captain," she replied. "Hail them." The Klingon looked at her askance, irritation dulling his bloodlust.

"You don't give orders on my ship Colonel."

"We don't want the ship destroyed remember. They're not the enemy, they're just disobeying orders."

"I know who the enemy is Colonel," he paused, rifling off an order in rapid-fire Klingon. The main viewer split three ways, with images of T'San's Romulan warbird, *Enyama*, and the Dominion warship closing in the

beleaguered *Aegis*, each releasing another salvo at the ship's crumbling engines before backing off. "But I wonder if you still do." He spoke in Klingon again before turning back to her. "Channel is open."

"Commander Cherenkov, desist from this course of action or we will have to disable your ship. You're surrounded. Don't make this any harder than it has to be. This is your last chance." She folded her arms and waited for a response.

Almost a minute later, Cherenkov responded. And not the way she had expected or hoped. A thrill of fascination coursed through her as the *Aegis* quickly split apart, into three autonomous sections, each with weapons blazing. Kira reached out and grasped Kreng's chair to keep from hitting the deck as the ship's primary hull, containing the bridge, unleashed a barrage at the *Jeqqlj*. The secondary hull engaged the *Enyama* while the tertiary hull, containing the ship's main warp core, fired at the Dominion vessel.

"That's your answer Colonel," Kreng crowed as he marveled at the tactical feat. "This will be a glorious battle."

Biting back a curse as the attack cruiser was pummeled again, Kira replied. "It will be many things, but glorious won't be one of them."

.....

### ***USS Defiant*** **(Main Bridge)**

Pounding the armrest of his chair, Ousanas Dar peered at the *Defiant's* main viewer, about the only piece of equipment still functioning on the crippled warship, with undisguised frustration, and hidden envy. The stars before him lit up with the bright flashes and soundless wails of battle as the *Aegis* took on three warships, each section of the marvelous ship using its speed and maneuverability to confound its much larger and powerful opponents. He stabbed the comchannel button on his armrest.

"How much longer will it take for the *Defiant* to be up and running?" He asked Lt. Nog?" for the umpteenth time.

"Two hours, three at the most sir." The young Ferengi's voice sounded weary beyond its years, even beyond Dar's.

He squashed another criticism and softened his voice. "Thank you for your hard work Lieutenant, carry on."

"Thank you sir." Nog replied before severing the link.

"What about weapons Mr. Easun?"

"Even longer sir. Five hours max."

"Damn." He cursed. "I guess we're going to have to sit this one out."

.....

### ***USS Aegis***

## **(Main Engineering)**

Jasmine froze with fear as a tendril of energy ran through her console, knocking her from her seat, before curling around the plasma tanks.

Stunned, scared, and drenched in memories of unbearable pain. She had returned to the engineering section to transfer the cloaking device to the bridge via intra-ship transport, and oversee the ship's engines during the escape of her own accord. She had bitten back her terror, allowing her love for Terrence to override her senses, a feeling of immersion that she hadn't given into since the *Mandela's* fateful return from Gehenna's gates.

Rough hands pulled her to her feet. Back to reality. Sgt. Slade's dark eyes looked her over, scouring her body for signs of injury. "Are you okay ma'am?"

"Yes." She said after a pause to check for herself. Only her uniform, with a jagged burn mark across the chest area, courtesy of the surge, was the worst for wear. "The engines? The warp core?"

"The consoles are fried. The automated system couldn't withstand the heavy weapons fire."

"I can't believe that Colonel Kira would allow them to unload on us like that."

"I don't think the Colonel's in the driver's seat." The deck plates rattled beneath them. Jasmine rushed to the blackened controls.

"Engines offline," she mumbled, more to herself than to the sergeant or the other five members of his Marine team, one of which was propped against the master systems display, nasty burn marks marring the Bolian's azure face. A Long-term Medical Hologram was already attending the wounded man's injuries. "Shields are down. What do we do?"

"What we're supposed to," Slade grumbled, his shoulders slumping. "Surrender."

.....

## ***USS Aegis***

"Why do Romulans have to be so damned eager?" Commander Pell Ojana quipped as a green disruptor blast sizzled past her head.

"I couldn't tell you even after living among them for twenty odd years," Corporal DeSeve replied, his pale skin moist with perspiration. He dabbed his forehead before peering again into the corridor leading to the secondary hull's auxiliary battle bridge. He fired several shots into the darkness, grunting with satisfaction when he heard a muffled scream followed by a dull thud.

"Oh." Pell said, quickly popping off a few shots of her own, when DeSeve pulled back to check his phaser rifle's power coil. Ducking from

another angry barrage, the Bajoran leaned in close to the Marine. "We can't keep this up forever," she whispered.

Somehow the Romulans had been able to perforate the secondary hull's shields and beam in an assault team. She knew Terrence and the others were going to rag her about it later on for allowing her defenses to be so easily overtaken. Or at least she hoped so.

"We've got to hold them off at least for a few more minutes. Give the Commander time to escape," DeSeve huffed, his blond hair matted against his head. Sensing her scrutiny, he shrugged, adding. "Haven't done this in a long time," he smiled nervously.

"I hope Cherenkov knows what he's doing," Pell grumbled, setting her phaser to maximum stun as she heard the thunderous rush of boots pounding up the corridor. "Well, let's give him those minutes." She replied as she jumped from behind the bend, her phaser blasting into the phalanx.

.....

### ***USS Aegis*** **(Main Bridge)**

"Slade and Pell's teams have been subdued," Tai Donar replied, reading the reports flashing across his terminal display.

"I don't need a computer to tell me that," Cherenkov replied, instantly smiling at the irony as he looked at the scene before him on the main viewer. "Well actually," he started to correct himself. "Never mind."

"It's just us and the Klingons now," Liris replied, leaning seductively back in her seat, her curvaceous body tense with anticipation.

"Just the way I like it," the First Officer replied.

.....

### ***IKS JeqqIj***

"They can't be serious?" Kreng laughed. After a few moments his mirth turned to concern when his crew didn't join in. Commander Darga, halfway out of his chair at the Helm station, repeated his previous statement.

"The primary hull is on a collision course. Full impulse!"

"Full reverse Kreng!" Kira screamed as *Aegis's* arrow-headed bow bared down on them. "Evasive maneuvers!"

"You are not the captain, I am!" Kreng repeated, his eyes boring into the testy Bajoran. "If I have to remind you again, Khitomer Accords be damned..." He growled, "Besides, they can't be serious. We're 'allies' remember? Such an impact would seriously damage both ships. We will play this out. I am sure that he will relent first."



Seconds later, *Aegis* veered sharply left. "See, I was correct. He didn't have the stomach for battle. Darga lay in a pursuit..." His words were drowned out by a wailing proximity alarm, followed by the frenzied pitching of the bridge to the portside wing of the ship. The Bajoran flew across the bridge, along with several other warriors and any other equipped not bolted down to crash against the port sidewall of the ship. She fell in a heap at the base of the wall. The bridge shuddered and spun wildly, the shrieking of metal slicing through his ears. Terminals sparked, plasma coolant spewed, raining acidic devastation.

Only Kreng's indomitable will kept him where he belonged, in the command seat. "What was that?" Somehow Darga too had retained his seat. The captain didn't know whether to be impressed or worried. If they survived this, he promised to keep his eye on his skillful second. "Report Commander."

Darga spat out several teeth, thick dark blood splaying over his console before he turned to the captain. "Our starboard nacelle is gone?"

"Nuq?"

"The *Aegis*, when it broke off its collision course, it sheared off our starboard wing."

"Where is *Aegis* now?"

"Gone."

"Gone?"

"Yes milord." Kreng clambered down from his seat, stepping over a prone warrior, and pushing Darga out of the way as he looked at the information, or lack thereof, on the First Officer's display screen. Still unbelieving, he scowled at the main viewer, where he only saw the victorious Dominion and Romulan ships with their prizes. And he had nothing. No honor had been won here today. No victory. His name would never adorn the Hall of Warriors, and House Kreng would never be immortalized in the Hall of Heroes. He had been outsmarted, out maneuvered by a human who didn't even have the decency or honor to kill him so he could at least have died with honor and spent eternity in *Sto-Vo-Kor*.

The human had spared him, spitting in his face, consigning him to a living death. Peering into the vast, empty stars, his hatred burning as brightly as the fires of *Kri'stak*, he quietly swore vengeance. "*BortaS blr jablu'DI'reH QaQqu'nay.*" ("Revenge is a dish best served cold.")

---

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### Razad Kor

The confession was more painful than anything Darcis had or could ever do to him; because it was true.

The Past...

*The Cuffe streaked into Cardassian space, the tip of Destroyer Group Three's deadly spear.*

*Despite the recent setbacks the Federation, Klingons, and Romulans had suffered at the hands of the new Dominion-Breen alliance, the most painful for him being the attack on Earth and the loss of the Chin'toka system, Starfleet had endured, and now they were on the cusp of total victory.*

*Destroyer Group Three, along with a coterie of Romulan warbirds, was charged with pacifying the Amleth System, clearing it to make way for the rest of the Fifth Fleet to charge into Cardassian space, linking up hopefully with old Ben Sisko above Cardassia Prime.*

*"Literally canaries in a mine," Glover had remarked when Admiral Ross had doled out his assignment. The comment had elicited a small smirk from the bulky admiral.*

*"You could say that Captain," he had remarked. "Hopefully you'll encounter only good air."*

*Peering at the cordon of ships surrounding the planet Loyal, Captain Glover loudly snapped his fingers, muttering, "Wrong again Bill."*

*"Huh sir?" A tense Cherenkov was on the edge of his seat.*

*"Never mind." He waved away the comment and question, turning to the Tactical Station. "Tactical Report Mr. Meldin".*

*The Benzite Tactical Officer, sans breather, peered over the console at the screen. "Two Breen Dreadnaughts, three Galor-class battle cruisers, six Hideki-class destroyers, and a raft of Jem'Hadar attack ships and Son'a scouts."*

*"One big happy family," Ensign Rojas muttered.*

*"Looks like we've got our work cut out for us. Let's get to it." The Cuffe rushed headlong into the din.*

The Past...

