

Dark Territory

Under The Shadows of Swords

By DarkKush

I OPENING MOVES

CHAPTER ONE

Point-Station Epsilon
McAllister C-5 Nebula
(The Former Cardassian Union)
Late April 2376

It was an atypically raucous night in Lt. Commander Gavin Mohmand's quarters. The putative station commander hadn't seen as much action since the *Erickson* left Epsilon three days ago, with his situational lover, the starship's commanding officer, Captain Wyoma Redfeather and Douglass Kollner, Epsilon's former commander, both aboard. The ship was headed to Deep Space Nine, and even in the midst of the revelry occurring around him, Gavin couldn't help but peek out of his cabin's port hole into the nebula's magenta hues, and hope that the ship made it safely to its port of call.

These were dangerous times for the Federation. Only two weeks ago, another Dominion War had been averted when the *Starship Aegis* helped shut down a Cardassian terrorist cell and returned the Founder the militants had kidnapped back into Federation custody, before the Dominion made good on their promise to send a fleet through the Bajoran wormhole.

Now the Changeling was standing trial for the war crimes she committed, chiefly the near genocide of the Cardassian people; a truly malevolent end to a heinous war. Before getting stuck with station sitting, he had served on the *Voris* and had a few brushes with death and serious injury, but really no good war stories to harrow his comrades with. For that he was grateful. And his good luck seemed to be holding.

Despite Epsilon being a Starfleet outpost located in Cardassian space, the station had yet to be targeted by insurgents. When *Aegis* shut down the True Way sect, it seemed to bring all kinds of radicals to the fore, bloodily avenging their fallen brethren, or so they said.

Gavin really saw it as nothing more than reactionaries afraid of change, of doing the hard work of rebuilding a society. It was much easier to build a bomb and strap it to your chest than pick up a shovel or hammer.

"Twinkle, twinkle, little star?" Talia Giuseppe sidled up to him, bumping against him with a juttied hip. "Sorry," she said, with her best coquettish gaze.

Gavin frowned. "I'm a one woman man," he told the station's Communications Officer.

"You don't know what you're missing."

"Yes I do, the debates," Gavin was proud of himself for thinking of that appropriately timed segue. He slid around Giuseppe and took her now vacant seat on the circular couch that dominated his quarters. Chief Petty Officer Matthew Chan, Med Tech Isaac Okoye, and Tactical Officer Delfino were already scrunched on the unforgiving seat.

"I hope Kollner's cabin is bigger than this," Chan grouched good-naturedly, before stuffing his face with peanuts he scooped from the bowl resting on the coffee table in front of the wall mounted vid-screen.

"Who say's I'm going to invite you other when I move in?" Gavin joked, searching the table for something edible. In addition to the peanuts, there were bowls of chips and some cheese dip, and Delfino's pungent, writhing *vermicula*. *Debate party essentials*, Mohmand wryly thought.

Unfortunately, the tray of chicken wings made with tender care by the station's only food replicator, located in the galley, was now piled only with bones. "Couldn't save me even a nub huh? What am I going to do with you guys?" Behind the jest, the question was laced with real concern.

Only three days ago Gavin had been just a Science Officer, and second in command in name only. He had never liked command, never wanted it. He had joined Starfleet to be among the stars and to learn everything about them, and nothing more. But the demands of war had changed his life in ways he still had yet to fully fathom.

And the winds of conflict had left him here, deep in the heart of Cardassian space, in command of a station populated with a staff he felt more comfortable zero-g bowling with than actually giving orders to.

"There are plenty of drinks," Isaac smiled devilishly as he gestured at the decanters of spirits from several different worlds. All premium stuff, Gavin noted. But Gavin was learning that Isaac knew at least one person from each ship that stopped off at Epsilon, which was pretty amazing considering that the station was along the standard route for entry into Cardassian space from the Federation. And all of these people seemed to owe the medic a favor, or vice versa, and he had developed an extensive system of bartering as a result.

Gavin couldn't even imagine what Isaac traded to procure the libations, and he wasn't sure he wanted to know. "I think the real reason you guys wanted to watch the debate over my place was so that you could make me an accessory to your drunkenness, thereby avoiding a court martial."

"Partially," Giuseppe leaned across him, brushing her breasts against his arm, as she reached for her half emptied glass. She threw the shot back and winced, "Satie just said security guys."

"Oh." The others almost said in unison as they each downed a shot.

"I really can't believe this is a real game," Gavin said.

"It is, I assure you," Chan said with profound earnestness. "It was started on Old Earth, during the television era. It was frequently reserved for repetitive political figures, but not all the time. When a person repeated a word or phrase or gesture they used excessively, the game players would down a shot of alcohol."

"What's the point?" Gavin was still skeptical.

"If you have to ask, then I know you've never drank before," Isaac guffawed. The others followed suit, leaving Gavin the only sane, or at least sober, one among them. And he was fine with that. Though he didn't wear his religious beliefs on his sleeve, he still observed them after his own fashion, and the thought of imbibing anything that killed your brain cells was too much for him even without the religious proscription.

"Let's just finish watching the debate." Gavin offered.

"What debate?" Delfino's attempt at humor fell flat. The lanky, blue scaled Antedean turned his fish shaped head, regarding each person with his bulging, translucent eyes. "Come on, that was funny."

"If you say so," Giuseppe said, somehow finding a way to squeeze herself between Gavin and Chan. She gave him a wicked little smile before turning to the screen. The prim, stern retired Admiral Norah Satie was in the midst of her closing remarks:

"The Federation is at a crossroads, and this is a perilous time for our grand coalition of planets." The woman's gaunt face and sunken eyes reminded Gavin of the old witches' tales his father used to tell him. He repressed a shudder. Gavin knew he was being unkind, but the pale, drawn woman reminded him of a walking skeleton.

"Aaamazara is withering from the after effects of Dominion induced ecocide, Betazoid has yet to recover from the Dominion's occupation, Arcturus IV is euthanizing the soldiers its planetary council cloned to help the Federation win the war, the Breen are delinquent on their reparations to the Federation Alliance, our Alshain 'allies' have begun a despicable ethnic cleaning campaign in former Son'a space, the Cardassian insurgency rages across occupied

Cardassian territory, with the Crolsa system, a star system President Santiago agreed to cede to the Klingon Defense Force, being the flashpoint. The situation could easily devolve into an all out war.

In addition to the slow response of the Santiago administration in addressing the needs of many beleaguered worlds left in shambles by the Dominion War, he has failed to extricate the Romulans from the Benzar system, and Bajor still languishes in the semi-Federation protectorate status that it was in during Jaresh-Inyo's term.

In summation, gentlebeings, President Santiago won the war, but he is failing to secure the peace. If you want a secure future for yourself and your offspring, if you want an administration with a clear vision for moving the Federation forward, and will not countenance intimidation from our foes or our so-called allies, vote this November for Norah Satie.

I had once thought that I had given all to the Federation through my years of service in Starfleet, but I realize that all is never too much to protect this shining beacon of galactic hope and prosperity."

Thunderous applause rang out as Satie attempted a smile, backing away slightly from her podium. The moderator, an imposing Betelguesian, flapped his long arms madly as she shouted for the audience to quiet down. Once satisfied, the moderator leaned into his microphone, *"Now President Martin Santiago will give his closing statement."*

Martin Santiago breathed heavily into the microphone on his podium, seeming to expand with the effort. It was the most alive the embattled President had seemed for the duration of the debate. The downpour of bad press had severely whittled Santiago's lead in all of the latest polls. The race was pretty much a dead heat.

Gavin had voted for Santiago in 2372, when the then Federation Council Delegate from Cygnus VII had ran against the fumbling Jaresh-Inyo, a gracious Chief Executive that would unfortunately always be tarred for his weak response to an attempted Starfleet coup. Santiago had run on a platform of reform, openness in government, and instituting new safeguards to curb Starfleet's influence in domestic politics.

Though Gavin was proud to be in Starfleet, he had found himself agreeing with Santiago that the spread of Starfleet needed to be trimmed, for its own good, as well as to maintain a healthy democratic government. Santiago's reformist government had quickly converted into a wartime one at the onset of the Dominion War, ironically leading to the biggest curtailing of civil liberties ever in the history of the Federation.

Santiago was no adding to that dubious legacy with his drifting policies and tumid Jaresh-Inyo-like responses to the problems bedeviling the Federation. However Gavin still thought he was a better choice than Satie. The

former admiral was too hawkish, and her reported role in the witch hunt aboard the *Enterprise-D* for a Romulan spy raised Gavin's hackles. Despite her protestations that she now realized where she veered wrong during that inquiry, he still didn't feel comfortable having someone with that propensity at the nexus of Alpha Quadrant power.

The President smiled, waving a swarthy hand through his thick shock of black hair. Despite the obvious ministrations of stylists, Santiago's haggardness still shone through. The weight of worlds was literally on the man's shoulders and he wasn't bearing it well.

"*Thank you Moderator Kalirikur,*" his voice was tired. He tried to smile, but couldn't quite muster the enthusiasm. The familiar twinkle was also absent from his almond-shaped eyes. "*The question that faces the Federation today....*"

The compin on Gavin's left breast chirped. "Great," he gasped as he activated it with a smack. "Mohmand."

"*Commander Mohmand,*" it was Ensign Sheridan, the current officer of the watch. "*A Kobheerian freighter is on approach vector. They are requesting docking clearance.*"

"There are no vessels scheduled for arrival until at least 0600 tomorrow," Gavin tugged his bearded chin. "Tell them to cut their engines and hold position until I get to the command center." The Kobheerians were Federation members whose previous ties to the Cardassians had made them prime actors in Cardassian relief efforts, due to them being the less likely to draw the ire of Cardassian militants or refugees.

"*Will do,*" Sheridan replied.

"I'll be right up. Mohmand out." He deactivated the link. Everyone was looking at him, perplex expressions dampening their collective buzz. Santiago droned on in the background.

"Is everything all right?" Giuseppe asked.

"You need us boss," Delfino tried to rise from his seat, but flopped back. Alcohol and Antedean physiology definitely didn't mix.

"Nah, I'm sure it's nothing." He waved for them to remain seated. "I'll be right back. Record the rest of Santiago's closing statement for me. It looks like he has a lot to say."

"You got it," Chan remarked.

"We'll be waiting," Giuseppe smiled, patting the vacant spot beside her. Gavin smirked.

"I'm sure you will."

"Why is the freighter still approaching?" Mohmand said, a bark reminiscent of Commander Kollner creeping in his voice. Stepping fully from the turbolift into the station's operations center, Gavin scoured each crew member with a stern gaze.

"Sir," Ensign Dana Sheridan spoke up, jumping up from her seat at the sensor console. "The ship's captain says they came under attack from unknown assailants while returning from the Dameron system. They say they have wounded onboard and request immediate medical assistance."

Gavin's eyes narrowed. "Does our sensor array detect any noticeable combat damage?"

"There does appear to be some scouring consistent with spiral-wave disruptors, the standard ship-based weapons of the Cardassian military. The ship's shields are buckling, and its warp core is unstable...I'm also reading a *chroniton* buildup in the ship's cargo hold."

Gavin tapped his combadge. "Isaac, I need you to get to the infirmary and prepare it for casualties right away."

"*Acknowledged.*" The med responded, his voice absent on any liquored slurring. Gavin turned back to Sheridan. "Dana, you said there was a *chroniton* buildup aboard that vessel? I don't believe that Kobheerians used *chroniton* energy in their propulsion systems." She nodded in agreement. "So, what kind of cargo could they be carrying that would emitting a *chroniton* signature?" She shrugged, remaining silent. "My thoughts exactly," Mohmand answered for both of them.

"Hail them Leptan," Gavin looked at the ancillary Communications Officer, a literally green Xindi-Insectiod. The ensign, green spots covering its brown carapace, clicked its jaw mandibles before twisting several dials on the control panel. It emitted a chittering chorus that his universal translator lagged in transmitting.

"Ship not responding to my hails."

"Could their communication system be off line?"

"Working...Possible."

"Well, send them a message: Tell them to lower their shields, and we'll beam them aboard."

"Ship is still headed toward us sir," Sheridan piped, "on a direct course."

"Raise shields," Gavin said reluctantly, "arm weapons banks." Mohmand nodded in the direction of Lt. Bui at Tactical. "On my mark prepare to shoot a low-yield spread across their bow to force them to alter course. I think they might get the message then."

"Aye sir," the beefy officer remarked, setting too work.

"Mark." A fan shape array of phaser energy erupted from the ring of weapon ports encircling the *Regula*-type station's core module. The oncoming

ship expertly dodged them all, increasing its speed. The maneuverability of the large cargo ship left Mohmand momentarily stunned.

"The freighter has evaded the phaser spread." Bui stated the obvious. "Ship is firing."

"What?" Gavin knew he couldn't have heard correctly, that the singular flash of light streaking toward them from the ship was actually real. He shook his head free of cobwebs. "Our shields should protect us."

"I'm not so sure about that," Sheridan remarked. "The torpedo is emitting a *chroniton* signature. Existing in a state of temporal flux, it has been speculated that *chroniton* weapons can penetrate Starfleet shielding."

"Impossible!" Gavin cried right before the warhead shredded the station's paltry shielding. A terrible rumbling deep within the bowels of the vessel shook the station with maniacal force, throwing everyone in the command center onto the hard, unyielding deck. Consoles sparked, flames crackled, alarms wailed, smoky tendrils blinded, and pungent coolant doused any unlucky bastard that survived.