*Within three hours the battle was over, several of the Cardassian and Son'a ships had fled inexplicably after the Breen Dreadnaughts had finally succumbed, leaving the Jem'Hadar to fight the Destroyer Group alone. Despite their penchant for ruthless courage, they fought onward to the last man. All to no avail. The Warbird Avis robbed Glover of the honor of wiping the last attack ship from the skies above Loyal.*

*"Sorry to deny you your prize," lied Commander Hesperian, his smile predatory.*

*"There'll be another time Commander." Terrence dipped his head in mock respect.*

*"Of course there will be," Hesperian affirmed, before he and his ship were vaporized. The Cuffe veered haphazardly as Ensign Rojas engaged in evasive maneuvers, wisely avoiding waiting to be told to do so.*

*Blinking as his boastful rival dissolved before his eyes, Glover swung half out of his seat, looking wild eyed at his bridge officers. "Someone tell me what just happened?"*

*"It came from the planet..." Science Officer Seb N'Saba answered, finally. "Some kind of concentrated vadion pulse."*

*"I thought that harnessing vadion energy was in the infancy stages," the captain probed the Alshain. His flattened snout twitching with consternation, the snappy canid responded.*

*"I guess you were wrong."*

*"It wasn't the first time," Glover remarked, pushing his anger at the Science Officer's impertinence temporarily to the side, "and hopefully it will be the last. Options people?"*

*"I suggest we retreat, regroup, and figure out how to get past that thing," Cherenkov remarked. "It appeared to cut quite a swath through the Destroyer Group."*

*"Back us out, just out of range of that thing Juanita."*

*"Aye sir," she replied, tapping in instructions, before she abruptly stopped. Looking up at him, face knotted with confusion, she asked. "Captain what is the range of that pulse?" Without responding, he looked at N'Saba. The Alshain merely shrugged.*

*"I guess we'll find out soon enough."*

*\*\*\**

*Commander Sirol, master of the Warbird Terix, was shorter than Terrence had expected. The portly Romulan looked up at him, his prominently ridged brow hooding his eyes, giving his cherubic face an ominous cast.*

*"I always knew that Hesperian's zealousness would be the death of him. The fallacy of youth I suppose," he remarked, with no hint of sadness at the death of his fellow officer and the hundreds of crew aboard the Avis.*

*Glover squashed his own disgust at the Romulan's dispassionate response. Instead he gestured for the Romulan, along with his adjunct, to take a seat opposite his own at the head of the conference table in Cuffe's observation lounge. Cherenkov, Meldin, N'Saba, Chief Engineer Uhnari, and Operations Officer Graft were already seated.*

*"Mr. N'Saba, report."*

*After the obstreperous Alshain distilled the history and projected benefits and dangers of vadion energy experimentation, Glover had opened up the floor to discussion, a rarity for his crew that for once they didn't lap up.*

*It was Sirol that devised the plan that Terrence finally endorsed.*

*"We have Scorpion fighters, and your ships have deployments of Peregrine interceptors." Sirol had begun, drawing in his shoulders, as his deep voice grew quietly conspiratorial. "I propose that we use our fighters to locate and eliminate the source of the vadion pulse."*

*"But isn't that too risky?" the Arboreal Xindi Gralf, asked. "If that beam vaporized a D'deridex-class warbird, then it could mince smaller, less shielded craft. With all respect sir, your plan could be inviting a slaughter."*

*"But that's the point," Sirol replied. "Our starships and warbirds are perhaps too easy targets for the vadion pulse. To marshal a weapon of such size and power, something had to be sacrificed. I posit that its accuracy and maneuverability might be its weaknesses. At the very least, this theory should be tested before it is discarded."*

*"So, you think that we should 'test a theory' with people's lives?" Gralf asked, incredulous. "Not only would our pilots be at risk, but intelligence records indicate that there is a thriving civilian population on Loyal, in addition to its military research facility. Even the cleanest surgical strike will result in indiscriminate killing of countless innocent civilians."*

*"Collateral damage," scoffed Sirol's aide.*

*"Nobody's life is collateral," Gralf shot back hotly.*

*Sirol ignored them both. "Captain, do you always let your subordinates question your decisions in such a manner?"*

*"When I need it, yes," Glover grated. "But there is no need for further discussion. The entirety of the Fifth Fleet will be passing through this sector of space within 10 hours on its march to Cardassia Prime. That weapon has to be disabled before then. If it isn't, it could pick off the fleet ships at a time. I say we'll go with Commander Sirol's plan unless something better comes along. Meeting adjourned."*

\*\*\*\*\*

*Glover hated the static more than the screams. On the edge of his seat, the intercom filling the bridge with the sounds of the battle displayed on the main viewer, he forced himself to look at every second of the slaughter.*

*A hidden swarm of Jem'Hadar fighters had come from around the planet, carving into the hapless Romulan and Starfleet fighters.*

*The captain had given the order for the fighters to fall back, and had been forced to wade into the thick to shield as many of the Peregrines and Scorpions as he could, with his fellow taskforce ships following suit.*

*The vadian pulse had started up again, belching oblivion at the unfortunate ships-Federation, Romulan, or Jem'Hadar-that found themselves in its wide, voracious path.*

*Losing too many, he thought, his mind blocking out the number of casualties Lt. N'Saba read from his terminal.*

*Reaching deep inside himself, binding his humanity, he gave the only order that he could. "Initiate General Order 24."*

*All motion froze on the bridge as each of officer, noncom, and cadet lapsed momentarily in their duties to stare at him.*

*"General Order 24?" Cherenkov repeated, mouthing the question after saying it. "But that..."*

*"That authorizes us to raze the surface of Loval." Gralf replied. "There are hundreds of thousands of Cardassians down there, many of them innocent civilians. There's got to be another way captain."*

*"If there is, you've got five seconds to name it." The Arboreal merely shook his shaggy head, appalled.*

*"But shouldn't we run this by Starfleet Command for authorization? The order can only be implemented after a considerable time has been passed, without Starfleet Command interdicting the order." N'Saba asked.*

*"There's no time. Do it Mr. Meldin." The Benzite hesitated. The first time he had ever done so.*

*"You heard me."*

*"But Captain," he pleaded.*

*"This is a war. We have standing orders to clear a path for the incoming Fifth Fleet and that's what I'm going to do. If it has to be either them or us, I choose us. Evoke General Order 24. Mr. Gralf, pass the information along to the taskforce."*

*"I cannot."*

*"Then you are relieved." Gralf stood stiffly out of his seat, a cadet moving quickly to assume it.*

*"Send the message." The cadet complied.*

*"I must lodge a formal protest," N'Saba rose out of his own seat.*

*"Noted, and you are relieved as well. And both of you are restricted to quarters until we reach Cardassia Prime. Mr. Cherenkov please escort them to their domiciles." The Russian slid out of his seat, his hand hovering, unnecessarily, over the phaser clipped on his waist, as he herded to two officers into the turbolift.*

*"Now Mr. Meldin," Glover exhaled. "Fire..."*

\*\*\*\*\*

The Present...

"I was cleared of any wrongdoing by a formal inquiry," Terrence whispered.

"A *Starfleet* board of inquiry?" Glinn Sulle purred, her rasp almost seductive.

"Yes."

"So, you've never had to answer to the Cardassian people for your crimes. The murder of hundreds of thousands of noncombatants when you ordered your Destroyer Group to reduce Loyal to cinders?"

"It wasn't a crime," he protested weakly, his anger suddenly pouring out of him. "It was war...a military decision."

"Yes," she smiled. "So it was. And we don't begrudge you for taking up arms against the Cardassian Union or Dominion, of defending your homeland. That is we do every day. In fact, we applaud you for that." Sulle paused, catching her breath as she circled him. Despite the humidity in the cramped cave, Glover felt deeply, intensely cold. "That's not the issue," she crowed as she shoved the padd she had been clutching painfully against his tender chest. "The slaughter, the genocide of an entire colony of Cardassian citizens is what concerns us today. Take it Captain!" She pressed the padd harder into his chest. "Take it! The names and pictures of many of the dead are listed here for your perusal. Also, there are images of the aftermath of the devastation you wreaked."

"No..." he shook his head, blood rushing in his ears, "No." Glover turned away from it, looking for release, succor from any quarter, but finding none. Behind him, off to his right sat a bound and muzzled Molok, the battered Klingon's fire now dim, a similarly tied up Keta, her eyes glassy from Darcis's drugs, and the Founder, her skin cracked and peeling under the strain of the inhibitor field encasing her body. Gul Keshet, sitting in judgment, had leaned forward on the bench, his eyes bright and his nostrils flaring at the smell of Glover's fear. Darcis still clung to the shadows, his large form heaving with quiet, mocking laughter.

With unsurprising strength, Sulle grabbed Terrence by the head; inadvertently digging clawed fingers into the still unhealed wound left by the rifle butt he had received during Keta's trial. Holding his head steady, his guilt, hunger, and shame robbing him of the strength to resist her, she pushed the padd up to his face. "Look at it Captain! Look at them! They had dreams, lives, worked, loved, struggled to make ends meet, and wanted better things for their children. And you took that away from them. You can call it many things, but it wasn't a 'military decision'. The inquiry testimony of your subordinate officers N'Saba and Gralf clearly attest to that fact. You made a *choice*. You *chose* to murder innocent lives with the full knowledge of what you were doing. Don't hide behind duty or loyalty or honor. These are things that Cardassians understand; these are things that we can forgive, but never

this, never *this!*" The image of a blackened, headless torso-a child's body-burned into his soul.

*I did that?* He vigorously shook his head, refusing to believe it. The Cardassians were renowned for their ability to doctor images, to manipulate information. This had to be some trick, some propaganda, he concluded, knowing that he would have to regurgitate the lie again and again for the remainder of his short life.

"The Bajorans could probably ask you the same question," he snapped, feeling better than he should have at finally being able to bite back.

"Terrible things were done during the Occupation," Sulle agreed, sadly shaking her head. "Terrible. But the Bajorans were left in a better position after our withdrawal than we found them. Can we say the same about you and your cohorts now? Our new masters, each with the blood of untold Cardassians on their hands. We apologized. We made amends. Have you? Will you?" Sulle turned away from him to look directly into the row of cameras now placed in the back of the cavern. "Citizens of Cardassia, our occupiers continue to castigate us over Bajor, but ask them when they will leave our planet, relinquish our systems, when they will stop occupying *us*, and you will be met with the silence of the tomb. They mean for Cardassia to be our tomb, but we have the power to decide otherwise.

Any power that would brush off such brazen murder of innocent Cardassians doesn't have our best interests in mind. Glover and many other officers should stand trial alongside the Changeling for what they did and continue to do to our people. But of course they can't police themselves; that is where their hypocrisy trumps their so-called objectivity. Captain Glover should be in chains, not commanding one of the most deadly starships in their Starfleet. Do you see how highly they think of you?" She paused, sucking in a great gulp of air, before pointing dramatically at the captain. "Only here, within these walls will Glover and the other child killers like him receive the justice they deserve! I submit my case *Archon*."

"That information was classified, the inquiry proceedings sealed. How did you obtain it?" Glover asked, the thought just coming to him, fighting its way through his shock and horror. *Something larger was going on here*. And he had been too dulled by pain to see it. "Answer me!" He demanded; falling from his chair as his weak legs struggled to move the leg irons latched around his ankles.

"I don't have to answer anything!" Sulle shot back. "In fact the accused are not allowed to ask questions. Once again, your lack of respect for Cardassian culture manifests itself. I am done with you Captain Glover." Leaning in close to him, her rasp soft in his ear. "My Coris smiles with me this day."

Scaly hands once again grabbed him before he could respond. "There's something going on here!" he screeched before he was pulled out of the cavern into the darkness of a side tunnel. Shoved against a wall, he held back the tears and screams as long as possible as the guards pummeled him into unconsciousness.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **(Shau Darcis's Private Chamber)**

At the close of the day's trial, Shau Darcis retired to his room, sweeping it for any listening or monitoring devices not his own before sitting down at his computer. He was late for his check-in with Viredis, but he couldn't simply stand by and allow regular Cardassian soldiers to savage Captain Glover without getting in a few hits. He could be such a glutton sometimes.

Licking the pathetic human's tangy red blood off his knuckles, Darcis scrambled the incoming communication with his other hand before opening the channel.

"You're late. Where have you been?"

Darcis sighed. "Don't start in. You act more as if we're bond mates than partners. Are you interested in a dalliance Viredis? I've always been curious about Romulans, such passion your people possess."

The Tal Shiar agent snorted derisively. "Don't delude yourself Darcis." His hawkish eyes bored into him. "Our schedule will have to be amended."

"Why?" All conviviality fell from his face and voice. "What has transpired?"

"My sources report that the *Aegis*, or at least one part of it is headed to the Badlands, the crew in search of their missing captain. We can only assume that they know the location of Razad Kor."

"But how is that possible?" Darcis asked, already knowing the answer: Mesec, sweet, lovely Mesec. His paramour before Pretar. In the aftermath of many of their sessions, enthralled in fading passion, he had revealed the proximate location of their base. And the boy had told Starfleet, no doubt under duress. Perhaps through torture. His face darkened at the thought.

Viredis regarded him quietly for several seconds. He started to speak, shut his mouth, and waited another several seconds before finally saying. "How they found out is irrelevant. If they know Razad Kor's location, even at their best speed, 9.9, it would take them three days to get there. We will be there in one."

"But what about the trial? It has two more days, and then a third for the executions. Don't you still want to pin the Changeling's abduction and disappearance on Keshet?"



“That too is irrelevant now in light of this unfortunate turn of events. Taking the Founder into our custody is our paramount concern. You know what to do Shau Darcis. I shall see you in a day.”

“But,” Darcis began, but the terminal screen had already gone dark. Even despite their vaunted Right of Statement, Romulans had no respect for the theatricality of a good trial. It was the one virtue Keshet possessed that Darcis admired. *It will be missed*, he sighed as he got up from his desk, and calmly walked to his closet, pulling from a hollowed groove hidden within its polished rodimium wall, the necessary tools to disable the station’s defensive systems.

---

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### Deep Space Nine (Detention Center)

Kira winced as she probed the tender, purplish whelp running the length of her forehead, warding off Dr. Girani, the station's junior Medical Officer, who had moved to intercept her, a medical tricorder in her hand.

"Attend to the prisoners," she ordered, not meaning to sound as harsh as she did. But she couldn't help it. The stunt the *Aegis* senior staff pulled, several of which now languished in the station's detention center, had been reckless, foolhardy, and too provocative in the tinderbox environment created by the True Way.

Though she sympathized with Commander Cherenkov and his determination to rescue Captain Glover, she couldn't condone it, especially his willful sabotage of the station and the *Defiant*, leaving Bajor defenseless for hours against any Dominion assault.

"So, are you going to talk Pell?" She asked, folding her arms, boot tapping loudly against the metal plating.

"What do you want me to say Nerys?" Pell Ojana sat on one of the cots jutting from the wall of the cell, sandwiched between Amoros, the ship's pensive Chief Medical Officer, and the eerily detached Ensign Lomar. Chief Engineer Uhnari sat on the floor, body taunt in a trance like state, and Jasmine Glover, the captain's wife sat in the far corner of the small cell, her back to the colonel. The other cells were filled with the Marines captured when the secondary and tertiary hulls of the *Aegis* were returned to the station. The rest of the crew was being detained in several of the station's cargo bays.

"For starters, where is Cherenkov headed?"

"I think you know where, if not the exact location." She answered matter-of-factly. Looking around the cell, she added. "You know that Dr. Amoros, Chief Uhnari, and Ensign Lomar had nothing to do with this. Also, the rest of the *Aegis* crew had no knowledge of this." In response, Amoros shifted his furry head to glare at the Bajoran diplomatic officer, his broad nostrils flaring.

"They'll be released...after a thorough investigation." Kira regretted playing hardball with her old associate, but she knew that being too lenient was out of the question. The Klingons alone were demanding vengeance for the damage to the *JeqqIj*, and she had had to throw both T'San and Eilif out of her office after refusing their heated demands to interrogate the starship's senior officers. "Perhaps if you gave me something to work with, I could speed that up."

Shrugging her shoulders. "Well, I see no need to keep this going. Can we talk in private-just you and me?"

Kira nodded at Lt. Daneeka. The Security Chief pressed a button on the cell's companel, its forcefield shimmering off. Pell stepped through the barrier.

"We'll talk in my office," the colonel offered.

\*\*\*\*\*

## **Deep Space Nine (Commanding Officer's Office)**

Back in her office, ensconced behind her desk, Kira stretched. Picking up the baseball left by her former commander Sisko, she turned it around in her hands for several seconds, admiring its pitted surface, trying to get her thoughts together. Finally, she said "Pell that was a pretty good resistance fighter imitation you pulled out there. Want to tell me why?"

Pell smiled wanly. "Though I never fought in the Resistance, my husband Soyam did. He shared a lot of stories with me before the Cardassians killed him." Her eyes crinkled at the bittersweet memory. "I've been trying to keep his legacy alive ever since."

"That can't be what this is about," the colonel declared.

"It can't?" Pell challenged. "Soyam was a teacher before the he joined the Resistance. He loved children so much, wanted them more than I did. And he so thought his taking up arms against the Cardassians raping our planet would one day bring peace. And it was in that spirit that Cherenkov and the rest of us countermanded the admiral's orders. The chronometer is ticking. If the Founder is executed, there will be a Dominion reprisal the likes of which we haven't seen since the war. A taskforce prepared to meet renewed Dominion aggression only recent left the station. Don't you think any Dominion response will trigger an appropriately savage allied response, with Bajor caught in the crossfire?"

"Of course I do," Kira agreed. "But pulling reckless stunts, not showing a unified front against the Dominion, leaving the station defenseless for hours on end, and denying Bajor the use of two starships to defend it, are all inexcusable."

"What's done is done," Pell surmised.

"Well, maybe it can be undone," Kira, replied.

"What do you mean?" The diplomatic officer's brows knit with suspicion.

"You're not just going to tell me where the *Aegis* is going, you're going to show me."

.....

## Deep Space Nine (Ousanas Dar's Quarters)

"Sam."

"Ousanas." The admiral said with noticeably reduced enthusiasm. "This must not be good news."