Gingerly touching the large, bloody gash running across his forehead, Gavin guessed he was lucky to count himself among the fortunate. Giving the wrecked bridge a quick once over, he realized that he was the only person fairly unscathed by the assault. Only the broken, twitching body of Dana Sheridan writhed with embers of life. The woman was spread over the sensor console, staring glassily into the big blinking light buzzing fiercely on her panel. "Dana," Gavin whispered, moving in her direction, but stopping when the station's main viewer blinked back on.

There had been many times in his life when he had wondered if Allah had created life as some kind of cruel joke. For the viewer to snap back on, showing him the freighter as it continued to bore down the station confirmed the underlining dark irony of life.

Though he knew he should at least take a leap toward the weapons console, and attempt a shot at the ship, Gavin decided to pray instead. He realized that the missile had been intended to take out the station's defensive grid, and the ship was approaching too quickly to cycle a weapons pulse from the auxiliary phaser banks that could possibly destroy it or knock it from its course. And he was sure that the freighter carried a payload even more deadly than the *chroniton* torpedo the lobbed at Epsilon.

Limping back to stand in the middle of the wrecked command center, he stared at the screen, willing the ship onward. "If God wills it, so it shall be," he prayed, hoping that his death and that of his friends would mean more than they probably would...

As Point-Station Epsilon illuminated in a series of blinding flashes, Liantha Drazon couldn't help but smile. Her only regret was that she couldn't be closer to the destruction. Her tiny craft on the other side of vast *Ohombri-Var*, she had to console herself with watching her handiwork on the ship's tiny monitor.

She smiled at the pallid being chained in the seat beside her, a circular helmet brimming with electrodes masking its hideous face. The Reman had been captured at Unefra III, the only one her compatriots were able to capture alive. Despite their unappealing appearance, Drazon couldn't fault the wraiths ferocity.

In fact Drazon wished that more of her people held a similar thirst for survival. But of course most Cardassians were allowing their martial natures to be quelled by empty promises of peace and inclusion, with the underlying cultural erasure implicit, in becoming a vassal satellite under the Federation Alliance.

The only other worthy trait the pale beast beside her possessed was its telepathic ability, which unfortunately not many Cardassians possessed. The few that had had met unfortunate ends in programs run by the Obsidian Order, several of which she had oversaw as an Order substation manager.

Her work in divining the cause behind the dearth of Cardassian telepaths had even garnered the attention of the Tal Shiar, a Romulan internal security organization analogous to the Order, which had been vexed by a similar problem among their own people. The collaborations had produced poor results for both organizations, but they had ultimately proven useful to Drazon.

Her research into Romulan efforts to develop telepathic weapons had led her to discover the 22nd century telepresence project sponsored by the venerated Romulan Admiral Valdore.

Valdore had attempted to use the Aenar, an offshoot branch of telepathic Andorians, to pilot a drone-ship, guided solely by a telepresence unit that transmitted the Aenar's thoughts across subspace. Valdore had sought to use the drone-ship to sow dissent among the founding members of the Federation. It had been a bold attempt, worthy of a Cardassian, but it had failed.

And Romulans didn't seem to resurrect many of their failed projects for some reason, even the ones that had merit, like Valdore's. Of course, Drazon had never found out from her Tal Shiar guide Sarpan why Valdore had sought the use of Andorians when Remans had been known to possess telepathic abilities for centuries.

Sarpan had remained tight lipped as to the reason why, and Drazon had seen no reason to press him. However, the idea had coiled itself around her

imagination, and she had spent a great majority of the Dominion War designing and field testing her own tele-presence machine.

As rivers of gas and flame fought against the nebula's vacuum as they devoured the makeshift space station, she was very proud of her work.

"Good work," she touched the Reman's cold, slimy forearm. Drazon recoiled as the creature grunted. "Perhaps next time we will try out our experiment on a Romulan target."

Despite itself, the bound creature chuckled. And despite herself, Liantha Drazon joined in.

**Allied Eighth Taskforce,
Cardassian Administration Command
Planet Lakesh
(The Former Cardassian Union)**

Nerom, son of Kalash, inhaled deeply, the night air of Lakesh heavy with the smell of misery. The planets twin moons, Mephas and Melepha shown with spectral grace, even through the permanent coating of charcoal gray smoke that deepened the inky blackness of nightfall. Through the murk, he was barely able to make out the Avendra mountain range, or the refugee camp that sprawled along the range's base.

Nerom ran his fingers along the window sill with his ears attuned the sounds of nocturnal life. Even at the apex of the citadel, he could hear the flapping of wings and the shrieking of victory brought to him on the night wind. Nature was pleasingly redundant, on every world, in every star system; there were the strong and the weak, the hunter and the hunted.

General K'Vada's headquarters rested over the ruins of Glanisuur University. Glanisuur had been the epicenter of liberal education for the former Cardassian Union, its curriculum renowned even in the Klingon Empire.

The grand institution, along with the city's two other prominent universities had been destroyed by Breen orbital bombardment at the close of the Dominion War, and their remains obliterated even further by K'Vada's war to scour the planet clean of insurgents.

He was glad that his host had convinced the sentries to deactivate the ozone reeking shielding that normally protected the base from attack. Keeping the defensive system running was a waste of resources. The obsidian citadel was manned by some of the finest Klingon warriors ever produced by the Empire, each Dominion War veterans almost to a man. And plus, K'Vada

was nothing if not an efficient butcher. The Cardassians that he hadn't killed had been confined to the refugee camp on the outskirts of the KDF barracks.

"Come back to bed," Lady Kielt, the general's nubile consort, ran a sharpened fingernail into the raw wounds she had made on Nerom's shoulder with her teeth. He smiled at the sensuous pain, whipping the woman in his arms.

"Nerom!" The woman gasped, pulling Nerom from the window. He yanked himself free from her grasp.

"Unhand me woman!" He smacked the woman across the mouth. She grinned, pouting seductively.

"Come back to bed," she cooed.

"Are you ashamed of me?" Nerom asked. "Is my *seloh* not adequate?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Pulling me from the window just now. Are you ashamed of me? Are you ashamed of us?"

"Of course not, the daughter of Kez fears nothing! I am of the Imperial Line, the blood of Linkasa flows in my veins. You, on the other hand have much to lose."

Though he didn't acknowledge it, Nerom knew that Kielt was correct. Never much of a warrior, he had quickly dispensed of his compulsory military service for a finance career, glad to leave the honor of House Shi'Vang in the hands of his older brother B'ijik. Unfortunately, the fool had been one of the staunchest supporters of the recently felled Chancellor Gowron. B'ijik had even gotten himself involved in a coup plot against Gowron's successor that had been discovered by Imperial Intelligence. His only grace had been his wiliness. He had eluded capture, and even now roamed the stars, a disgraceful brigand.

With General Martok firmly ensconced in the Great Hall, Nerom had thought he would have to suffer for his brother's impassioned stupidity. However, the Chancellor had shown a most un-Klingon like charity toward him, fondly referencing his time under Shi'Vang's command, and even giving Nerom the choice contract to rebuild the war ravaged Cardassian planet Lakesh.

Nerom was still stunned that he had been allowed to leave the Great Hall alive, and with the honor of his House largely intact. He had eventually summed it up to the mysterious influence exerted over Martok by his Federation Ambassador, Worf, son of Mogh, slayer of Gowron who gave the ultimate power of the Empire willingly to Martok.

He smiled, rooting his fingers in Kielt's thick mane, moving awkwardly with the woman back to the bed. Together they fell on the rumpled, blood stained sheet. Their lovemaking was even fiercer than before.

Shivering with joyous release, Nerom roared like he imagined K'Vada might after a great battle. Though he hadn't been blessed with a warrior's courage, he possessed the cunning of a Thought Admiral and the business acumen of a Ferengi Grand Nagus, quickly availing himself of both K'Vada's long suffering wife, drawing her into his business ventures, particularly the smuggling kilotons of illegal *Regalian crystal* narcotics into occupied space. A zealous Klingon captain on patrol would think twice before mulling a ship under Kiett's umbrella.

He nuzzled the woman's tawny neck. "K'Vada is a fool," he whispered into her ear before biting hard into its tip. Kiett squealed with delight. At this very moment, K'Vada was probably groveling for his life, or perhaps even that of his wife. He had been called back to Qo'noS for a meeting with the High Council.

And since K'Vada already had been inducted into the prestigious Order of the Bat'leth, it was doubtful that the recall was spurred by something he did right. Being trapped in the war zone that Lakesh and all of the Crolsa system had become since K'Vada assumed command of allied forces there, Nerom hadn't seen much in the way of progress.

If anything, K'Vada's heavy handed tactics had driven the nest of militants hiding in the bowels of Lakesh from their secret base, but the atrocious fighting had left Lakesh a burnt hulk, an ashen echo of what it once had been. And Nerom's sources among the Imperial Fleet had told him that Starfleet was starting to show its customary timidity at K'Vada's *baakonite*-fisted efforts, and leaning on Martok to reign in the general.

"He doesn't know how to appreciate what he has," Nerom wrapped Kiett in his stringy arms, pouring on the *Grapok sauce*. "How dare he prefer some musty bridge to your bed chamber? Once Martok has dispatched him, our houses can form the most powerful union in the Empire." He shoved the woman underneath him, planting both his elbows beside her head.

Due to the decimation of K'Vada's line, in large part because of their sacrifices in the Empire's interminable conflicts, Nerom would become sole possessor of the general's extensive holdings if tragedy befell the blustering dolt. If K'Vada died honorably, it would leave his House vulnerable, but if not, then Kiett might demand special dispensation to rule as its lady. Unsure of the outcome of K'Vada's summons, Nerom didn't want to show his sharpened incisors...just yet.

"My husband has more grit and guile than a *grishnar cat*," Kiett replied, "I would advise you not dismiss him so quickly."

"Oh?" Nerom chuckled. Despite being an enormous success in his underground business on Lakesh, Kalash had ingrained in him the very perceptive belief that women's opinions mattered only in the bedroom or kitchen. After watching his father humor his formidable mother for years,

Nerom knew how to handle such women. He smiled, and nodded. "Of course you're right." He said with just enough hint of sarcasm to belie his words. "But I would advise the same of you."

"Don't worry," Kiett said. "I know what I'm dealing with."

"Do you now?" She raked her fingernails across his cheek, drawing blood.

"Yes."

"Oh." Kiett's lips almost formed a delicious full circle. Her eyes widened, and she frantically jabbed her finger into the air. Her body tensed.

"What is it?" He asked, his guts grumbling. Before he could turn around to see what Kiett was pointing at, he heard the leathery flapping of wings, and then a black *lynar* bat, of the variety native to Lakesh, glided into the room and perched on the bed frame. Nerom laughed. "I thought the daughter of Kez feared nothing?" He chided. "It's nothing but a *lynar* bat. Just one of many disgusting species of Cardassian rodents; Almost as revolting as the Cardassians themselves."

Kiett began to thrash, trying to escape from underneath him. He held her firm, revealing in her fear. "Remove it!" She demanded. The bat maintained its silent vigil, regarding the two prone Klingons with an almost bored gaze. "If you're crying about a harmless little *lynar*, then I take it you've never seen Cardassian voles or riding hounds? Those vermin are truly hideous."

"Remove it!" Kiett spat, nearly in hysteria. She hit him against his temple with such force that black spots swam before his eyes.

"Alright," he grumbled, refraining from rubbing the knot he felt already beginning to form on the tender spot on his head. He rolled off her and onto his feet. Putting on his more fearsome face, he waved madly at the serene bat, bellowing. "Out! Get out of here *Ha'DIBah!*"

Amused contempt seemed to glint in the rodent's eyes. Nerom approached it, his anger rising at the creature's defiance. Before it could react, he grabbed it roughly with both hands. The bat let out a surprised shriek, but then quickly resigned itself to its fate.

As Nerom walked to the window with it, he anticipated a feral counterattack from the beast at any moment. But it didn't happen. "At least this one knows who the master is," the businessman gloated, turning to smiling victoriously at Kiett.

She was not amused. In fact, her countenance was more graven than before. "That creature might consider you its master, but I don't think his brethren are of the same mind."

"What do you mean woman?" Nerom said as he looked back toward the window. A black mass of wings and teeth greeted him. Even more terrifying, the mass exploded into a fiery wave that blinded and burned him at the same

time, the bat in his grasp joining in the combustion. The last thing he heard was Kiett's shriek before he was completely consumed by fire and pain...

Glanisuur Refugee Camp Lakesh

"Hold still," Lt. Commander T'Shanir replied gruffly, not even attempting to hide her annoyance. Slender fingers slid expertly down his back.

Commander Jeffrey Thorpe had wanted to point out the Vulcan Chief Engineer's spike of emotion, but at the very moment the words formed on his lips, T'Shanir pressed into a patch of knotted muscle. The mingled pleasure and pain took his breath away. He exhaled, shivering. "Damn I needed that."

"Is there anything else that you need?"

A Vulcan come-on? He couldn't believe it. Twisting around, hoping to see a sly smile adorning the beautiful engineer's face, Thorpe couldn't help but frown when he was met by the woman's typically neutral expression.

Reading the man's disappointed look, T'Shanir asked, innocently, "Did I say something offensive?"

"No, Commander," Thorpe said glumly. "No you didn't. Thank you for the neuro- pressure session. I didn't think that Vulcans were all that touchy-feely."

"That is a common misconception," T'Shanir began, as she stood up from the mat they had both sat on. "Vulcans can be quite... 'touchy-feely'...if the situation warrants it."

"And this was one of those times?" Jeffrey asked, always fascinated at the opportunity to peer into the Vulcan mind. Being one of the few humans aboard the predominately Vulcan-crew *Starship Soval* he needed every insight he could get.

"Doctor Sarn had informed me that you have been suffering psychosomatic ailments recently as a result of the *Nightingale* Incident."