"No, it isn't. Lt. Commander Cherenkov has disobeyed orders and hijacked the *Aegis*. We believe he is taking it into the Badlands to find your son." Dar held up a hand to stop the admiral from commenting. "And what's worse, two operatives from your Department, each with Level 9 clearance helped him do it."

"I know," he grumbled. Dar's upswept eyebrows almost touched the top of his head in shock.

"You *knew*?"

"Not about the commander disobeying orders," Admiral Glover answered. "But the operatives. I knew. They're Section 31."

"Section 31?" The commander's voice dropped an octave, as an arctic chill wound through him. Spending decades in Starfleet Intelligence, Dar had crossed swords with the ultra-secret rogue intelligence outfit more than once. The idea that the Federation could spawn an organization so similar to the Romulan Tal Shiar still confounded him. But he had at least found some solace in the fact that Section 31 was not an official organ of state policy unlike the Tal Shiar. Or at least he continued to tell himself that.

"One of their operatives approached me. Captain Tryla Scott."

"Tryla," Dar gasped. "No. I can't believe it."

"You don't have to believe it Ousanas," Glover snapped, prompting an old pain to spring in the commander's heart. The admiral had never forgiven him for his role in collecting the faulty intelligence on the Ghorusdians that had led to his dead wife's tarnished career. And Dar didn't blame him. It hadn't been the first time he had failed Samson. In truth, Ousanas had felt so guilty over the havoc he had wreaked in Glover's life and that of so many others, that he had resigned from Starfleet, and retired to Vulcan, his adopted home planet.

But the ghosts of Ghorusda, among others, had given him no peace. Dar finally returned from his self-imposed exile when the Dominion War spread across the Alpha Quadrant like a pandemic.

Glover continued, "I feigned ignorance of them of course. I don't know if she believed me or not. She revealed to me that one of the guilty Cardassian militant faction, the True Way, have a mysterious benefactor, one that Section 31 feels is trying to destabilize the reconstruction process to reap the spoils of a defeated Cardassia Union all for themselves."

"The Klingons or Romulans?"

"I said 'mysterious' Ousanas."

"So, you just decided to go along with this? You took her on her word?"

"Despite her affiliation, Tryla Scott has proven herself loyal to the Federation. Plus, she and Terrence are old friends. She would not be a part of something that would hurt him. And truthfully, I thought Section 31 had a better chance to save my son in time than SI or even Starfleet. Less red tape and scrutiny."

"Yeah, but more illegality and unaccountability."

"A trade off I am willing to make this time."

"Well you know I can't sit idly by and allow Section 31 to get away with whatever they're hatching. Despite Captain Scott's personal feelings towards your son, Section 31 always has an ulterior motive. And Captain Glover might be a priority, but I can assure you that he is not at the top of their list."

Admiral Glover nodded. "That's why I'm supplying you with the last update I received from them." He paused as he looked down, gazing back at the screen a few seconds later. "You should be receiving the information...about now."

Dar's computer monitor split, a line of encoded information running along Admiral Glover's face. "Got it." Glover replied with a tight-lipped smile.

"Godspeed Ousanas." The admiral's eyes glistened with tears. "Just bring my son back."

"I'll do my best sir," Dar said, and he meant it.

## ***USS Aegis***

"What are we looking like Lt. Rojas?" Cherenkov, extra spanner in hand, asked the junior helmsman, as she placed the slick interface surface back over her terminal.

"The forward sensor array is shot to hell," the young woman replied, dark smudges across her face. "Our navigational deflector is iffy at best, and so is our forward shielding, the bow's going to need a hammer to be straightened out after that stunt we pulled. Our impulse thrusters have also been damaged, limiting maneuverability. But she'll fly."

"That's good to know," the First Officer remarked, handing her the spanner before he walked up the Engineering Console. A panel had been removed from the terminal's bottom, the glowing sphere of the cloaking device shoved within, a latticework of wiring enveloping it. "Are you sure that's going to work?" He asked the Orion, his face marked with skepticism. "Or are you trying to irradiate us all?"

"Radiation poisoning is a small price to pay to save the Federation," Liris said, her beautiful features so deadpan, the Russian didn't know whether to chuckle or cry. He did neither.

"Mr. Donar, status of weapons?"

"Weapons systems are fully operational."

"That's good to hear. What about the other ship's systems?" Cherenkov flicked his gaze to Elfar, hunched over the console normally occupied by Lt. Glover.

"The latest Level 4 diagnostic has revealed nothing untoward," the Trill declared.

"Now that's really good to hear."

"Well this might not be sir," Rojas replied. He turned around in response. Two blips, barely recognizable were on the main viewscreen.

"Lieutenant?" He prompted Rojas.

"Long range sensors are still frazzled, but those shapes appear to be starships. Remember that several Federation starships had been assigned to the Badlands to search for the *Rakal*."

"Which means we can only assume that they have been alerted about us," Cherenkov concluded. "Have they seen us?"

"They aren't making any moves to intercept us, so I don't think so," Rojas answered.

"Raise shields and activate the cloak. Let's not do any more damage to Federation starships than we have to." A dim hush fell over the bridge as the *Aegis* become invisible to the other ships' sensors. "Lt. Rojas go to impulse engines. Sometimes cloaking devices can be detected if the ship's engines are out of alignment. After the pounding we just took, and the less than tender ministrations applied to the cloak, I want to be safe not sorry."

"Aye sir."

Feeling uncomfortable with the tempting call of the captain's chair, Cherenkov chose to remain standing. He would face whatever was about to come on his feet.

---

## **Razad Kor** **(Gul Keshet's Private Chamber)**

Aldur Keshet closed the singed tome, and leaned back in his chair. Normally sifting through his wife's law books made his head hurt, but tonight he felt invigorated. He grabbed the half-filled glass of *kanar* beside the book and downed it, uncharacteristically savoring the sweet taste.

All of Cardassia had seen, or would soon, the recording of today's proceeding. And when his people saw the hypocrisy of the "benevolent" Federation revealed, of how Starfleet had coddled and *promoted* a known

murderer of civilians, in fact crowning him a “hero”, the ranks of the True Way would swell to unprecedented levels.

Tarkon had been a fool to desert them. But he had graciously left a vacuum in his cowardly exit that the masses would be screaming for Keshet to fill once he sentenced the Founder to death.

Peering across his desk at the holo of his wife Nebel and his son Thrain, his tiny hand in hers, he knew both of them would be proud of him this day.

A gentle knock on the door dispelled his reverie. “Enter,” he reluctantly groused after considering whether to accept visitors at such a late hour. But owing to that fact, he knew that whoever had come to see him must have something important to tell him. *For their sakes at least*, he thought.

Darcis loomed in his doorway, his skin flushed, his eyes haunted. Keshet rose up in his seat, his stomach clenching with suspicious concern. “What is it Darcis?”

“May I enter?” He asked, the first time he had ever made such a request. Now the gul was truly worried.

“Of course, please.” Keshet was at full attention in his chair now. Fully clothed, Darcis lumbered into the room, a large black bag in his hands. He threw it at the gul’s feet, before plucking a chair and sitting down beside Keshet.

“There is something I have to tell you,” the harried man said.

“Go on.”

“But first,” he pointed at the bottle of *kanar*. Keshet handed him the bottle and wiped out his glass with the sleeve of his shirt before handing him that too. “Thank you.” Another first for the former Obsidian Order agent as he poured himself a stiff drink.

“What is it Darcis?” Keshet sought to mask his apprehension with a show of annoyance.

“There are things I must tell you about our benefactor.” Darcis leaned close to him. Keshet did likewise, his interest fully piqued.

“Go on.” Keshet prodded again. The gul forced himself not to grab the hefty man’s shoulders and shake the answers out of him.

“I have been less than forthcoming with you.”

“I would expect nothing less from a member of the Obsidian Order.” Darcis smiled faintly at the observation, bowing his head in thanks.

Rolling his massive shoulders, centering himself, Darcis exhaled before continuing. “Many have speculated that our benefactors were wealthy Cardassian patriots, collaborating with the occupiers by day while revealing their patriotic hearts at night.” Keshet nodded. “But that is not completely the case. Our primary patrons have been the Romulans all along, more specifically the Tal Shiar.”

Involuntarily Keshet flew back in his seat, stunned to his core. "Why?" He managed to say after a few dumbfounded minutes.

"They wanted to use the True Way as a shadow army, to entangle both the Federation and the Klingon Empire in a quagmire, eventually turning both home governments against the Cardassian reconstruction project, leaving our sector of space open to Romulan interests."

"And you agreed to this?"

"I agreed to the weapons, ships, and *leks* the Tal Shiar provided in ample abundance. After Tarkon's defection, due in part to his displeasure with taking Romulan directives, the uprising's scant Cardassian revenue streams went with him. I did what I thought was necessary to keep the rebellion alive."

"But how could the Romulans continue to support us after the True Way, in fact my very own wife, assassinated Sub-Admiral Danclus?"

"Therein lies the problem," Darcis intimated, his voice fraught with remorse.

"I don't follow you." Keshet said, casually turning sideways in his seat, shielding Darcis's view as he unlatched the disruptor from the holster tied to his hip.

"The Tal Shiar continued to support us, even after Danclus, because they knew we provided the best avenue for them to get their hands on the Founder. They aim to study it, to master its morphogenic powers. Think of it, shape shifters could be the supreme intelligence agents."

"The Founder will be tried and executed for its genocide within three days."

"Therein lies the second problem."

"Why did you come here Darcis?" The gul's voice grew colder, his gaze more dissecting. Darcis pointed at the bag.

"They want me to disable the defensive grid. They want to abscond the Founder and they want to murder you," he confessed, actually grief in his voice.

"I am in your debt for informing me of this. You are a true son of Cardassia," Keshet smiled at Darcis, the first genuine gesture he had ever shown the Intelligence Observer. "We must alert the sentinels, and prepare the orbital platforms for incoming." He rose out of his seat.

"Truer than you know," Darcis returned the smile, clutching the gul's hand in one of his paws, pulling him in close. "And that is why I somewhat regret this." He replied, using his free hand to prick the gul with a small needle sticking from the sleeve of his tunic.

Convulsions took Keshet immediately, his lucid mind cleaved from his palsied, unresponsive body. With an almost paternal gentleness, Darcis



guided him back into his chair. The gul's eyes grew wide with revulsion as the traitor pulled a microfilament knife from the folds of his tunic.

Cradling the vicious blade, his eyes alit with twisted pleasure Darcis roughly grabbed the helpless Keshet, throwing him onto his stomach across the desk. He toyed with him, lightly placing the hot blade against Keshet's neck scales, the sizzling smell of his own cooking flesh excruciating. But Darcis would pull away before the knife deeply penetrated his flesh. Keshet knew that a microfilament knife could easily slice through flesh and bone.

"The Romulans wanted revenge for the death of Danclus, they wanted to humiliate you, but I could never allow them to do that to you," Darcis panted as he shoved inside Keshet. The gul's heart seized as a river of pain flowed through him. "I wanted that honor to be mine alone. And I can think of no better way to send you to your wife than headless." He crowed, thrusting with demonic abandon.

His body useless and spirit torn, Keshet willed his last bit of muscle control to turn his shamed eyes away from the smiling holo of his wife and son.

---

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### Razad Kor

Feverish, between life and death, the hard earth rumbled beneath his feet, concussions and shouting assaulted his ears, but Terrence Glover remained where he was, not sure which nightmare, so many had been dredged up the last few days, had seized him this time.

Not even the rustling of Keta's chains, or her frightful, hopeful whispers, "Something is happening...Razad Kor is under attack," freed him from his trance. There was a bright flash on the periphery of his consciousness, a groan, and a thud.

Scabrous hands grabbed him, as so many had for innumerable days. Keta gasped. "Captain!" she screamed. The concern in her voice, so strangely similar to his wife's at that moment, forced him to open his eyes. The wicked face of Shau Darcis stared back at him. He wasn't surprised.

*So, this is it*, he thought with no feeling, save gnawing hunger, accompanying the realization of his end. He just wanted it to be over. Darcis smiled at him, his breath fetid, but there was something wrong...his teeth were broken, stained. Like a Klingon's. Like Molok's. Glover's eyes narrowed. Now Molok was holding him. *How had that happened?*

"Darcis?" Confused, stunned, he pulled away from the Klingon, but his grip was ironclad.

"Isn't it obvious," Molok spoke, but the voice was the captain's. Now a doppelganger of himself held him. "I'm a Changeling. Sent here to protect the other. To make sure you solids honored your agreement...among other things. But something has changed. Something is wrong." The Molok-thing replied, his smiling face and bright eyes incongruent with his dire statement. "The enemies to the new peace between our peoples are now about to reveal themselves. And we must meet them." He placed Glover back onto the ground.

The captain almost stumbled over the corpse of the Cardassian that had been guarding their cell. Molok handed Terrence the phase-disruptor rifle that the guard had been carrying. To Keta he gave a phase-disruptor pistol tucked into the "belt" of his Cardassian uniform.

"Where's the Founder?" Glover managed to say, his hands unconsciously checking the disruptor rifle's settings.

"In a specially constructed dungeon on the second level of this station, near the court chambers," Molok replied.

"How do you know that?" Keta asked, her voice pregnant with suspicion as he pointed the pistol at the shape shifter.

He batted away her concerns, chuckling. "Child, I downloaded the layout from the nearest terminal I could find after engineering my escape."

"But why did either one of you allow yourselves to be captured, tortured for days on end if you could escape so easily?" The captain's voice also dripped skepticism.

"And what about the blood, that blood was real," Keta added. One of the defenses devised against Changeling infiltrators was to take blood screenings of suspected impostors. Though the Founder's could mimic humanoid blood, the effect was temporary, and the liquid would revert back to its natural gelatinous state after only a few minutes.

Molok sighed, "There was a real Captain Molok once. A butcher, a sadist. He died on Cardassia Prime, shortly after the war. The blood was real, and it was his. I simply absorbed the Klingons blood into my own body and released it when necessary." Keta couldn't suppress a shiver at the ghastly solution. "You asked," Molok pointed out, before continuing, "and for the other question: We too support the allied efforts in the Cardassian sector. The insurgents posed a major threat to post-war affairs, and we wanted to gauge their threat potential. And discover their cohorts." As he finished up his summation, he broke the shackles on the wrists and ankles of the captain and Cardassian.

"Cohorts?" Glover asked, exasperated, his head swelling with confusion and feverish heat.

"Whom I believe has arrived to collect the other Changeling. So, we must reach and secure her first. No more questions," Molok turned and thundered down the hallway. Keta following, and Terrence stumbling to keep up.

The rough-hewn corridor was dark, barely illuminated by sparking glow sticks scattered along its sides. The captain's vision wasn't helped either by the acidic smoke, flavored with the smell of burning and cooked flesh, that hung in the air. Holding back his gag reflex, he also had to force himself not to cry out each time a naked toe or the sole of his foot stubbed Cardassian armor or stepped on shattered glass or metal shards. Refusing to slow down to inspect his torn feet, the captain pressed ahead, trying to find solace in his military training, squinting through the haze, opening his honed senses to any possible dangers.

Coming to the end of the corridor, the corridor now more brightly lit by the exchange of green and amber phaser fire, Keta ran smack into Molok's outstretched arm, falling back into Glover, forcing them both back against the wall.

"Quiet!" Molok rounded on them, instantly crouching. Both Keta and Terrence followed suit. The captain waddled up to the Changeling. He wanted to see what had given Molok pause.

The corridor had led to the cavernous hanger bay. The sizzle of weapons fire encircled the assorted, ramshackle shuttles in the bay. A group

of Cardassians were pinned against the bay's far wall, with no means of escape; wraith-like attackers, their skin luminous in the darkened cavern, sinuously moved around shuttles, methodical and strategic, sacrificing some as they pushed onward.

"Remans," Molok huffed. "A true warrior race. Perhaps my people should've allied with them."

"But aren't the Remans vassals of the Romulans?" Keta asked, sidling up beside the captain. "What are they doing here? What stake do they have in this?"

"It's not them," Glover replied, pieces starting to connect in his mind. "It's who they serve...the Romulans. They could be part of a rescue team," He offered hopefully, knowing it was not the case even before the words had fully vacated his mouth.

"Remans are fodder, they're not sent in for rescue missions; they do the dirty work for their Romulan masters." Molok replied with distaste.

"Much like how the Jem'Hadar works for you," Glover couldn't help but slide the sharp rejoinder in.

"Correct," Molok admitted. "But the Jem'Hadar was supposed to be for defensive purposes only."

"We can debate that later," the captain quickly said, sensing the heat rolling off of Keta at Molok's distorted characterization of the butchers that had almost extinguished her entire race.

"So, what's the plan?" Keta asked. Glover admired how quickly she had subsumed her dislike, if not outright hatred for the Founder. She understood the number one priority at the moment was survival. Old accounts could be settled later. But he prayed that they never be settled at all, merely forgiven or at the least buried.

*Don't need to be thinking about burials right now,* he chided himself. "We need to reach that access tunnel protected by the Remans," Molok pointed out with the tip of the *dk'tahg* formed from his body. Glover realized that the shape shifter now was regaled once again in Klingon battle armor.

"Do we wait for the Remans to slaughter the Cardassians?" Keta said with an understandable pinch of sadness in her voice. "And then attack them from behind to reach the shuttle?"

"We could do that," Molok agreed, "But time is off the essence." He grinned, his face feral. "I believe we should join the melee. In the confusion, we might be able to cover ground quickly and reach the access tunnel without much interference."

Keta nodded. Glover added. "Sounds like a plan."

"Today is a good day to die!" Molok bellowed, returning to character. He rushed into the fray, the Captain and Keta once more in his wake.

.....

**Razad Kor**  
**(Gul Keshet's Private Chamber)**

Colonel Viredis's right eyebrow rose imperceptibly. "You do enjoy your work Shau Darcis," he stated, no need for questions as he looked down once again at the violated, desecrated corpse of Gul Keshet, a thick trail of blood pooling on the floor beneath his desk.

Darcis said nothing, his huge body quivering with bestial pleasure, as he cradled a blood stained knife. "I take it his humiliation was sufficient?" The Tal Shiar agent asked, casually picking up the holographic image of the suicide bomber Nebel Keshet and a young male that was assuredly their child. He carefully placed the holo back on the desk.

"Of course," Darcis replied finally, his voice obscenely husky. Viredis nodded, gesturing to the two beefy Reman guards flanking him. Within seconds the Remans had removed Keshet's head, with nary a drop of the dead man's blood spackling their hands or the bag they shoved his head into. The colonel hated the sight of gore. The only downside he could note in this line of work, but he was heartened that such ghoulishness was not routine.

"Even now my soldiers hasten to collect the Founder. There is scant, but stiff resistance. Nothing I am worried about," Viredis sniffed. "Admirable work Darcis."

A welcome semblance of control returned to the large man as he asked, "There is another...Glinn Sulle."

"Keshet's second?" He asked, though he knew her rank, personal history, and even favorite dishes.