Ah, the nightmare that had landed me aboard Soval, as much to salvage my sanity as well as my career, Thorpe thought. But he said: "I'm still fairly new to how things run around here, but is it standard practice aboard Vulcan run vessels for Chief Medical Officer to discuss the medical information of crewmen with the Chief Engineer?" The edge in his voice was real. He didn't like people in his personal business. He felt he could overcome his demons on his own.

"Dr. Sarn knew that I was the most skilled neuropressure practitioner on board. He felt it was a matter of medical necessity to inform me of your situation, and order you to attend this session."

"The doctor didn't order me to do anything," Thorpe huffed. "He told me that you practiced relaxation techniques that might help me find 'balance.' So, in addition to learning that Vulcans aren't afraid of touching, I'm also learning that they have no qualms about lying when it suits them."

"I think that is an unfair assessment," T'Shanir replied.

"Think what you want," Jeffrey retorted, grabbing at his jacket and shirt on the floor as he stood up. He quickly slid the red turtleneck on. "This session is over." He zipped up his black and blue duty jacket.

T'Shanir nodded her head. "As you wish."

"I wish." Thorpe snapped, throwing back the flap to the engineer's tent. He walked into the chill wind, the inferno of his anger, of his sense of betrayal staunching the frigid fingers of Lakesh's autumn. He wrinkled his nose against the acrid odor of the mounds of burning wood and *uebwi* grass pushing against the night sky. Gaggles of sooty refugees huddled near the bonfires.

Once the Klingons took over on Lakesh, they imposed their severe lifestyle on the planet's Cardassian inhabitants which didn't include such 'luxuries' as replicators, refreshers, or sonic showers. The commander had at first thought the Klingons were being petty until he had been invited to dine at the Klingon's command citadel four days ago. He had been proud that he held down his gorge until he was behind the walls of his domicile tent.

Thorpe heard the scrap of ladles against metal pots and ceramic plates, and his nostrils filled with the pungent odor of stewed *zabo* meat. The grayish meat's only grace was that its reek covered up the even more abhorrent stench of the camp's overworked septic system. Thorpe and T'Shanir had been sent down to assist the Klingons in repairing the broken down waste disposal unit.

It was one of the few times that the crew of the *Soval*, the only Starfleet ship now attached to the Allied 8th Cardassian Taskforce, had been allowed to the surface since the Federation Council had ceded control of Lakesh to Gen. K'Vada.

Thorne often wondered why the powers that be maintained the pretense of a partnership. Captain T'Prea's displayed the patience of Surak in dealing with the bullying Klingon general, and his spiteful, nonsensical placement of the *Soval* on the most trivial assignments. Though the *Ambassador*-class ship didn't bear the armaments of a Klingon warship, the class was known for its durability. Two of the most famous ships in the line, the *Enterprise-C* and the *Excalibur*, attested to that.

The commander had been surprised when *Soval* had received the order to help repair the disposal unit, but the unexpected request made sense once

the ship arrived, and the crew found out that K'Vada was off world, and the more agreeable Commander Vurdis. The wise warrior had even agreed with T'Prea's suggestion that *Soval* take the lead in answering a distress call from a Klaestron caravel instead of contacting one of the Klingon warships prowling the Crolsa system. Unfortunately, the septic system hadn't been repaired when the distress call came through the hyperchannel net, and T'Prea had ordered the away team to stay on Lakesh until the starship returned.

Thorpe passed the huddled refugees and the suspicious Klingon guards glaring at both them and him as he hurried by. Jeffrey's eyes were locked on his tent but his mind on the past. More specifically it repeated ad infinitum the events that led to his firing on the medical courier *Nightingale* as it sought to break the quarantine imposed by the Federation Council on to muzzle the contain the eco-plague the Jem'Hadar had released in spite after the seminal Dominion defeat at Chin'toka.

He had been left in command of the *Degra* due to the unexpected surprise retirement of Captain Darim, the reptilian Ariolo returning to her home planet to hatch her young.

Never warming up to the woman, revelation of her pregnancy had taken Thorpe totally by surprise. As had her abrupt departure. She held one meeting, announced her decision, handed the reins to him, and then transported off the ship to catch a private transport to Fillandia.

And just like that Jeffrey had become a starship commander. And unfortunately his first assignment had been on the death watch over Aamazzara, insuring that no ships left or entered the planet until a vaccine or cure could be devised for the deadly Dominion plague outbreak.

The *Nightingale* had fit in the latter category. From the inquiry held that absolved Jeffrey from guilt, the ship had belonged to Medics without Boundaries, an idealistic group of medics that had braved violence, nature, and disease to volunteer their time and skill in places even Starfleet ships weren't always authorized to go.

They sought to alleviate the suffering of the Aamazzarites, a race that was symbiotically tied to their planet in a unique bio-chemical union. Even the Dominion had sent a team of scientists to halt the plague, but they had pronounced the planet too far gone, as well as stating that the nanotechnology they devised to create the plague could adapt to other ecosystems.

With so much on the line, Jeffrey had tried to explain to the *Nightingale's* captain, a grizzled Bolian female named Vries, the unstable situation on the planet's surface and the very real personal danger the crew could be subjecting themselves to. Vries had ignored him, and he had been forced, or so he kept telling himself, to order that the *Nightingale* be fired on,

first with a warning bow across the bow, and then a shot to disable the small *Caduceus*-class ship's engines. Everything had gone wrong after that...

The volley had sliced through the ship's hull, plowing through the vessel's warp core, creating an almost instant core breach. The *Nightingale* exploded before Thorpe the thought to beam out its crew even entered his mind.

He had finally been cleared of wrongdoing, though he had been ordered to undergo psychiatric therapy as a result of the persistent nightmares that had tortured his dreams since the tragedy.

Fleet Command had placed him aboard the *Soval*, hoping the mental discipline of its crew would hopefully rub off on him, Thorpe suspected. The ship's captain, T'Prea, along with the rest of the crew had been cool, but gracious, which is what Jeffrey had anticipated.

And he had been glad that the Vulcan's reserve had left him largely alone, and not having to defend his actions or explain them, as he suspected would be the case on a ship people with a human or non-Vulcan crew. The calm, unemotional environment had helped Thorpe focus on performing his duties, the nightmares held back to terrorize him only off hours.

So, Thorpe had to admit that Fleet Command had been right, or close to it in this instance. He hadn't been sure that he could ever return to space or serve on a crew or give commands. But lately he had started to feel that maybe he could overcome his doubts and fears after all. And it was all because of the neuropressure sessions, he smiled to himself.

Though he knew it wasn't the case, though T'Shanir's ministrations had loosened muscles he didn't even know existed. Tonight might grant him his first dreamless sleep in months.

"Commander! Commander!" A harried voice sliced through his memories. He kept walking though, hoping one of the Klingon soldiers would handle whatever the person wanted. "Commander Thorpe, please wait!"

The commander stopped at the mention of his name. He hadn't been the most personable sort during this mission, dashing from the septic unit to his tent, barely even taking in the still grand vista of the Avendra Mountains. Thorpe turned slowly.

A dirty, bedraggled Cardassian man was stalking toward him, a small bundle in his arms. Reaching the human, the lanky, gaunt Cardassian slumped his bony shoulders, seeming to shrink down to Thorpe's eyelevel.

"I'm a doctor," the man said through ragged gasps, "Dr. Tel Hizeal." Thorne nodded, trying not to let his impatience show on his face.

"How might I be of assistance?" Dr. Hizeal pushed the bundle gently into the commander's chest. Jeffrey jumped with a start when the bundle writhed. "What?"

"This infant is sick, infected with Temecklian measles," the doctor said.

"I'm sorry." Thorne said, not sure what else he was supposed to say or do. "Have you informed the camp's Klingon medic of this?" The swaddled child bumped against his sternum.

"Medics?" Hizeal spat. "More like butchers!" He pulled the child to his bosom. "Do you know what they told me? Do you?" The man screeched. Out of the corner of his eye, Thorpe saw that the doctor's outburst had garnered the attention of one of the Klingons. Jeffrey quickly waved at the brute to keep his post.

"Do you know what they told me?" Hizeal repeated, pressing the infant to him as its tiny body began wracking with coughs. Each cough seemed to hit the man with the force of a cudgel. "They told me that medicines were scarce because of the insurgency and if the child was strong it would survive before they kicked me out of the infirmary!"

The callousness Hizeal encountered incensed Thorpe, but he was more frustrated because he didn't know what he could do. The Klingons had pretty much cut Starfleet completely out of the administration of Crolsa and the handling of the Lakesh refugees. The Klingon Empire hadn't been known for its kindness to the territories it occupied, and the increased militancy of the Crimson Shadow terrorists had severely reduced the little flow of medical supplies and foodstuffs to the beleaguered planet after Starfleet had pulled up stakes.

The commander shrugged; a helpless look on his face. "I'm sorry Dr. Hizeal, but there's not much I can do."

"You're Starfleet!" The man replied simply.

"Yes...but the Klingons are in control of Lakesh now."

"But...aren't you allied with the Klingons?" The doctor's black eyes glazed over with confusion.

"We are, but, it's not so easy to explain," Thorpe stammered.

"At the end of this conflict the Federation promised the Cardassian people that you would help us," Hizeal growled.

"Doctor, sir, I'm just an officer." Jeffrey held up his hands, palms open. "I can only do what I am ordered to."

"That's the same excuse many of the Cardassians filling your jails hide behind," the medic yelled. Thorpe waved away the Klingon, but this time the burly soldier kept coming.

Hizeal saw the lumbering Klingon approaching, but he didn't care. Clutching the struggling child even more firmly to his chest, he spat on the ground. "I believed *you*! I believed in Santiago's promise that the Cardassian people would have peace, freedom, and dignity! I was a fool."

"Is there a problem here?" The hulking Klingon asked, smiling with relish as he wrapped a hand around the hilt of the dagger stuck in his belt.

"No Sergeant Major," Thorpe replied, after quickly squinting as he read the patch on the man's right arm. "Everything is fine here."

"If this *petaQ* and its squalling child are disturbing you, I can detain them." The sergeant offered with a sneer.

"No, no," Thorpe said. "There's no problem here. You can resume your post Sergeant Major."

"You don't give me orders Starfleet," the Klingon spat, grabbing the doctor roughly by the arm. The sudden movement caused Hizeal to jostle the child. The infant wailed. "Silence that child!" the soldier ordered, "Or I will!" He dug into the doctor's arm.

"That's enough!" Thorpe spoke with quiet vehemence. He didn't want any more Klingon soldiers or Cardassian refugees to be drawn into the unfolding drama. "Let him go Sergeant, or I'll report you to Commander Vurdis." The Klingon threw the communicator clipped to his belt. It hit Thorpe squarely in the face.

"Go ahead." He crowed. "Capturing a Crimson Shadow sympathizer will surely net me a promotion."

"This man's not a sympathizer," the commander said. "He was just asking me for medicine for the child. The infant has Temecklian measles."

"We have an infirmary for such ailments," the Klingon's ridged brow furrowed in perplexity. "Why didn't he go there?" The commander didn't like how the soldier talked about Hizeal and the child as if they weren't there, but he didn't want to throw fuel on the smoldering situation.

"I *did*," Hizeal pleaded. "They turned me away."

"Then why are you complaining?" The soldier asked. "If you were turned away there was good cause." He released the man, pushing him forward. "Get out of my sight and count your blessings that I have decided not to take you to the citadel tonight."

Hizeal looked once more at Thorpe, pity and rage roiling behind his eyes. The commander turned away, unable to maintain the doctor's gaze. When he turned back around, all he saw was the broken man's back as he scuttled down a darkened, muddy street.

"Are you telling me that there are no medicines for that child?" The commander asked the Klingon.

"I'm not telling you anything Starfleet. Klingons are people of honor, something humans still don't seem to understand. If a Klingon told him that there was nothing to be done for the child, then that is the case. To lie would be dishonorable." The warrior poked out his broad chest.

"I see."

"No, you do not."

"Perhaps," Thorpe said, turning away from the Klingon. Upon unsealing the door flap of his tent, the commander paused, unable to enter. Hizeal and

the child had supplanted the *Nightingale's* explosion in his mind. He had to find them, try more than he had to save that child.

If a good man like Hizeal could give up on the Federation it was a bad open indeed. Resealing the door flap, Thorpe turned back around, determined to do his best to right at least one wrong in the universe.

He took off in a sprint in the direction that he had seen Hizeal last, his quick feet saving his life. Seconds after he had left his tent, it exploded in a cascade of plastic and metal, the blast knocking him to the ground.

Spitting the rancid dirt out of his mouth, his ears ringing, his head pounding, confusion swirling around him, Thorpe tried to stand up, but fell onto his back, his muscles quivering, the breath pummeled from his lungs. Before his eyes swam a black, pulsating wave before nothingness claimed him.

From a rocky perch on the Avendras, Gul Vaidar Dien spied the conflagration racing across both the Klingon barracks and the refugee camp with near orgasmic delight. He quickly handed his vision enhancers to Gul Javin En'Roel.

En'Roel placed them to his eyes, hooting seconds later. "I owe you fifty *leks*," he grumbled. This elicited a round of laughter from the other soldiers assembled on the ledge, each hand picked by the grousing gul.

"I told you that it would work," Dien crowed.

"I just can't believe it," En'Roel shook his head, amazed. The *lynar* bats dropped over the Klingon base from their *Ordis*-class fighters had actually worked! The genetically altered rodents, each a living bomb, had been one of the many experiments approved by Legate Mintof Urlak, the man Javin had supplanted as head of the Crimson Order's clandestine military wing.