"Is she still alive?"

"I can't be certain," he answered truthfully. "The location and well being of the Cardassians aboard the station, present company excepted of course, wasn't on my high list of concerns."

"I want her...we have some loose ends to tie up."

"I'm sure you do," Viredis gestured toward the door. "Go find her then. But make sure you finish before we depart. A warbird is waiting at the portside loading dock. Do you wish for one or both of my men to accompany you?" The colonel offered.

"I can handle myself," Darcis cracked his large knuckles in anticipation. "I'll meet you at the loading dock."

Viredis waited until Darcis had crossed the threshold of Keshet's quarters before he shot him in the back of the head, insuring that the splatter pattern of the dead man's blood wouldn't touch his person. Blood and gore stains were so untidy. *And murder to clean out*, he recollected with disgust.  
.....

**Razad Kor**

## **(Catacombs)**

Glover's rifle barked, striking Reman after Reman, the pale vampiric-looking aliens throwing themselves at him in droves. In front of him, a literal shield, Molok had discarded almost all pretense of being a Klingon, his arms now two long silver blades slicing, stabbing, and hacking an endless array of Remans. There were more of them than they had suspected.

Keta had been pulling up the rear until she had pulled away, a rabid horde of Remans, had covered her. Shooting futilely into the pile of black clad, chalky bodies, Terrence had forced himself to give up on her, the mission, and his own survival now paramount.

The only positive impact of their ill-conceived dash was that the Cardassian soldiers had taken the offensive after many of the Remans had turned their attention to them. He saw bits of gray flesh, pieces of Cardassian armor through the rain of bodies he mowed down. Glinn Sulle, not surprisingly, led the charge.

Seconds after he spotted his nemesis, a foul odor expelled behind him, following by a crash, and the flash of steel at his eye. Stopping right before it penetrated the orb, he heard a familiar rasp.

"Strange bedfellows as you humans say eh?" Sulle fell in beside him, slicing Remans with one hand, a disruptor firing away with the other.

"I'm married," Glover grated.

"I know. I know much about you," Sulle replied. "We Cardassians are quite meticulous in our collection of information."

"I've been meaning to ask you about that," the captain kept his tone light as he ducked from a devastating roundhouse, shoving the emitter cone of his rifle against the now off balanced attacker and filling the alien's chest with disruptive energy. He pushed the sagging Reman off of him. Muscles coursing pure adrenaline, he didn't know how long the high would last, but he hoped his desperation could squeeze as much out of him as necessary.

"What happened?" He roared over the din. Sulle leaned close to him, protecting his flank.

"It appears the Romulans have their own designs for the Founder."

"Where's Gul Keshet?"

"I don't know. Possibly dead." Sulle's voice dropped an octave.

"Darcis?"

"Don't know that either. Hopefully dead."

"I think we are about to find out," Molok grumbled, inexplicably lowering his bladed arms, allowing them to morph back into facsimiles of hands.

"What?" Glover asked as the Remans withdrew. A crouched Sulle also looked askance. From the black mass, a battered, almost naked Keta erupted, pushed toward the trio, the only non-Remans left alive from the fight.

"Look," Molok breathed, pointing at the access hatch. In its threshold was a tall, hawkish Romulan, with two burly Reman guards behind him. Each held a disruptor in their hands. The Founder, her healthy luster restored, calmly stood at the Romulan's side. She smiled wanly at Molok. He bowed in return. "I understand," he said.

"Understand what?" Glover asked with growing apprehension.

"That we will accompany the Romulans aboard their vessel," Molok answered, his voice placid.

"We?"

"Us," he pointed at himself and the other Founder, "with you included of course Captain. Nothing can be done for the Cardassians I am afraid."

Before Glover could respond, the Romulan pulled the trigger of his weapon. Flecks of Sulle's metallic blood splattered on his face, and flew in his mouth as he moved to catch her. Placing the dying woman gently on the deck, he looked back up at the Romulan and then Molok, his eyes burning with vengeance. The Romulan pointed his weapon next at Keta, his eyes widening briefly at her near nakedness. The young Cardassian reflexively sought to cover herself with the few tatters adorning her.

"Your fondness for Cardassians must be a recent phenomenon, akin to the human Stockholm Syndrome perhaps?" Viredis asked, not waiting for a response before he added. "It's not evidenced in your military record, especially Loyal."

Back on his feet, Molok grabbed Glover's arm as he moved toward the Romulan. "You supplied them with the inquiry information!"

"It was a small thing, but I must admit most enjoyable watching you squirm during your prosecution. *Guilt* is such a human emotion."

"You son of a bitch!" Viredis nodded at the appellation, and then smiled.

"I've been called worse." He lowered his disruptor, his Reman guards following his lead. "The Cardassian lives for now. Keeping her around might make you more agreeable Captain." He shifted his head slightly to the left. The Reman at his left pulled out a communicator and spoke into it. Glover felt a familiar tingle as the transporter took hold, whisking him away to God knew where.

.....

### ***USS Aegis*** **(Cherenkov's Quarters)**

Cherenkov stared at the waxen plate of curried chicken, rice, and carrots his stomach turning. Though replicator entrée #103 was his favorite

dish, his appetite had evaporated as soon as he had left the bridge. It had almost taken an act of divine will to remove him from the command deck as the *Aegis* pushed deeper into the Badlands. The thought had even run across his mind that he might eat his meal on the bridge before he realized how unprofessional and disrespectful that would be to Captain Glover.

So he had allowed Tai and Lt. Rojas to convince him to return to his cabin to get a quick repast. He had regretted the decision as soon as he had walked into the dim room. And the disconsolate feelings had increased as he had sat down in the darkened cabin, the deep orange, crimson, and magenta of the plasma fields buffeting the ship the only source of illumination.

His room felt strange, wrong. Turning away from his view port, the First Officer looked at his bed. A stickler for order and neatness, rumpled sheets greeted him with accusation. Right after the Founder had been placed in the brig, he had shuffled Aquiel into his quarters and they had made love in his bed. It had been a brief encounter, but even more passionate than usual.

The Russian couldn't help but wonder if it would be the last time. Spectral memories of her soft ebony skin, the crush of her lips, her fervent heat shimmered through his mind, just out of reach. Traces, he wasn't sure if it were real or imagined, of her perfumed scent lingered in the air. He missed her, and he knew things wouldn't be the same between them. He hadn't pulled her into his circle for this mission and he knew he would have to face that someday. But Ivan hadn't wanted her to suffer for his choices, though he knew Aquiel wouldn't see it that way. It would solely be an issue of trust for her. Deep down he knew she would be right.

He loved her he could finally admit, alone in the most pitiable, forsaken reach of space. But he didn't trust her. *How could he?* They had served together, seeing action at Loval and Cardassia Prime, but they hadn't bled together. The only trust he knew, the only trust he understood was forged by war and honed by the survival instinct. That's why he and Tai got along so well. They were brothers in arms. And though Captain Glover's road had not been as hard as his, he also recognized the same steel inside him.

*But Aquiel?* She was a member of a peaceful, partially telepathic race, the troubled product of an abusive home, a studier first of languages and then engines. They had little in common. Reared on tempestuous Terra Nova, he had trained himself to be an automaton, with as little feeling or empathy as possible. And that is how he saw himself until the horrors of the Dominion had awakened his conscience, and shown him how limited and inhuman he had become. Meeting Aquiel had sealed the deal. The fire had been stoked, and there was no way for it to be suppressed.

He exhaled loudly, wishing he could eject his feelings as easily as a warp core. Anticipating her hurt, her accusations, and maybe even her fists



weren't the worst part. The prospect of an empty bed, and an even emptier life chilled him to the bone.

"Commander Cherenkov," his combadge chirped. He thankfully activated it.

"Yes."

"Approaching proximate location of Razad Kor," Lt. Rojas informed him.

"Do you see the station?" He asked, hopeful.

"I think you're going to want to see this for yourself."

"On my way." He lightly touched his bed sheets on the way out.

.....

### ***USS Aegis*** **(Main Bridge)**

"There's nothing there," Cherenkov gasped as the turbolift doors opened and he stepped onto the bridge.

Lt. Juanita Rojas had already been peering at the heart-wrenching site for almost a minute, willing her tears to remain stored in their ducts. To be shed at another time. But not now. She didn't want them to see her bawling like a newborn at the loss of her captain, and her friend. She had even remained in her seat as the other officers had risen in shock at the sight, even the taciturn Lt. Donar.

On the screen were chunks of rock and metal swimming in a colorful stew of gases and radiation.

"Razad Kor I presume," the Trill said, his observation a cold slap in her face.

"These are the coordinates the prisoners provided," the Orion added, checking her instrumentation several times. "I don't see any other planetoid with a station sprouting on it around here."

"Could they have been mistaken?" Lt. Donar asked. "Could they have supplied you with false information?" Juanita closed her eyes, praying for that to be the case.

"Perhaps under your interrogation methods they might," the Orion replied, her voice tinged with defensiveness. "But I can guarantee you that they believed what they told me."

"I believe it too," Cherenkov said walking slowly up to the viewscreen, past Rojas's console to put his face against it. "That's Razad Kor." He turned away from it. "Life signs?"

"None," the Trill answered.

"Ships? Warp or ion trails? Could there be a ship out there? Could one have left?" The questions spewed rapid-fire from the First Officer's lips.

"Impossible to tell," Donar replied.

"Well let's get down there and investigate. Ever since our run in with that *Vor'cha*-class cruiser, the ship's sensors have been out of whack."

"The sensors are out of alignment sir," Rojas agreed.

"Nothing remains but rocks, debris, and ash," the Orion intoned, "with radioactivity spiking off the charts. Anyone taking a space walk out there it will be their last."

"But there might be clues out there as to what happened," Cherenkov replied.

"I'm sure there are, but we have to wait until what's left of the planetoid cools down."

"How long will that be?" The Russian grouched.

"A few hours at most."

"But we don't have a few hours," Juanita pleaded. "Whoever destroyed the station could have the captain right now and they could be getting away."

"The station could've experienced an internal crisis that resulted in its destruction," the Trill counter pointed. "Or a plasma flare could've been the cause. This is a very unstable portion of space. There are several scenarios, outside of an external attack that we can consider."

"Yeah right. Come on Commander," Rojas huffed. "I bet your guts telling you the same thing mine is: The captain's still alive, somebody's got him, and if we sit around here waiting for some rocks to cool we might really lose him for good."

Sitting in Glover's chair, Cherenkov rubbed his chin, in unconscious imitation of the man. "I agree. Lt. Rojas, move us around the debris field. Set sensors to maximum. Let's see if we can't pick up a warp trail, ion trail, or something." Glancing over a sullen , he offered. "If we can't find something in a couple hours we can return and restart our investigation from this point." The Orion said nothing in response.

With renewed energy, Juanita gently nudged the *Aegis's* arrowhead hull around the debris. *We're on our way Captain*, she thought, beaming inside. *We're on our way.*

.....

### ***IRW Dromorn*** **(Holding Cell)**

"You are one of the Hundred," the Founder Leader said, after the painful wave the inhibitor field washed over her, speaking quickly before the next ripple immobilized her. "You said you understood. But how could you? We have never linked."

"No, we haven't." Molok grimaced, as the beam sliced through him. "But I understand."

"Link with me," she pleaded, her detached demeanor fading around one of her own. She cared not if the Romulans were watching them. The Link was more important than any momentary display of weakness, even around the solids. In any event, she would repay the typical power lust of the Tal Shiar, and their foolish desire to become gods, by bathing in their blood. Perhaps she would don the face of the one named Viredis, and slice to pieces his family and then the whole of his accursed race. The war would've been won if not for the Romulans' abrogation of the non-aggression pact signed by the Dominion in good faith. *And they say never turn your back on a Breen?*

Vengeful thoughts abated as another wave sliced through her. She held back out her hands. "Link with me. And you will understand."

Molok ignored her. "I was on Cardassia Prime when you gave the order," he paused, regaining his speech in the after another pass of the field.

"How-How is that possible?" Pain seized her. "Why didn't you alert me to your presence?"

"I lived among them. I was one of them. I took in their children, the lost, unwanted ones wondering the streets...they were my family."

"Family?" She scoffed. "You are one of the Hundred. I am your family. The Founders are you family." She held out her hands again. "Link me with me now." He pulled away from her.

"I have been lived in many humanoid cultures, experienced their concept of love, and grief. They are a varied array of beings."

"They are *all* solids. All prone to hatred. All prone to persecute that which is different, that which they don't understand."

"And are you and 'my' people so different?" Molok shot back. "You have subjugated entire worlds, billions of lives crushed under your heels."

"We have only acted in our defense."

"A lie!" He pointed a spear-tipped hand at her.

"You are young. You don't understand the history of our people. The tragedies we have endured. Merge with me and I will show you, and you will understand."

"What I understand is that you manipulated the Cardassians, played to their worst instincts and sought to murder them all when they sought their liberty, when they realized the mistake of trusting you. I will not do the same."

The Founder staggered back as if she had been struck. "W-What are you saying? She stammered. "You can't possibly mean that."

The surge struck Molok, but he somehow pushed through it, advancing on her. "No Changeling has ever harmed another."

"Yes, that is correct," she paused, cringing more from the continued advance of Molok than in anticipation of the next inhibitor field. "Except one, but he is with us now. He saw the error of his ways."

"Too bad you did not," Molok sneered as he jabbed his spear-hand into her chest. She forced herself to morph around him, determined to suck him into the Link, to merge her essence with him. Only then would he understand, could she rip the veil of naivety, and misinformation from him.

She sought to show him the long, tragic history of her people, the centuries of abuse, persecution, and enslavement. But he resisted, and in her weakened state she gave way. His memories, his feelings flooded into her, infecting her with love, worry, pain, grief. She lived a thousand lives on hundreds of worlds in the twinkle of an instant: She was Cardassian, Malurian, Denebian, Proxician, Nasari, Talaxian, Deltan, El Aurian, Rigelian, Klingon, Andorian, Krenim, Dopterian, Xyrillian, Kaelon, Sheliak, and countless more. For the first time, and the last she understood. And she grieved.

Loosening the reins on her consciousness, she allowed herself to be absorbed. The process only took a few seconds. Shorter than Molok had surmised. With the essence and mass of the other Founder inside of him, he pushed through the field, and pierced the door to his cage. Klaxons blared through the ship. Crushing the skull of the frightened guard standing watch over his cell, Molok felt a tingle of the subsumed one's consciousness. He smiled. There was one thing they could agree on. Bathing in Romulan blood wasn't such a bad idea.

\*\*\*\*\*

### ***IRW Dromorn*** **(Interrogation Chamber)**

"Let me guess, you're not taking us back to Deep Space Nine," Glover quipped as two Reman guards shoved him into a metallic seat, clamping shackles over his wrists and ankles. "So much for alliances."

"You have a singular wit Captain," Col. Viredis remarked, his lip curling up slightly. Hanging back in the shadows, his disruptor shoved into Lt. Keta's temple, the lanky Romulan nodded at the only other Romulan in the room. "Taibak please began the conditioning process." Taibak lifted a silvery needle to the light.

Strong hands grabbed Terrence's head, holding it in place. Through gritted teeth, the captain tried to sound nonplussed, his voice desperately conversational. Wrenching his head free from clawed Reman hands, Glover was able to glance once more in the shadowy Romulan's direction, catching a glimpse of the approaching Taibak before one of his captors cuffed him in the mouth. "Taibak, that's a strong, proud Romulan name, but I didn't get your master's," Glover spat out through blood and broken teeth.

*I can't take too much more of this*, he thought, right before the needle pierced the flesh of his neck, its contents coursing through his veins like lava. His vision swam, and he lost what little food remained in his stomach, the stench of his own vomit keeping him on the edge of consciousness.

"I didn't give my name." Glover heard the other Romulan gloat, the voice deeper, slower, and stretched as if it had to travel through a black hole to get to Terrence's ears. The captain swooned, blinking at his double vision. Two and then four Taibaks stood before him, glaring down at him with disapproval.

"He's fighting the serum," the man sounded disappointed. Perspiration sprouted over the captain's body.

"Increase the dosage."

"It might kill him."

"Increase the dosage."

"This is highly unusual Colonel. This dosage should be sufficient for a Terran."

"Perhaps Glover has some alien ancestry. Miscegenation is not uncommon in the Federation." Even in his drugged state, Glover heard the distaste roiling behind that statement.

"Perhaps." Taibak didn't seem that convinced.

"Increase the dosage."

"Of course Colonel."

Taibak stood before Glover, gently grabbing the man's drooping head in his gloved hands. He smacked the captain's cheek, bringing momentary lucidity back to the captain. "Who or what are you Captain Glover? Does your genealogy include non-humans?"

"Forgo the history lesson Taibak. Increase the dosage. Now," Viredis pressed.

On the rim of blackness, Glover saw a silver flash. He bit his tongue, the pain holding back the serum. The captain was determined to face whatever the Romulans threw at him. "Bring...it on Taibak." He mumbled.

"As you wish," Taibak, with his superior Romulan hearing, replied. "Hold him." The Remans seized Glover's head again. Taibak adjusted a knob on the syringe. He tried to thrash against the grip, but his strength had dwindled, subsumed from his battle to remain conscious. Taibak leaned in close, the sharp tip of the needle pricking his neck.

Glover closed his eyes, ashamed of his weakness. He screamed as the needle raked across his neck, drawing blood. The unexpected pain lessened the captain's sluggishness and fear. He cracked open his eyes just in time to see Taibak give a strangled cry, a green blossom of blood erupting over the chest area of his argent uniform. The Remans rushed past him. Glover followed their hurried footfalls to the chamber's now open door.

The Female Changeling stood at the threshold. The blade that had impaled Taibak retracted back to humanoid dimensions, reforming into a hand. Covered in green blood, so much so that its coppery reek filled the room, the shape shifter held out both her arms, their liquid structure lengthening them, her hands forming into blades. She speared the two Remans, whipping the corpses against opposite walls. The Romulan colonel pushed Keta away from him, blasting the Founder with his disruptor.

The Changeling fell back into the corridor, creating enough space for the brazen colonel to dash through. The Founder started in the direction of the retreating Romulan, when Keta cried out, "Help the captain! Please!" The young Cardassian was frantically pulling at Glover's bonds.

The Founder looked down the hallway, then she glanced at Keta and the fading Glover, and then at the colonel again. Her body rippled, and then she glided into the chamber, snapping Glover's shackles easily. She lifted the slumping captain, placing him across her deceptively slender shoulders. "We have to find an escape vessel."

"What happened to Molok?" Keta asked.

"He...he didn't make it."

"What! I thought it was near impossible to kill a Changeling?"

"It is not as difficult as you might think." The Founder said curtly. "Now, let us vacate this Romulan cesspool."

"Lead the way," Keta replied, stopping to recover a disruptor from one of the felled Remans. It was the last image Glover saw before he slipped into darkness.