And though he was pleased with the results, En'Roel couldn't help but feel envious. After ousting Urlak as head of the Crolsa insurgency, he had created the Crimson Shadow, a group completely autonomous from the Crimson Order, something that was his own and that would chart a more involved role in Cardassian destiny.

Urlak had been allowed to return to Cardassia and his business ventures, leaving the trove of sophisticated weapons he had been developing as head of the Dominion weapons research facility on Lakesh as payment for his life.

En'Roel and his brave soldiers had made great use of those weapons, leveling the odds against General K'Vada's superior numerical strength. But each victory or stalemate they had created had been because of Urlak's contribution. And Urlak, an Obsidian Order spymaster, was too dangerous a man to allow his shadow to continue to linger over his plans.

Javin wished now that he had executed the man after he lost the vote for leadership, but he had known that there were a lot of people still loyal to Urlak. The old *wompat* had not only appealed to patriotism when he first built the insurgent group, he had also dipped into his vast wealth. Allying with the Dominion, investing the bulk of his fortune in foreign ventures, and being propitious again in joining Damar's rebellion, had largely left Urlak's fortune and his Trading Consortium intact.

The gul was young, but he wasn't foolish. He knew he would be signing his own death warrant if he eliminated the old man. But Javin also knew that he couldn't remain in the old man's shadow, or continue to rely on his 'contributions' to the movement.

With Urlak's removal, and the implosion of the True Way, at one time the largest insurrectionist cell, Javin knew that the time was ripe for him to become the primary leader of the fight for Cardassian freedom, in the mold of iconic Tret Akleen, founding father of the Cardassian Union.

But his dreams hadn't been helped when traitors led K'Vada to their secret Lakesh base; even giving the animal access to the facility's interphased portals. En'Roel had barely avoided capture himself that day, taking what few pieces of advanced tech he could in a mad dash.

Javin clutched his stomach, the smell of cooking Klingon flesh beginning to stir under his nostrils. "Did you know that the Klingons have been known to eat the hearts of their adversaries?" He intended to make the Klingons, K'Vada in particular pay, for roosting him from his headquarters. The gul could imagine in his mind's eye, K'Vada's roasted heart already sticking on a prong.

"I'm not surprised," Dien sniffed, pulling the heavy cloak more tightly around him. Even the tough Dien couldn't master the chill wind slicing through the mountain peaks. "We await your command." The soldiers stood at rapt attention.

En'Roel grinned. At least these brave warriors lived and died at his command still, and soon so would so many others. "Soldiers, take to the skiff." The soldiers piled quickly onto the hovercraft resting beside the two orbital fighters. "Eradicate everything non-Cardassian you encounter."

Cardassia Prime
The Bight of Okpara
(The Former Cardassian Union)
A week later...

Gil Huvell was pleased to be away from the capital city, even if it was to respond to a communications glitch.

The warm, coastal winds coming from the verdant sea running adjacent to the Bight of Okpara caressed his scaled face. The sun shined golden and radiant over the unspoiled brown beaches and green vegetation. The only thing marring the picturesque scene was the unusual amount of carrion birds flying about.

The beach, however, showed no signs of the destruction the Dominion rained upon Cardassia Prime in a malicious attempt to exterminate the Cardassian people. The capital city, with its crumbled streets, sooty buildings, and desperate, teeming masses seemed another galaxy away from Okpara's idyllic shores.

Gil Huvell was happy to be free from the despair, at least for a few hours. "What is our ETA to the processing center?" Sgt. Nix, his Federation counterpart inquired, ruining the gil's blissful basking. Huvell bit back his annoyance as he regarded the Starfleet Military Policeman. The tall, doleful Arkenite stood at rigid attention beside him on the skiff, seemingly unaffected by the beautiful scenery passing by him. The other tag-along, a pinched face Romulan sublieutenant named Sital, remained seated, his slate gray eyes constantly scanning the surrounding area for threats. The gil was impressed by the Romulan's healthy suspicion.

The hairless, tan Arkenite's green eyes instead remained focused on Huvell. He'll stay that way until I answer, the gil realized. At least the Fed was persistent. It was about the nicest thing he could think of when he thought at all about the Federation Alliance's occupation.

Despite the random bombings and protests that harried the Federation and Romulan peacekeepers, still patrolling the capital city four months after the war's end, with the reviled Klingons being reassigned off world, the Starfleet contingent seemed to remain committed in their plan to inject the Cardassian people with the opiate of democracy. In essence, finishing the genocide that the Dominion started, he figured. But Huvell tended to only voice those sentiments among like-minded brethren.

"Well shall arrive at the center in approximately ten minutes." Nix gave a curt nod, and then returned to his seat beside one of Huvell's soldiers. The gil breathed a sigh of relief that the soldier actually made space for the Arkenite without causing another scene. Many of the Cardassian soldiers still weren't as enlightened as he was when it came to dealing with the alien occupiers.

Though now an officer in the collaborationist Security Forces, Huvell had turned a blind eye to most of the disgruntlement he had seen by the soldiers under his command. He still had yet to come to grips with the Union's defeat and dismemberment. Only yesterday, it seemed he was in the

Mechanized Infantry casern for the 92nd Battalion, bemoaning the ceasefire order that ended the war.

Like many he hadn't known what he would do, if his family had survived, or how he would make a living in a universe in which the Cardassians were not the dominators. Allowed to return home to Cardassia IV after spending a month in custody, he had found his wife and children still alive, untouched by the Founder's order to erase all Cardassians from their own empire, but no jobs and no future.

Against his own beliefs, Huvell had joined the Security Forces, subjecting himself to the indignity of being retrained by people he had tried to kill only weeks earlier. But he had a family to provide for and he had borne the disgrace with proud Cardassian resolve.

And to his own surprise he had actually risen quickly through the ranks. In part due to the gutting of the officer's corps due to the war and Legate Damar's rebellion against the Dominion, and also because many of the remaining war veterans had joined the myriad insurgent groups fighting for Cardassian self-determination.

Huvell's blood quickened with the call of the martyrs to free Cardassia from foreign occupation, but his responsibility to his mate and sires would leave him only a fellow traveler in spirit.

He pushed aside thoughts of patriotism and sacrifice as the skiff screamed past the vacant guard post leading to the processing center. The distribution center was the largest one in the southern continent, its location far from the capital, at the landmass's tip, was because the main aid suppliers were Bajoran, members of one of their religious orders. The land and facilities had been provided free of charge by the shipping magnate, and Trade Provost Mintof Urlak as a part of his rapprochement efforts.

The former Legate also had founded the Crimson Order, a war veterans' organization, and he had risen after the war to stymie the imperialist schemes of the Federation and its co-conspirators. The man bravely challenged the proposed plans for a democratic republic Premier Lang was trumpeting, presenting his own vision of a Cardassian commonwealth instead, a new economic union of Cardassia and the subject worlds it had once ruled.

With admirable brazenness, Provost Urlak had reached out to the Bajorans first, taking their proffered aid not as a supplicant but as an equal partner. He had invested a significant portion of his fortune to restoring several Bajoran temples that had been demolished during the Cardassian occupation of Bajor in exchange for the grain and building materials.

Huvell had loved what Urlak was attempting because it flew in the face of the beggar Lang and the other *voles* currently roosting in the national Diet. To stop Urlak's momentum, the leeches had tried to say he was a traitor, that

he was involved with the Crimson Shadow insurgent brigade, that the Crimson Order was nothing more than a front for terrorist activities. With nothing to hide the man had admitted some previous associations with insurgents, but Urlak had said that he since no longer worked them with because of their violent methods.

Though Huvell didn't think it was a crime, and maybe a duty for younger or unmarried men, to take up arms to protect what remained of Cardassia, he respected Urlak tremendously, and had even filed for membership in the Crimson Order.

He was proud to receive the call from Chatelaine Makath, the Provost's mother, requesting the assistance of the Security Forces to investigate the sudden communications blackout for the remote processing compound.

The skiff set down at the vacant, smashed guard post in front of the gated center. Strangely enough, the actual entrance to the compound seemed untouched, and its pristine condition unnerved the gil for reasons he couldn't quite fathom.

The soldiers filed out quickly. Huvell waved for the men to keep their disruptor rifles slung over their shoulders. He could tell that there was no need for them. It was then that he noticed that the carrion had followed them and were lighting down somewhere inside the compound. Whatever tragedy had visited the center was long gone. He ordered his soldiers to set up a defensive perimeter along the front fence of the compound just to give them something to do.

With Nix and Sital shadowing him, Huvell stepped into the blackened guard post. The outpost's hanging door broke off in his hands, the gil slamming it inward, its heavy clang against the wall adjacent to the entrance ringing Huvell's ears.

The smell of burned flesh no longer bothered him, but Sital turned a pale grin and gagged at the site of the crisped Cardassian sentry, the red rimmed hole in his chest the only color left on the remains. Nix remained unflappable at the scene of carnage, causing Huvell's respect to shift to the Arkenite. The environs of the guard post were similarly blackened, all of the interfaces gutted by flame.

"I guess we're going to have to blow the doors," Huvell said, stepping out of the guard post, faster than he hoped his counterparts noticed.

"Denora," he called to the most appealing soldier under his command. The shapely young woman rushed to his side, a large back pack strapped to her slender, though strong shoulders. Huvell held out his hand imperiously. "Hand me a plasma charge." The woman slung the pack to the ground and tore through its contents, producing the disc-shaped explosive seconds later.

"Excellent," Huvell said, while activating the device. "I suggest you all," he paused to include Sital and Nix into his sweeping gaze, "move behind the skiff."

He was pleased that both the Fed and Romulan took direction as well as his soldiers. Huvell moved quickly to the center's metallic gate, slapping the ticking bomb to it. He rushed behind the skiff, just reaching its safety before the plasma charge exploded, sending shards of heated metal right above his head. "Is anyone harmed?" He asked.

Receiving a lot of positive head nods and grunts, Huvell smirked. "Excellent." He stood up to survey the opening he had just created. It felt good to blow things up sometimes, he realized. "Let's go." He ordered, pulling out his phase-disruptor pistol, more from habit than necessity.

With the others behind him, Huvell stormed into the processing center, pulling up short just inside the door. His pistol fell to the ground, and he followed seconds behind it, his lunch spewing over the dirt beneath him. Sital fell beside him, the contents inside his stomach mixing with the gil's.

"Oh my," was all Nix could say. Huvell had seen death, he had witnessed slaughter, he had committed massacres, but he had never seen anything quite like it. His eyes stinging with tears, his throat burning with residual bile, the gil squeaked. "Denora, someone, call the mortuary services."

"Shouldn't we begin a forensic investigation, try to determine who-who done this?" Nix said, the slight crack in his voice his only sign of emotion.

"I think that's obvious," Huvell tried not to snap. He forced himself to look again at the knotted entrails of the pile of dead Bajoran corpses stacked behind the message made from their innards, with cackling carrion birds fighting over the remains.

"Cardassia for Cardassians," Sital read slowly. And though Huvell still agreed with that statement, he didn't quite believe in it as much as he had before.

CHAPTER TWO

Federation Starbase Deep Space Nine

B'hava'el System

(Bajoran Space)

May 2376

"Admiral Shanthi's ship has just docked," the duty officer's voice drilled through her headache. *"She is requesting an immediate audience."*

Colonel Kira Nerys leaned back in Benjamin Sisko's old seat, rubbing futilely at the nest of *barrowbugs* right beneath her temples. *Just what I need,* Kira groaned, though she wanted to scream instead. "Send her in."

She had last seen the dolorous Fleet Admiral almost three weeks ago when she had visited the station in order to assign the *Starship Aegis* to escort the Founder to Nimbus III. A lot of things had gone wrong after the woman had issued that order, chief among them a Cardassian-Tal Shiar plot to kidnap the Founder, which had resulted in a Dominion warship arriving at the station promising retribution if the Changeling was harmed. The desperate situation had impelled the *Aegis's* crew to steal the *Defiant's* cloaking device and set off a cascade virus in the station's computer core, leaving the station defenseless for hours.

And Shanthi had even been less thrilled about that than the colonel had. Furthermore, Kira had heard grumbles that the woman was questioning Kira's fitness to command the station after she decided to release the *Aegis* officers that had committed the theft, along with Captain Glover, the ship's captain, who had chosen to share their fate, after their transport to the stockade had been recalled to the McAllister Nebula to attend to the tragedy there.

The destruction of Point Station Epsilon had been the first in a troika of tragic events culminating in the desecration of a whole Bajoran religious order on Cardassia Prime, in a crime so brutal, so shocking that the nascent Cardassian government had offered to pay for the transport of the slaughtered back to Bajor, with the miniscule funds left in its treasury.

It wasn't enough Kira felt, but at least the Cardassians were no longer denying crimes perpetrated against the Bajoran people. And the colonel also knew the new Premier, Natima Lang, was a decent person and felt that the gesture originated more from her than from general public sentiment or sympathy on the Cardassian homeworld.

But being present herself at the holocaust left by the Dominion, Kira couldn't really blame the Cardassians, this one time at least, if they were more focused on their own survival and own despair than that of her people. Even

the darkest days of the Bajoran Occupation never produced such death as the 800 million Cardassian lives lost before the Dominion surrendered.

The glass doors to her office slid open, the tall, imposing Shanthi filling the space in between. Kira rose slowly, as formal and imperious as she could manage. She wasn't going to let the formidable Fleet Admiral intimidate her. If Kira could hold her own against the likes of Gul Dukat, Weyoun, Captain Sisko, and Kai Winn, she was confident that Shanthi could be similarly managed.

"Admiral Shanthi, welcome back to Deep Space Nine." Kira hoped her smile didn't appear as plastic as it felt.

The dark skinned woman gave a sharp bow; the ceiling's light catching the few strands of gray among her short, black hair. She stepped regally into the office, as if it were her own. "Colonel Kira," the woman's words were clipped, crisp. Her face was hard and her gaze unyielding. "I must commend you that Deep Space Nine remains in one piece, with convicted Starfleet prisoners being given free license aboard the station."

Kira couldn't help but roll her eyes as she sighed loudly. *This is going to be lovely.*

Dr. Amoros slid the entire *Jumja stick* into his mouth, producing a cleaned stick seconds later. "Again I must commend you on your taste once again Commander Pell. Where shall we go next?" The Grisellan doctor towered over the smaller Bajoran diplomatic officer.

If Pell Ojana hadn't known the gentle soul nestled within the large, ursine medic, she would've thought the gesture menacing. But despite the doctor's fearsome appearance, he was quite affable, cuddly even.

She giggled, remembering how Captain Glover would often liken Amoros to a Teddy Bear, an ancient stuffed toy on Earth. At first not understanding the reference, Pell had looked it up on the interface in her quarters, her laughter when the image popped up nearly shaking the bulkheads down around her.

Amoros cocked his head. "Is everything all right Commander?"

"Of course," Pell forced her mouth into a straight line, though the warmth on her cheeks told her they were red as the Bolian tomato soup both of them had just partaken. "Well, we've pretty much visited all the dining spots along the Promenade...except for *Quark's*."

"You look like you've just smelled something unpleasant," Amoros remarked. "Are you sure you are well?" He reached into the black satchel always on his slung across his broad shoulders.

"I'm fine," Pell held up a placating hand. "It's just...the owner...he always makes me feel like I'm roasting on a spit."

"We don't have to go there," Amoros said. "The *Aegis's* replicators are fairly sufficient for my needs."

"You're too sweet Amoros, but I'll be okay. I think before you go into hibernation you need to eat some real, cooked food for a change. Besides, I've heard that Ferengi cuisine is quite nutritious, if you can stomach it that is."

The doctor patted his large midsection. "I can stomach quite a few things." He smiled, flashing rows of sharpened teeth.

"I'm sure you can, and have," Pell replied. "Well, let's see how *jellied gree-worm* or *flaked blood flea* agrees with your palate."

"I always look forward to new adventures," the furry doctor grumbled. "Discovering new foodstuffs is one of the main reasons I joined Starfleet in the first place," he paused, leaning close to Pell, "don't tell anyone I said that."

"Your secrets safe with me doc," Pell reached up to slap his shoulder. "I can think of worse reasons to join the fleet." Amoros laughed, oblivious to the sadness underlying Pell's seemingly innocuous statement.

"What of the dispersal ritual?" Nitala'Rax asked as the First passed out the vials of *ketracel-white*. First Toran'talak glared at him, his leathery, pebbled face contorting as he tried to smile. "Alphas prove themselves by their actions, not mere words." He handed a vial to Nitala'Rax.

The Jem'Hadar warrior snatched the tubule, forcing himself not to throttle his counterpart for his arrogance. He forced himself to remember he was in a simulation, and that this engagement, on the craggy, dusty planet Invarrak had long been decided against the Dominion's favor.

Nitala'Rax had never understood how the Dominion could be defeated by such inferior species until this moment. He had to admit, to himself, if to no one else that his agreement to participate in this reenactment had actually been beneficial after all.

He now saw that the failure of the Alpha Quadrant spawned Jem'Hadar to adhere to tradition had caused their defeat. He placed the fake tubule into a pouch on his belt, instead of into the shunt attached to his neck, where real *ketracel white* was pumping *isogenic* enzymes into his body. Nitala'Rax glared at the other Jem'Hadar, daring them to comment on his odd behavior. However, none were that foolish.

"Patience brother," Toran'talak cautioned. "We will soon prove our worth to the Founders." Nitala'Rax growled, forcing himself to nod. A real Jem'Hadar First, like himself, would've gutted any soldier under his command who displayed even a hint of disrespect. *Pathetic*, he determined. But he said nothing. Instead he looked out at the scalded, reddish sky and matching landscape before him.

Far below them, in a dusty valley ringed appropriately with the bones of long deceased creatures, trudged the remnants of the *Starship Sadat*. After successfully destroying the Dominion communications hub at AR-776, the *Sadat* had been chased down and destroyed over Invarrak. The planet sported a listening post abandoned by the Cardassians when the Klingons had invaded their territory several years earlier, before they had become feared lieges of the Dominion.

Toran'talak now led the clean up mission. At this stage in the conflict the Dominion was definitely losing ground. Even though the warriors around him were unreal, Nitala'Rax could still feel an almost palpable bloodlust for the Starfleet soldiers beneath them, weaving between the bones and rock for what little protection they could provide. It was not enough.

Second Amar'itan stepped forward, slinging his rifle over his shoulder and raising his *kar'takin* in the air, its sharpened edge glinting in Invarrak's pale light. "Our pulse weapons aren't necessary," he hissed. "We should leave an example for any Alliance team foolish to venture into Dominion space again." He sliced the air with the bladed weapon. The other warriors followed suit, with Nitala'Rax careful to remember that he was playing the role of Third. So, he waved his *kar'takin* as fiercely as the First and Second.

Despite the rejection of battlefield protocol, which stipulated that the *kar'takin* only being wielded during close quarter combat, Nitala'Rax couldn't fault his brethrens' confidence, even though he knew where it ultimately led.

The thought of slicing apart flesh, rending bones and tissue, even if it was composed of photons stirring something deep in him. He hadn't faced battle in several months; the last was suppressing anti-Dominion activities on Callinon IV. In truth, there wasn't much combat, more like simple butchery.

Restricted to the Gamma Quadrant for the whole war for reasons he had never been able to understand, and his Vorta overseers had told him not to ponder, Nitala'Rax had often fantasized about the war for the Alpha Quadrant. Like many, he had been trained and instructed about the Alpha Quadrant's more martial cultures, and had shared many of his brothers' desires to engage the notorious Klingons in combat and match the sly Romulans in cunning.

The closest he had gotten to the Alpha Quadrant had been several years ago, when he had participated in the extermination of the New Bajor colony from Dominion space. Serving aboard a Federation space station orbiting Bajor, he had kept his role in the colony's oblivion to himself, but of course the Founder Odo learned of it.

In fact, his actions at New Bajor had earned him a spot as an honor guard for the Vorta Charge d'affairs Boran to Deep Space Nine. Odo had told him that it would be a great learning experience to live among people he had

helped eradicate so casually. That perhaps it would give him pause if a similar situation ever occurred again.

Being in the presence of a god, Nitala'Rax had merely bowed and remained silent as Odo relayed his wisdom. The Jem'Hadar hadn't really believed that the Bajorans or any Alpha Quadrant race could teach him much of anything, unless it involved newer methods of inflicting death.

Odo had continued on the same tack when he appointed Nitala'Rax to replace Boran after he was killed, along with many Bajorans when the other members of the honor guard, all Alpha Jem'Hadar, had rebelled. The Alphas had blamed their defeat and disgrace on the Founder that had surrendered herself to the Federation and been imprisoned on Bajor while awaiting judgment. They had tried to kill her, leveling the Bajoran settlement of Vehlo in the attempt.

Seeing the lack of protocol these Alphas displayed at Invarrak, Nitala'Rax could only extrapolate that poor discipline infected the entire batch. Even without that foreknowledge, Nitala'Rax had slain the traitorous Jem'Hadar for their blasphemy.

For his loyalty, Nitala'Rax hadn't been granted a reward that he would actually treasure, such as Honored Elder status; instead he had been made a diplomat. It was a duty to which he was completely unprepared for, with a field of combat that involved words and nuances that he felt incapable of mastering.

His transition from warrior to ambassador had been difficult. In fact Nitala'Rax had recently had to restrain himself from killing the station's commander, Colonel Kira when the Bajoran denied his request to accompany the Founder to Nimbus III aboard the *Defiant*.

He hadn't found fault with her reasoning and appreciated her bluntness. The colonel had told him plainly that she didn't trust him, that if the Founder ordered him to sabotage or destroy the *Defiant* or engineer her escape, he would, and she didn't want to take the risk. Nitala'Rax knew that the colonel's suspicions were correct so he had held back from attacking the woman, out of respect for her acuity into his mind.

Instead he had sought to expend his rage in the holosuites, after demolishing his own quarters. And he was pleased that this time he had live opponents, and a new program, to test his skills against.

Along with the other warriors, Nitala'Rax slinked along the cliff's rim, his enhanced eyesight spotting the specks weaving through the ravine. "Shroud," the First ordered.

As his personal invisibility field folded around him Nitala'Rax allowed the thrill of imminent battle to course through him. Holding the *kar'takin* in front of him, its metallic tang enlivening his senses, Nitala'Rax followed the First and Second on the winding, treacherous path into the maw.

Lt. Juanita Rojas was having second thoughts. She had seen action during the Dominion War, even gaining a few scrapes and bruises along the way, particularly during the Battle of Cardassia, when she had had to vacate the *Starship Cuffe* before it was destroyed by orbital weapons platforms ringing the planet. But she had never engaged in combat on the ground, and was now glad that she had been spared that hellish experience.

The heavy tactical vest and battle suit weighing on her voluptuous frame were real, but the TR-116 rifle in her hands and the bedraggled officers double timing it in front of her weren't.

"Everything all right Lieutenant?" *Aegis* Security Chief Tai Donar jogged up beside her, a grim smile on his face. Rojas was trying to just keep up, her burning lungs screaming for oxygen, sweat slicking her reddish brown hair. The hulking Angosian wasn't even breathing hard, even with an isomagnetic disintegrator over his right shoulder.

If the usually taciturn Donar wasn't so friendly, or handsome, Rojas would've punched him for being flippant. . Though she wasn't petite, she did consider herself in fairly excellent shape for a Flight Control Officer, until this simulation at least.

"Move it people!" The whipcord, dark haired man at the front of the herd turned back to yell. "We have to get to the listening post before the Jem'Hadar find us."

"You heard Lt. Lar'ragos!" A woman with height and muscles that even exceeded Donar's pushed the frazzled officers just behind Rojas. The woman was nudging them forward with a large, lethal piece of machinery.

"That's a magnetic gauss rifle, fires two hundred mag-accel rounds a second," Donar leaned down to whisper. "That's what I used to carry when I was on Special Missions Team-5."

"That's what you carried on this mission?" Rojas asked between gulps.

"Yeah." The Angosian's voice was wistful. "I miss that weapon."

"Do you miss Special Missions as well?"

"Sometimes." The man admitted. Rojas knew from what little Donar had intimated to her that his team had actually fought at Invarrak, swooping in to rescue the remnants of Special Team-17 and the other survivors from the *Sadat*. The Angosian had told her that Special Teams motto was: "Leave none behind." And he had decided to whittle away some of their time before going to Jaros II by experiencing the battle from the perspective of the people on the ground. Plus, she didn't think he could resist testing his skills against another Jem'Hadar warrior. Rojas had been actually convinced the reluctant Donar to approach Nitala'Rax. For that, he had offered her a chance to play in their war game.

"Thank you."

He looked at her, confusion flashing through his dark eyes. "For what?"

"Sharing this with me," was all that Juanita could think to say.

"No problem. Commander Cherenkov wasn't available."

What? Pangs of anger and embarrassment struck her simultaneously. I can't believe this clod just said that, or that I could be so foolish to think that the solemn Donar could possibly be interested in me, Rojas realized, her heart catching in her chest.

The woman actually was glad when the Jem'Hadar un-shrouded, descending on them seconds later.

"Are you saying it's over?" Lt. Commander Ivan Cherenkov turned away from his lover, casting his anguished gaze at the stars glinting in the long port windows on the Promenade's upper ring.

"I'm saying that I think we need some time apart...that's all," Lt. Cmdr. Aquiel Uhnari replied, placing a hand on the man's knotted shoulder. He shrugged away from her.

"What you're saying is that you don't want to marry me," the *Aegis's* Executive Officer squeezed the box containing the diamond ring, the engagement ring that Aquiel had just refused to accept, in his hand with such force that he crushed it. He could feel the pointed *Falangian* diamond digging into his palm, but that was the least of his concerns.

"No...no it's not that...it's just..." the Haliian Chief Engineer let the statement hang. He whipped around quickly, his anger getting the best of him.

"It's just that you don't want to be my wife."

"It's really not that simple Ivan," Aquiel gasped, the ridge line running along her eyebrows crinkling.

"It was a yes or no question, and you said no. How much more simple can you get?"

"Dammit Ivan, everything isn't always black or white."

"Yes, it is."

Uhnari grasped his shoulders with surprising strength. "No, it isn't. You always do that. Always make things an either or proposition."

"Because that's how life really is. They might not teach you that in Academy Philosophy 101, but that's the real galaxy."

"I know more about the real galaxy than you might think," the sienna hued woman said with a graveness that only rarely slipped through her flippant edifice. He knew that Aquiel was still grappling with the death of Lt. Mercer during her brief stint commanding *Aegis* after both Ivan and Captain Glover had been captured by Cardassian militants.

After spending fifteen years in both the Marines and Special Missions before joining Starfleet's exploration arm through the lateral entry program, Ivan had seen so much death that it no longer affected him so profoundly. For a long time he had seen his desensitizing as a virtue, but now he wasn't so sure.

The few months he and Aquiel had spent together as lovers had ignited a lot of feelings he thought had long since been stripped away. And he wanted to encapsulate that flame, cup it in his hands so that it would never go out and leave his life as cold and empty as it had been. With his imprisonment at the military stockade on Jaros II imminent, he didn't want the momentum to falter in their relationship, he wanted her to know that he loved her and that he was prepared to spend the rest of his life with her after he was released. But it was obvious that Aquiel didn't feel the same way.