---

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### ***USS Aegis*** **(Main Bridge)**

"Sir, we're picking up a distress beacon," Donar said, looking up from his terminal, his expression an odd mix of foreboding and hope.

Cherenkov swiveled in his seat to look at the Tactical Officer. "Source? Location?"

"About half a parsec away," Donar said, his voice growing tight. "The transmission has a Romulan signature." *Romulan?*

"Is it audio or visual?"

"Audio only."

"On speakers."

The First Officer's heart painfully thumped in his chest as a familiar voice, its richness strained, filled the ship's intercom system once again. "This is Captain Terrence Glover, a 'guest' onboard the Romulan *Warbird Dromorn*. Requesting immediate assistance. Singularity breach is imminent. Repeat: This is Captain Terrence..."

"'Guest' of the Romulans?" Donar asked. "Don't like the sound of that."

"Me either," Cherenkov remarked. "Can we hail them?"

"Sorry sir," Donar replied. "It's an automated message."

"How old is it?" He asked, hopeful that there was still time to save the captain.

"Less than 15 minutes by my estimate."

"Well then Mr. Donar, coordinate your station with Lt. Rojas's. When you have triangulated the proximate location, lay in course and get there. Maximum warp."

"Aye, Aye sir." Both of the officers enthusiastically responded.

*Almost home*, the First Officer thought. *Just a few minutes longer.*

.....

### ***IRW Dromorn*** **(Main Bridge)**

After having his mind and body grated like cheese, his muscles completely drained, the last thing Terrence wanted to hear were the screeching alarms ripping through the communication system of the *Dromorn* punctured every so often by the droning voice of a self destruct countdown. His only saving grace was that whatever drug Taibak had pumped into his system appeared to wearing off.

"...Setha-tri par trukatha. Setha-ki par trukatha. Setha-mille par trukatha..." The computer's monotone slithered through the blaring klaxons.

"Is there an off switch for that thing?" The captain roared as he swept the disruptor he had plucked from the hand of a dead Reman, around the bridge, in search of any likely culprit. He let loose with a barrage at the communication system, the console erupting into a satisfying array of smoke and sparks.

"Do you think that was wise?" Keta asked, almost swallowed up in an ill fitting, shoulder padded Romulan uniform. "That was the only means of communication we had."

"The automated buoys have already been sent," Glover reasoned. "If they don't get someone's attention, then that console won't either."

The Romulan colonel had kindly initiated a breach of the warbird's quantum singularity engine before using one of the escape pods and jettisoning all the others.

The few Romulans and Remans left alive after the Founder's first rampage through the ship on her search for Glover and Keta, were now so busy trying to secure their own survival that they had offered little resistance as the trio made their way to *Dromorn's* bridge. The few dedicated bridge officers had been rewarded with stabbings and beheadings by the Changeling.

Looking at the now stoic shape shifter, he felt a pang of regret that her fellow Founder, Molok had fallen in their escape attempt. Or so she had told them, and she had no reason to lie. At least one he couldn't fathom. And right now all he cared to fathom was how to get off this exploding ship alive.

"I could transform into a space faring vehicle," the Founder offered, "but I could only hold one passenger, and I could not maintain a livable atmosphere for a long stretch."

"No thanks," Glover said. Keta nodded in affirmation. The doomed ship rattled again, causing more consoles to explode, smoke, flames, and the tang of ozone filling the bridge. *I've been here before*, the captain thought sitting down in the destroyer's vacated command chair. *Almost like old times*. He leaned back, closed his eyes and grabbed the armrests. At least he would go down with his ship. He would die a hero, just like he had once dreamed of as a kid. His best friends had left the mortal coil fighting for what they believed in, at the culmination of noble quests. He wouldn't mind seeing them again, or at least Cal, because he had never figured out how that Bajoran Prophet, Celestial Temple stuff worked. As the bridge split beneath his feet, torn by the release of the quantum singularity, the voracious black hole the Romulans used to power their craft, he tried not to think of his wife. Instead he focused on the soft prayer he heard Lt. Keta send to her gods.

.....



***USS Aegis***  
**(Main Bridge)**

"Heaven looks a lot like the bridge of my ship," Glover remarked, as he attempted to rise from the unyielding deck. Gentle hands pushed him back down, as a tricorder ran over him. A Long-term Medical Hologram, in the guise of the long dead, but still highly respected Denobulan medic Phlox, of the very first *Starship Enterprise*, frowned at the readings on the device. "Multiple contusions, abrasions, severe head trauma, shock, malnourishment..." he read off several more depressing diagnoses before concluding. "This man needs immediate medical attention."

"That's why we activated you." A shadow passed over him, and then leaned down. Glover couldn't help but grin.

"Ivan, good to see you."

"Same here Captain." He smiled back, placing another restraining hand on him. "But you need to rest." Terrence wanted to protest that, but his aching body said otherwise. He merely nodded, groaning as the Denobulan facsimile poked him with a cold hypospray.

"What about the others?"

"The Cardassian and the Founder?"

"Yes. We beamed them aboard too before that warbird exploded."

"Where's my wife?" The Russian's face clouded.

"What...happened," he found it harder to speak as the hypo's sedative quickly took hold.

"She's back at Deep Space Nine. It's a long story."

"Well I want to hear it. That's an order." He mumbled before blessed sleep claimed him.

---

## EPILOGUE

### Two weeks later...

Captain Terrence Glover thanked Security Chief Daneeka for being kind enough to allow him and the rest of the incarcerated members of his senior staff to view the tribunal proceedings on a closed circuit net from their cells in Deep Space Nine's detention center.

After rescuing him, Glinn-sed Keta, and the Founder, Cherenkov had helmed the battered bow section of the *Aegis* back through the treacherous Badlands where they inadvertently rendezvoused with the *Defiant* as it was inspecting the remains of Razad Kor.

The mission complete, Cherenkov, Donar, and Juanita had willingly surrendered *Aegis*. The other two persons allegedly involved in the hijacking of his ship, a reported Trill and Orion, had been gone hours before the unexpected rendezvous, via an *Aegis* life pod.

So far, Lt. Daneeka or her counterparts had not gotten Donar or Cherenkov to open up about their mysterious associates. And Glover doubted that they ever would. He knew when he took both of them onboard his ship that they carried myriad secrets. In this instance, the secrets they possessed helped save his life. He didn't know if that would always be the case, but he hoped so.

Though he had played no role in the countermanding of Admiral Shanthi's demobilization order, Glover would be damned if he allowed his crew, good people who put their lives and careers on the line for him, to be punished and he not share in it with them. Especially Jasmine. He grasped his wife's artificial hand, its flesh so life like that he momentarily forgot that the hand hadn't come with her out of the womb.

Once again his father's influence had made things easier for him. Admiral Glover's clout, in addition to a glowing endorsement from Natima Lang's government for their role in shattering one of the most dangerous sects of Cardassian militants had convinced Starfleet Command to reduce possible years of jail time to ninety days in the stockade on Jaros II. "Skip the breakfasts," former inmate Daneeka had advised them once she had learned about their destination. *Aegis* would be docked at Earth Station McNair after the *Erickson* arrived to transport them to their temporary new home. For the moment, *Aegis*, with Lt. Commander Uhnari at the helm, was ironically keeping vigil over DS9 and Bajor until the *Defiant* returned from Nimbus III. Adm. Shanthi had ordered the ship to speed to the tribunal, with its restored cloaking device activated, to avoid any other mishaps.

Watching the Founder in the docket, an uncharacteristic remorse wreathing her features, Glover couldn't help sense how this ordeal had

changed each of them, perhaps the Founder Leader most of all. It seemed like she finally got it, that she now understood the enormity of the suffering she had inflicted on billions of lives. Then again, the Changelings were shape shifters, masters of mimicry. It could be just an act, but he hoped it wasn't. Despite all the pain he had endured, he realized that he had learned something: that he and the monster standing trial were more alike than they both pretended to be.

And though he didn't agree with the True Way's methods, he understood what they had been trying to do, maybe even better than either the departed Keshet or Sulle. The trial Keshet began was ongoing, and the captain promised to find a way to atone, to climb out of the blood-soaked pit his hatred and bias had constructed. The quadrant had almost slid right back into war in the blink of an eye. He had grown used to war, *used* to it. The realization hollowed him, but he couldn't deny it. Now he had to get used again to peace, to reconciliation. He committed himself to joining in the cause of building a true, free, and proud Cardassia, a model of interspecies cooperation for the entire quadrant. It was the least he could do for all the innocent lives he extinguished on Loyal.

Even the Romulan Praetor Neral had recently echoed such hopeful sentiments, becoming the most vocal proponent of speeding up the tripartite occupation timetable in light of the diplomatic and public relations debacle caused by another Tal Shiar bumble.

Glover had even received a personal apology from the Romulan government, relayed through his father over his treatment at the hands of Taibak and the nameless colonel. Both Doctors Girani and Amoros, along with resident Romulan Ousanas Dar had all confirmed that the serum Taibak had injected him with had run its course and that there wouldn't be any lasting deleterious effects.

"Are you okay Terrence?" Jasmine frowned at him. "Do you need a medic?" Since he had returned, bruised, battered, broken in almost everything but spirit, she had been hovering over him like a nursemaid. Though he had discouraged her from doing it, deep down he loved the attention, and she knew him well enough to continue.

"I love you," he whispered in her ear. She huddled closer to him on the small bench. Her hazel eyes dimmed.

"There's something I need to tell you." She said softly, her sweet breath tickling his nose.

He put a thick finger to her tender lips. "It can wait honey. We've got time. All the time in the world."

**THE END**