"This is about not including you in on borrowing the cloaking device?" He asked, grasping for straws. Ivan had made sure not to pull Aquiel, who already had a shaky service record, into his plot to borrow, really to steal, the Defiant's cloaking device. He used it to help the *Aegis* sneak into Cardassian space in order to rescue Captain Glover from the Cardassian militants who had previously captured him.

Uhnari turned away from him. "So, that is what this is about?" He asked again. "I thought we had discussed that already?"

"No, *you* discussed it." The Halian said, with her back still to him. "I didn't get a word in edgewise." Cherenkov gently touched Aquiel's shoulder, turning the woman around to face him. His heart caught in his throat when he saw her eyes wet with tears. He moved to pull her close to him, but she pulled away.

"I'm sorry Ivan, but I can't marry someone that doesn't trust me."

"Please Aquiel, it wasn't...that wasn't...I just didn't want you to get into anymore trouble. You see what happened to the rest of us. If things hadn't turned out as well as they did, we could all be facing serious jail time, in addition to being booted from the Fleet."

"But you didn't even give me a choice."

"I was trying to protect you."

"I don't need you to protect me!" She brushed by him, running into the crowd milling along the concourse. He thought to stop her or give chase, but decided against it. It would probably only make matters worse.

"I should've taken Tai up on his holosuite offer", Ivan mumbled to himself as he turned back toward the humorless stars.

"Is something on your mind Captain?" The Trill offered, her cheeks reddening. *Aegis* Captain Terrence Glover turned to Lt. Ezri Dax. The prim, elfin woman sitting in the pilot seat of the runabout *Volga* was almost the complete opposite of Jadzia, the previous holder of the Dax symbiont. After several silent seconds, the woman shifted her eyes back to the flight control console.

"Okay," Glover exhaled before shrugging. "I probably shouldn't ask...but I have to know, do you...do symbionts actually retain all of the memories of their hosts?"

"Yeah," the young woman said slowly, a small smirk inching over her lips. "I'm sorry to inform you."

Glover straightened in his seat. "There's nothing to be sorry about. I mean, with Jadzia, it was just performance anxiety was all. It had been a very, very trying time in my life. I was under a lot of stress. I had just been given command of the *Cuffe* after tragic circumstances in the Tong Beak Nebula..."

"I know," Ezri cut him off, "I remember the story from the first time."

"You do huh?" Glover couldn't help but be distressed. Ezri nodded, before laughing softly.

"It's okay, really." She reached out and squeezed his knee. Glover flinched, causing Ezri to laugh even more. "I'm a counselor. If you want to talk about it..."

"There's nothing to talk about," Glover said stiffly, his face hardening. "Everything's in working order."

"I'm glad to hear that," Ezri's smile receded. "Perhaps you would like to talk about something else? To pass the time until we return to the station?"

A hundred different things sluiced through Glover's mind instigated by the Trill's question, but he seized on the most pleasant. "Kasidy is a really delightful woman. Ben picked well."

Ezri nodded in agreement, her face brightening. Besides Terrence, the Dax symbiont nestled within the petite Trill woman was Ben Sisko's closest living friend. "You know I, well I mean, Jadzia encouraged Ben to pursue her. He didn't always listen to me, well, us, but in that case I'm glad he did."

"I hate that I didn't get to see Jake though," Glover intimated, frowning. Jake Sisko had left on a transport to Earth a day before Colonel Kira had granted Glover's release from detention to check on his ailing grandfather. A long time fan of Joseph Sisko's succulent Shrimp Creole, Glover hoped that the curmudgeonly chef would be puttering around again in his kitchen soon. With all the tragedy enshrouding the Federation at the moment, and the very personal hole left by Ben's ascension to the Bajoran Prophet's Celestial Temple, the captain worried that the Sisko family couldn't weather more bad news.

Wanting to stay positive, he shifted his thoughts back to the very expectant Kasidy Yates-Sisko.

"Kasidy wouldn't tell me, but maybe you know," Glover leaned forward, "Boy or girl?"

Ezri chuckled again. "That's like the biggest mystery on Bajor at the moment. Kasidy has everyone waiting with bated breath."

"I want to thank you Dax for escorting me down to Bajor to see Kasidy. I had never seen her you know, and I can't wait to introduce her to Jasmine. I think they'll hit it off wonderfully." Even though Colonel Kira had released Glover and his senior staff from the station's detention center they were not allowed to leave the station without an escort, even to the *Aegis* docked at the third Upper Pylon.

"But Jasmine wanted to do something special for you. I lent her a holosuite program of the Hoobishan Baths on Trill that I'm sure you'll enjoy."

"Thanks." Glover grumbled, a little nervous that Jasmine and Ezri had become fast friends so soon after the counselor returned from vacationing on Risa. He hoped that Ezri hadn't let slip his previous acquaintance with Jadzia.

Plus, he wasn't much of a fan of holo-programs. He preferred reality to fantasy. But Jasmine had told him that she had something she really needed to tell him, and wanted to do it in a comforting environment. His wife wasn't normally so insistent, leaving him to suspect that the announcement she wanted to make could only mean one thing: He was about to be a father.

Spending time with Kasidy, the thought had been curling around his mind, filling his heart with a joy that he hadn't expected possible. Ben would've been shocked to know that Terrence actually was looking forward to being a father.

Years ago he had thought he would be a father, but it had turned out not to be. It had taken Glover a long time to recover from that blow, but he had eventually realized that he hadn't really been ready for fatherhood at that time. There were many things he hadn't accomplished in his career that the intrusion of a child would've hampered, if not outright derailed.

But since that time he had achieved his dream to become a starship captain, gotten married to an exceptional woman, and survived the most destructive war in Federation history.

His most recent brush with death, courtesy of Cardassian True Way militants, had made Glover more open to the idea of being a father, of continuing the family bloodline. A single child, he really didn't have the luxury of passing that duty on to a sibling. Plus, he knew that his father, Admiral Sam Glover, would be thrilled with the idea of having more Glovers around to mettle in their affairs. Besides Terrence and his father, the only other Glover still alive was his Uncle Sheldon, an archeologist more committed to his work than raising a family, or even maintaining contacts with his existing relatives.

"The Baths are beautiful," Ezri remarked, cheerily.

"Are you referring to the hologram or the real thing?"

"Well...the program. I've never been there myself. Though Audrid...one of the other hosts was quite fond of them."

"And what was Jadzia's opinion of them...if I may ask?"

Ezri's eyebrows knit in deep thought, as if she were struggling to pick the dead woman's opinions from a recess in her brain. "She thought they were fine. But Jadzia always seemed more impressed with scenic attractions away from Trill."

"I see," Glover said slowly. "I take it since you've never been to the famed Baths that you are of a similar persuasion?"

"Not quite...I was born on New Sydney. My family usually visited Trill for business only. My mother didn't get along with my family on Trill. Really she didn't get along with my family anywhere."

"Oh."

"I'm sorry," Ezri winced. "I shouldn't be unloading my personal problems on you. I'm sure you've got a lot of other more pressing things on your mind."

"Actually, I would rather learn more about you and your problems than deal with my issues at the moment."

"Thank you. That's sweet...I think." Now Glover chuckled. He glanced out of the *Volga's* forward window. The sleek, silvery outline of the four-nacelle *Aegis* accented the dark arachnid space station. His heart fluttered briefly, surprising him. Glover hadn't thought he could bond with any ship besides the *Cuffe*, the grand little ship now space dust over Cardassia Prime. But he had never felt more grateful than when he had woken up on the bridge of the bullet-shaped *Prometheus*-class ship after his senior staff had rescued him from an exploding Romulan warbird, the denouement to the True Way's vengeful plot.

Beyond the station, Glover looked into the stretch of space that held the wormhole that led to the Gamma Quadrant, the reputed home of the Bajoran Prophets. Somewhere inside that vortex his friend Benjamin Sisko was residing, awaiting some time or event to return to the corporeal plane. *Don't mean to rush your time table, Glover thought, but hurry home soon. I might even name my first born after you,* Glover smiled. Then again, there had been a Sheldon in the family ever since the first had become a martyr during the Earth-Romulan War over two hundred years ago, he remembered, scratching his hairless chin. His father would definitely be angling for his first born grandson to carry on the tradition.

The clang of docking clamps capturing the runabout pulled Glover out of his reverie. He jumped, startled. Ezri regarded him with a quizzical gaze.

"Is everything okay Captain?"

"Please call me Terrence." Glover waved absently. "I think we are far beyond the formality stage."

"Well, you and Jadzia might've been."

"You possess her memories right?"

"Yes."

"Then call me Terrence."

"Okay...Terrence." Dax said slowly. "So, are you all right? I can contact Julian for you."

"Dr. Bashir you mean?" Glover grinned.

The woman's face turned ruddy, making the brown spots ringing it stand out even more. "Of course, *Doctor Bashir*," she straightened her shoulders. "I can place the call. He could meet us at the airlock."

"No. I'm fine. You'll have to find another excuse besides me to call on the good doctor during duty hours," Glover joked.

"Good one," Ezri smiled, a glimmer of Jadzia twinkling behind her eyes.

"Thank you." The captain smiled.

"*Quark's* is that way," Ezri pointed in the opposite direction from where Glover was heading.

"I know." Glover said without elaborating. He looked back at her while still moving. "See you around Ezri."

The young Dax threw up her hands. "You're almost as inscrutable as Benjamin."

"Thanks again," Glover grinned, before turning all of his attention to the task ahead of him.

The cargo bay Glover sought was located in Deep Space Nine's docking ring. The stasis units containing the survivors of a neuro-pathogen attack on the *Starship Phoenix* had been placed there, awaiting transport to Starbase One, where they could receive even more expert treatment than the reputed Dr. Bashir could provide.

His dear friend, and mentor, Captain Banti Awokou had been one of the victims of the attack, the first major one of the Crimson Shadow, an organization committed to violent change in the former Cardassian Union, that had spread terror like a virulent disease the last few weeks. The toxin had left Awokou in a vegetative state. He had been conscious at first, but recently the man had slipped into a coma.

Glover couldn't help but somehow feel a little responsible for the most recent spate of violence. It seemed like the Crimson Shadow had went into

overdrive after Glover and the *Aegis* crew had shut down the True Way, at that time the most well known terrorist cell.

Perhaps, Glover and company had actually done the Crimson Shadow a favor, by removing their chief rival and leaving a vacuum that the Shadow's charismatic leader, Gul En'Roel had eagerly rushed to fill.

Even though he knew it was simplistic, and quite self-centered to blame himself for the destruction En'Roel had unleashed upon in the Cardassian occupied territories, Glover couldn't help himself.

When the True Way had placed him on trial for his 'war crimes' it had forced the captain to really look at what he had done during the war, particularly his now infamous order to raze the surface of the Cardassian planet Loval. It had left him committed to being a part of rebuilding Cardassia, if for no other reason to put to rest the ghosts that he had created.

Glover tapped the access code into the console by the bay's doors. Colonel Kira had been gracious enough to allow him to visit his friend and provided him with the necessary codes. It was one more thing that Admiral Shanthi had found fault with, but the admiral's wrath was the least of his concerns at the moment.

He wanted to see his friend, and share the good news of his imminent fatherhood before he saw Jasmine.

The doors slid open, revealing a lonely, statuesque figure standing vigil by Awokou's tube. "Jasmine?" Glover stammered through his shock. "Wh-What are you doing here? I thought you were in the holosuites? At *Quark's*?"

Lt. Jasmine Glover turned around slowly, a sad smile marring her beautiful, mocha face. "*Ak'voh*. I was performing *ak'voh*. It's a Klingon ritual..." the woman began, but Glover shushed her as he swept her into his arms.

"I know what it is honey," he murmured, kissing her. "I did serve on a Klingon ship for almost a year."

"I learned about it while I was studying various religions," Jasmine continued, as if Glover hadn't said anything, "During my rehabilitation." Glover pulled her tighter.

At the beginning of the Dominion War, Jasmine had served as Chief Engineer aboard the *Mandela*, one of the few starships that survived the Jem'Hadar onslaught in the Tyra System. Jasmine had lost an arm and leg to a plasma leak in the *Mandela's* escape.

His wife had spent the remainder of the war in physical therapy, trying to come to terms with her new prosthetics. During that twilight time, the woman had sought the meaning behind her own tragedy and the enormous madness of war through exploring her spirituality.

Though the captain was confident that his wife had fully mastered her artificial limbs, he was sad that the woman was still coping with emotional loss of her injuries.

"How did you get in here?"

"Colonel Kira gave me the code. I told her that I could also check on the condition of the stasis field generators for each tube. With their chief engineer gone with the *Defiant*, the station is quite short staffed and could use all the help they could get."

"I'm glad to see you working your engineering chops again."

"Don't rush it, okay Terrence?" She squirmed in his grasp.

"I'm not." He reluctantly let her go. And he refrained from smacking himself against the head. *Every time things are going well, I say something stupid*, he chided himself. *Well, here I go again*. "Jasmine, you said you were performing *ak'voh*? But Captain Awokou and the others, they aren't dead."

"They might as well be," Jasmine said softly. She walked over to the closet tube and traced her fingers along its transparent face plate, the unit now taking on the ominous cast of a coffin in Terrence's mind.

"Don't say that Jazz."

"Why not?" She looked up at him suddenly, her hazel eyes flashing. But Glover couldn't tell if it was anger, sadness, pity, or some other emotion whirling within her gaze. "It's true. That's how we'll probably all wind up, before long if this damned insurgency isn't put to bed."

"I'm sure Starfleet will capture En'Roel sooner or later."

"And if they do, so what? What about the next guy? Or next terrorist cell? Or the one that will follow that? It's an endless, vicious cycle. How many more people have to die? How many more children have to suffer?" Jasmine shook her head, her tears hitting the lucid case. "Maybe we should just pull out of Cardassia. The hell with them!"

"You don't mean that," Glover cautiously approached his wife, holding out his arms. She slowly found her way into them, her body writhing as powerful sobs ripped from someplace deep within her. "I know you don't mean that. What's really bothering you Jasmine?" He forced himself to shut up for once, and let time wheedle an answer from her.

After an interminable time, Jasmine whispered, "I'm barren."

"What?"

She looked at him, her eyes slick with fresh tears. "I can't have children." The captain shook his head, unable to process what his wife had just told him.

"What?" He repeated.

"It happened during the attack on the *Mandela*. Not only did the plasma coolant tanks rupture, but I was exposed to a high dosage of theta radiation. It made me sterile."

"Oh my God," he whispered, stroking her hair as he tried to pull her closer to him, but Jasmine yanked away.

"No Terrence," she said, "You need to hear this. I've been keeping the truth from you all this time. Afraid of what might happen if I told you. I mean, not only am I deformed on the outside, I've been mutilated on the inside as well."

"I-I, I'm sorry." Glover stammered, his eyes glistening with tears.

"I've been withholding this from you, and you're sorry," Jasmine yelled. "Aren't you angry, appalled by what I've done? Can't you come down from your high horse just once and admit that you can be hurt, that I've hurt you?"

"No Jasmine, this isn't your fault." Glover replied, reaching futilely for her, but she evaded him.

"Don't you dare look at me with pity," she snapped. His wife moved toward the bay's entrance, her eyes locked with his. "I don't deserve sympathy and I sure as hell won't accept pity."

"We can get Dr. Amoros, or Dr. Bashir to check into this for us...for you." The captain offered.

"Don't you think I've already pursued those avenues?" Jasmine's voice crackled with frustration and disgust. "I even participated in this nanotech experiment to restore my reproductive organs. But it didn't work. Nothing has, nothing will!"

"That's okay Jasmine, really."

"Oh please," she turned away from him. Glover moved to her, attempting to wrap his arms around her, but she batted them away. "Don't touch me!" He recoiled as if her snakes coiled around her shoulders.

Not sure what to do, or how to feel, Glover did nothing, except root himself to the deck, his arms hanging open, ready to embrace Jasmine whenever she was ready. Jasmine remained with her back to him, her cries echoing against the cargo bay's walls. Even after the wailing died down, his wife wouldn't turn to look at him, *couldn't* look at him Glover realized.

Unable to allow time to work its magic again, Terrence pressed forward. "Jasmine, this isn't a big deal. I'm not too keen on having children anyway. We've both got very busy lives, and besides, if we could always adopt if we chose to."

Jasmine finally looked at him. "You could never lie to me Terrence." He tried to hug her again, but she moved out of his grasp. She backpedaled toward the bay's doors.

"Please Jasmine," he croaked. "Don't go. Don't leave. Let's talk about this."

"I've said enough." Jasmine turned and exited the cargo bay.

Momentarily stunned, Glover moved to pursue her almost a full minute later. He pounded through the door, barreling over the officer standing at the bay's entrance. The man cursed as he hit the deck.

Realizing what he had done, Glover roughly pulled the man to his feet, asking perfunctorily, without even looking at the man. "Are you all right?"

"Captain Terrence Glover?" The man asked, causing Glover to really look at him for the first time. On a second's inspection, the nondescript, sandy haired man didn't make much of an impression.

"Yeah?" Terrence said brusquely.

"I'm Commander Jeffrey Thorpe," the man stuck out his hand. Glover merely stared at the proffered hand, his mind firmly on Jasmine.

"And?" Glover pressed the man.

"Well...I..." the man stammered, lowering what little respect Glover usually posited to Starfleet officers to nearly zero, "I'm your replacement."

"You're my what?" The bulkheads trembled in the wake of the captain's bellowed question.

"Replacement," Thorpe shoved the padd in his other hand up to Glover's face. The captain quickly scanned its contents. His expression became as hard as granite.

"By order of Admiral Shanthi..." he repeated.

"Yes sir."

"And where is the Admiral now?"

"Aboard the *Tsushima*, in the observation lounge...she wanted me to tell you that she would be awaiting your arrival." For emphasis, the man meekly pointed in the opposite direction of the Habitat Ring, where Glover was sure Jasmine was heading.

His muscles coiling, he barked. "Thank you," before stalking off toward where the *Tsushima* was berthed. Adm. Shanthi was about to learn that good things didn't always come to those who waited.

CHAPTER THREE

Captain Glover's rage was hot enough to melt *neutronium*. Seemingly oblivious to the man's distress, Fleet Admiral Thuosana Shanthi finished the rest of her tea before acknowledging him. "At ease Captain." She placed her cup in a saucer, and slid them both away from her.

He shifted to parade rest, but his muscles were knotted. Anger lain on his skin like fire, and despair gnawed his insides. With his marriage, fatherhood, and his career now all gone, Glover couldn't help but look at the beaconing stars twinkling beyond the *Tsushima's* windows and wish, for a second, to join them.

"Permission to speak freely Admiral," Glover asked, with forced respectfulness. Shanthi leaned back in her seat at the head of the observation lounge's table.

"Permission granted."

"Why...why have I been replaced?"

"Don't worry Captain. It is a temporary placement until your return from Jaros II. Starfleet can't afford to have one of its primary tactical warships out of action, especially with a near full fledged war raging in the Cardassian territories, not to mention the spill over from Alshain activities in the Son'a region, or the Romulans, or Breen..."

Glover knew he should've felt relieved that his replacement wasn't permanent, or at least that was what Shanthi was saying at the moment. However, he wasn't. "If things are so bad, and I agree with you that we are in a very critical stage, why even send me to Jaros II for 90 days at all?"

"That was your choice captain."

"I know that." He snapped, the muscles in his jaws twitching.

"Come again?" Shanthi leaned forward, her eyebrow rose in a Vulcan-like gesture.

"My apologies Admiral," Glover ground his teeth.

"Disobeying orders, not following the chain of command can't be tolerated, even if the results were ultimately successful. The *Aegis* is one of a handful of *Prometheus*-class vessels, each crew handpicked because of their service records and aptitude to master each vessel's advanced technology. What each *Prometheus* ship does has repercussions that reverberate throughout the entire Fleet. You are role models whether you like it or not, and especially during this time when some member worlds are on the brink of anarchy or annihilation, discipline must be maintained in the Fleet.

Some ships and some crews might be called upon to perform disagreeable tasks to retain order and cohesion. Command couldn't allow, *I* won't permit, anyone from flouting regulations. The days of getting gold stars

or extra pips for cowboy tactics are over Captain Glover. As my grandmother used to say, 'You made your bed; so now you lie in it.'

Understanding the admiral's logic, but he refused to give up so easily. "Don't you think it's more logical to just give us a reprimand and let us continue to do our jobs? Commanding the *Aegis* is not an on-the-job training opportunity."

"Of course it isn't, that is why I am ordering you to make accessible to Commander Thorpe your logs and your command codes."

"Command codes," Glover simmered. "I can accept, but my logs? Why does he need those? Many of them are all ready at the archives."

"Which will take several days to procure via subspace after submitting a ream of requisitions," Shanthi shook her head. "I want Thorpe to have a ready resource at his disposal, especially for his first assignment."

"And that would be?"

"Starfleet Intelligence captured a Ferengi weapons merchant, a DaiMon Inish with ties to the Crimson Shadow. In exchange for his freedom, the Ferengi has provided detailed information regarded the organizational structure of the Crimson Shadow. In addition, Inish has also given up the location of Gul En'Roel's base."

"What?" Glover stammered. "That sounds too good to be true. Are you sure you can trust a Ferengi? One in bed with the Cardassians at that?"

"Believe me Captain I don't think SI ministration's left any room for doubt or fabrication on the DaiMon's part. In any event we have to take a stab at this. With *Aegis* being the closest tactical cruiser in this sector, I am ordering her to capture En'Roel."

Glover clutched the back of the leather seat nearest to him. "You can't, you can't send *Aegis* on a mission like that with most of her senior staff out of commission. You're dooming whatever chances you have from the start!"

"Commander Thorpe has command experience," Shanthi offered, a neutral expression on her graven face. Glover didn't know what pissed him off more, her asinine decision to place this mission and his ship in the hands of a novice, or that his outburst didn't seem to bother the icy woman in the slightest. "He commanded the *Degra*, and he recently was assigned to the *Soval*, where he barely survived the Crimson Shadow's most recent attack on Lakesh."

"I don't give a damn if he was a clone of Jean-Luc Picard he's not ready to sit in the captain's chair of *Aegis*, that's my chair!"

"Fine," Shanthi said. "Just inform your senior officers that you won't be accompanying them to Jaros II. That you're going back on your word to them."

"Wait a minute," Glover recoiled. "That's unfair."

"So many things in life are Captain. You're old enough to realize that now."

"You can't make me choose!"

"Everything is a choice."

"But-but...my wife is going to Jaros II, I can't leave her alone. Not now."

"And why is that?" Glover closed up, refusing to reveal anything remotely personal to this virago.

"This-this just isn't right." He deflated, turning his eyes to the room's lush black carpeted floor.

"I take that you'll be joining the rest of your senior staff at Jaros II." Shanthi slowly stood up. "I've already informed them to report to *Tsushima*."

"Why?" Glover asked, but he couldn't quite muster his old outrage.

"I have to return to Earth, so I've decided to escort you all personally to Jaros II. The *Erickson* has been reassigned to the rebuilding effort at Point Station Epsilon. Command is determined not to give any ground to the insurgents. We can rebuild whatever they destroy."

I hope *Aegis* doesn't wind up on that reconstruction list, Glover thought. Shifting his shoulders, his voice absent of its usual boom, Glover shifted his jaw before asking, "So, when do I hand meet with Thorpe."

"He should be waiting...just outside the door." Shanthi nodded in the direction of the lounge's double doors. "And when you're finished, I want you to join your officers in the ship's Brig."

"I'll try not to run over him this time," Glover mumbled.

"What was that Captain?"

"Never mind," he replied. "It was nothing."

"Fine, carry on."

And much to Glover's displeasure, he did.

Starbase 375

Federation space

(Near the Former Cardassian Union)

"I will not let Federation weakness stand in the way of my vengeance!" K'Vada roared, jumping out of his seat, and splintering it against the wall of Vice Admiral Salk's situation room. The squat, muscular general towered over the still sitting Vulcan.

"That outburst was unnecessary and unseemly, hardly befitting an officer of your rank," Salk mildly chided. K'Vada had been carrying on for close to an hour. He had set in on Salk as soon as he had stepped upon the station, with his warships ringing the *Regula*-class station like deadly spokes.

"And what do you know about being an officer? About being a warrior?" K'Vada challenged, his hand reaching for the *dk'tahg* blade stuck in his belt. He whipped it out and ground it into Salk's wooden desk. Unable to

help himself, the admiral frowned at the marring of the russet-colored *Ratana* wood desk, a gift from his foremother T’Kul. The admiral’s muscles tensed and he placed his hands to his sides underneath the desk, centering his energy, sharpening his focus.

Oblivious to the shift in the admiral’s mood and form, K’Vada thundered on. “My wife was murdered! My citadel on Lakesh destroyed, countless Klingon soldiers lost their lives, and Starfleet has convinced Martok to shackle my hands now of all times? Someone has to pay for this! No one attacks me, dishonors my House without paying dearly for it!”

“Your orders are to retire your forces to this starbase, and to conduct the peacekeeping efforts jointly with me from this point forward,” Salk nodded at the padd, the only other thing on the desk besides the still quivering *dk’tahg*.

“No,” the fierce Klingon screeched, sweeping away the padd. Before it shattered on the wall beside the remnants of the chair K’Vada had similarly dispatched, Salk was out of his seat. Using his desk to propel him forward, the silver haired Vulcan tackled the stout, muscular warrior. He quickly subdued the stronger Klingon with a submission hold learned at the feet of T’Kul, who was one of the greatest *Suus Mahna* masters on Vulcan, in addition to being his grandmother.

K’Vada succumbed more quickly than Salk had hoped with an aggressive variation of a neck pinch that the admiral was certain would at least give K’Vada a raging headache to nurse along with his wounded pride.

Salk dropped the Klingon in a heap at the base of his desk. He had thought about having his Security Chief remove K’Vada to the brig, but he dismissed the idea. It might be best for the general to awaken and see Salk staring calmly at him.

And K’Vada said I wasn’t a warrior, Salk smiled, but then frowned when he caught himself. One of the surest courses to victory was to defeat your opponent mentally, to get inside their heads. He wished he could perform mind meld on Gul En’Roel or some of the other insurgent leaders to learn what their next move would be.

He sighed as he sat back down in his seat, preparing to spend the next two hours, or whenever K’Vada awoke from his induced slumber, spinning scenarios in his head as he plucked the dagger from his desk.

The admiral frowned again when his communicator chirped. He tapped the chevron over his right breast. He knew how much K’Vada craved a captive audience and had informed his second that he didn’t wish to be disturbed unless to alert him to some dire happening. “Salk here.”

“Admiral,” Lt. Commander Girmindl said breathlessly, “The Klingon ship *Vokrot* has just relayed information that it has taken an unidentified ship into its custody. The ship’s commander, Kllagh, reports that the ship was

moving erratically along our defensive perimeter. Kllagh is requesting further instructions from Gen. K’Vada before he boards the ship.”

“I’ll be right out.” Salk replied. He glanced once at the prone K’Vada before exiting his office. The general was snoring like an overgrown *sehlat*. *I won’t be so hasty next time*, he promised himself.

Admiral Salk locked his arms behind his back. “General K’Vada is indisposed.” He repeated for the fifth time. His eyes were glued to the station’s main viewer and the irate Klingon filling it.

“That answer is not satisfactory,” Brigadier Kllagh spat back, also for the fifth time. “He left explicit instructions that he was to be alerted if any suspicious activity occurs.”

“As commanding officer of this space station, and joint commander of the Allied 8th Taskforce for the Crolsa region, I am well authorized to act in his stead.” Salk replied. “I can send you the new orders-again-if you wish.”

“Don’t get smug with me Vulcan,” Kllagh replied. A brutish female whispered into the brigadier’s ear. He grunted, shaking his head, the shells knotted within his dark mane tinkling at the movement. “I don’t like it,” he responded to the woman, loudly enough for Salk and his subordinates to hear. “I can’t believe the Chancellor would agree to that!”

“It is authentic,” the woman replied.

“*Koruts!*” Kllagh shouted, before leaning toward the screen. His eyes burned with anger. He paused, collecting himself, before he forced out the question. “I...request further instruction... Admiral Salk.”

That’s more like it, the thought ran unbidden through the admiral’s head before he could squash it. Spending all this time around irrational species is starting to catch up with me, he realized. “Prepare for my arrival. I will beam over with my security chief in a few minutes. We’ll inspect the ship on site...together.”

“As you wish.” Kllagh said before abruptly severing contact. Salk glanced in the direction of his anxious Security Chief. “Mr. Donne, you’re with me.”

It had taken Salk two of his four years at Starfleet Academy to get used to the smell of his mostly human roommates. He didn’t think he could last one day if he had sought to explore the stars under Klingon instruction.

He wrinkled his nose, and pinched his face involuntarily as soon as the transporter beam left him and Lt. Donne on *Vokrot’s* small transporter pad. The odor of unwashed bodies, rotting food, and coolant, mixed together with

a stifling, dank atmosphere on the ship forced Salk to rely on all his training not to gag and thereby create an interstellar incident.

The admiral could tolerate Klingons in small numbers, but he knew he would have to utilize the sonic shower as soon as he left *Vokrot*. Sensing his obvious discomfort, Brigadier Kllagh grabbed him in a large hug, lifting the admiral off his feet and setting him on the floor.

The large, muscular man had moved so quickly and unexpectedly that Lt. Donne hadn't even reached for the phaser clipped to his belt before Salk was already back on the floor. "Someone once told me that Vulcans hate physical contact," the brigadier said, wrapping a long, sinewy arm around Salk's shoulders. "Tell me that it is a falsehood?" He laughed. The three other Klingons in the tiny transporter room joined in.

The laughter died quickly after Salk grabbed Kllagh's arm and threw the man onto his back, the larger Klingon sprawling over the circular transporter pad that Salk and Donne had just arrived on. The other Klingons growled, reaching for their weapons.

Redeeming himself, Donne's phaser was all ready in hand. He nodded to the Klingons, taunting them to pull their weapons. A stunned Kllagh quickly got to his feet, his paw-like hand wrapping around his *dk'tahg*.

"Holster your weapon Mr. Donne," Salk sternly ordered. Donne looked at him, askance, before reluctantly holstering his weapon. The other Klingons went for theirs, but Kllagh growled for them to halt. Salk continued:

"The Klingons are still our allies. I think that's something we all need to be reminded of." He looked specifically at Kllagh. "Some of us also need to be reminded of the importance of respecting the chain of command. Though I am a Starfleet officer, in K'Vada's absence I am the commander of all Starfleet and KDF forces in this area. I will be respected, and I can assure you all that I am more than capable of insuring compliance with my orders."

"My...apologies Admiral," Kllagh managed after several false starts.

"Accepted," Salk bowed graciously. "Now, tell me more about this ship."

I.K.S Vokrot Bridge...

"So, you're saying that there are no life signs aboard that vessel?" Quentin Donne asked. The lanky Klingon at the ship's science console scowled, looking at Kllagh. Kllagh, ensconced on his throne like command chair, nodded for the officer to answer. Both Salk and his security chief stood to his left on the open bridge.

"Yes." The man said gruffly.

"Hmm," Donne rubbed his blond goateed chin.

"Something on your mind Lieutenant," Salk asked.

"Smells like a trap." Donne concluded.

Why did he have to mention the word smell? The admiral thought. Instead, he asked the brigadier. "Have your scanners detected any corpses onboard that vessel?"

"No."

"What's its registry? It looks Xeopolite in design?" Kllagh clawed his armrests, his upper lip curling in a snarl.

"Who cares where it came from? All that matters is that it's here, it shouldn't be, and what are we going to do about it."

Salk looked back at the screen. The boxy, irregular shaped vessel hung in the space before them, its hull battered and scraped free of markings. In imitation of his subordinate, he rubbed his own smooth chin. "And the ship's life support and propulsion systems are working?"

"Yes," Kllagh exhaled.

"Destroy it."

"What?" The brigadier gasped, surprise drenching his swarthy face.

"Destroy it." Salk calmly repeated.

"But don't you want to *investigate* its appearance, *unravel* the mystery of its absent crew," Kllagh taunted. Salk rolled his shoulders, similar to the way he did when he flung Kllagh onto the transporter room's deck. The Klingon quickly ceased his braying. One of the officers who had been present couldn't help but chuckle, drawing a dagger stare from the ashamed warrior.

"In this instance I concur with Lt. Donne's assessment. In this intense climate we can't take too many risks."

Kllagh curtly nodded. "Agreed." He shifted in his seat. "Malkom," he barked at the gunner on the opposite side of the bridge from the wiry science officer. The shorter, corpulent weapons officer tensed in his seat.

"Yes Brigadier."

"Remove that eyesore from my sight!" Malkom moved fat fingers over his console.

"Disruptor banks are powering up. Thirty seconds to discharge...."

As soon as Liantha Drazon saw the *Vor'cha*-class battle cruiser's gun ports redden, she detonated the bomb. The shock wave crashed into her cloaked vessel, the Reman seated just behind her squealing in pain.

Consoles lit up with sparks, fire rained down from the ceiling, and her eyes were blinded with smoke. Her lungs heaved from the sulfurous fumes as she searched madly for a fire suppression canister. With the temporary loss of her eyesight, she had to rely on her hands and knees as she bumped and banged against the wildly pitching ship as she felt her way along the walls.

She had gotten too close to the action this time. She had been too eager to watch the destruction of Starbase 375, the main staging area for the Federation Alliance's assault on Cardassia, as well as its continuing occupation.

Gul En'Roel had not authorized this venture. She had allowed an even more influential benefactor, as well as her own ego, to convince her of its success. A product of the Order, Drazon should've known better than to allow her arrogance to seduce her. Now all that mattered was survival. She couldn't be caught. She knew too much. And though she was confident of her ability to withstand any Federation interrogation, even the vaunted Vulcan mind meld due to the cranial implant inserted in her head, Drazon knew that she would not last long under a Klingon mind shifter or Romulan mind probe.

Her hands finally wrapping around the cold steel of the canister, she swung wildly in any direction that she felt heat. Within seconds, almost the entire cabin was filled with foam.

The haze leaving her eyes, she saw that the telepresence unit she had strapped the Reman in had malfunctioned, charring the wraith. Rushing to her console, she rapidly scanned the boiling controls, praying that the cloak was still intact. It wasn't.

Not knowing how long she had before she was spotted, Drazon rushed to the tiny engine compartment. The spherical cloaking device, a late 23rd century Romulan design was dark. She hadn't noticed the hairline fractures lacing the crystalline unit until now. The engine room, the most heavily shielded on the small escort, had barely been affected at all by the shockwave, but the cloaking device was now totally inoperative.

A feedback surge couldn't have caused that much damage, Drazon thought, her naturally suspicious mind seizing on the only logical alternative. *I've been betrayed! But who? Why?*

The former spy quickly checked her engines status, before heading back into the passenger compartment. If she could reroute piloting control to the engine room, she might be able to escape before being discovered.

She stopped as soon as the shadow of the battle cruiser shrouded the ship in darkness. The ship jerked as a tractor beam locked it in its clutches. She fished under the ruined flight console for her disruptor. Of course, the power cell had bled dry during the journey, making her betrayal complete.

Screaming with frustration, she threw the useless weapon against the window. Her face contorted as she sought to activate the implant in her head. The cranial implant was designed to help Order agents survive torture by pumping endorphins into the bloodstream. The implant also possessed a mechanism that would release lethal *voraxna* in the event that a captured agent wasn't able to resist torture. Gritting her teeth, her temples throbbing

with the futile effort at suicide, Drazon finally relented, sliding to the floor, overcome by tears and shame. Even her last failsafe had failed.

All Drazon could do now was use her encyclopedic mind to search out her betrayer. The last person she had seen had sent her own this assignment, they had even toasted over her success with spring wine. He wouldn't have betrayed her; he couldn't have delivered her to the enemy...

Drazon was prepared to go to her grave believing otherwise. But of course, there could be no other choice. She couldn't remember the last time she cried. Until now.

Illiana Ghemor watched the wounded battle cruiser swoop down upon the even more ailing scout ship with a pinch of sympathy. That could just as easily have been her, if the cloaking device on her own vessel had failed. Then again, she would've been cognizant to recheck the vital systems of her vessel, and not left it in the hands of others. *Even the Order went down in quality since I've been away*, she thought.

The dirty, green warship latched a tractor beam onto the hapless vessel, pulling it within its confines. She spied the Drazon's respiratory signs on the monitor before her.

Despite an expected rise in heart rate, the woman was still alive. Illiana frowned, her disappointment metastasizing. Even though she had also disabled Drazon's sidearm in addition to sabotage her cloaking device and shield, and even deactivated her cranial implant with a low-level theta band pulse, Illiana was angered that Drazon didn't try to at least generate a warp core breach on her vessel. It bespoke a lack of dedication not evident in the Drazon's dossier.

Of course, she was perfectly aware that the dossier could've contained false information. But it was more likely that her evaluators had failed to notice her weakness. Even more disturbing, Drazon had risen to the post of substation manager with such a grave impediment. A lot of things had seemed to decline in her absence, Ghemor ruminated.

The Klingon ship took the pod in tow before heading back to the ring of mostly Klingon ships guarding Starbase 375. Her finger hovering over the detonation button on her panel, Illiana waited until the ship was past inside the protective barrier, and her sensors indicated that the Drazon's bio-sign had been transported to the station.

Unable to contain her disgust any longer, she activated the controlled *isolytic burst*. If Illiana had not been present at the creation of such miraculous invention, she would've believed them to be fantasy, and slain anyone who tried to convince her otherwise.

The explosion knifed through the battle cruiser, shredding the two ships flanking it, and overwhelming the starbase's shields. The station tilted, a jagged hole opening it its portside as the tiny subspace tear seared through it. As the other vessels scrambled around the destruction, some flying off and searing space with futile disruptor blasts in an effort to attack any cloaked culprits, she yawned before frowning again. Though she knew the yield of the bomb was not powerful enough to engulf the entire station, thereby insuring Drazon's survival, she had hoped that it would destroy more enemy vessels. Now she was disappointed with herself.

She opened a coded channel to her contact.

"Don't be disappointed," he urged. "There will be a next time." Ghemor nodded, without replying. The man deactivated the link.

Surprisingly the conversation had lessened her deflation. There would be a next time. And when it occurred, she would make sure that things went perfectly.

CHAPTER FOUR

Nimbus III
(Planet of Galactic Peace)
Nimbus System
Federation Space (Near the Romulan Neutral Zone)

"It still retains a savage beauty, does it not, even after all of the terraforming?" Senator Tal'aura, of the Imperial Romulan Senate, smiled, folding her violet, rich woven robes of state. "Does any of it look familiar?"

Commander Ousanas Dar regarded the steely, cold beautiful woman with a hard gaze. "I was a stripling when my aunt brought me here. I only returned once more...after leaving Romulus before I could be executed."

Tal'aura frowned, shaking her head sympathetically. "Ambassador Caithlin Dar was a true Romulan patriot. Her arrest and execution were two of the many crimes the Romulan government must atone for."

"And I'm sure that once you've assumed the Praetorship that you'll set right all the wrongs perpetrated by your predecessors?" Dar cynically smirked. "But of course getting elected Proconsul would doubly increase your chances. And perhaps the endorsement of one of the Federation's more prominent Romulan expatriates would strengthen your hand against Hiren with the moderate and liberal Senators? Your support for the subject castes in the Star Empire not supplying you with the pull you need against the vise Hiren holds on the Romulan establishment?"

"I must commend you on your astuteness of my political quandaries," Tal'aura gasped in surprise, the first genuine gesture Ousanas had seen the careful senator display since he had met her at one of the endless dignitary gatherings being held for the luminaries on hand to watch the Changeling's trial.

She had been the only member of the Romulan delegation willing to even speak to him. After being declared a traitor to the state for his vocal protest of the Norkan campaigns against Federation colonists, he had escaped certain execution and sought refuge in the Federation. Unfortunately his family, the most prominent being his aunt Caithlin, the one-time Romulan ambassador at Nimbus III in the late 23rd century, had paid the price for his intransigence.

His entire family had been murdered and their lands and wealth taken by the Senate. It had taken Federation officials a long time to accept his account, and Starfleet even longer to admit him. But eventually they had, and he had become Starfleet's most referenced Romulan tactical expert.

Tarred as a traitor for his dissident activities revolving around the Norkan massacres, he became an abomination after his service to Starfleet reached the ears of the empire's rulers.

Working with the Romulan Imperial Navy during the Dominion War, both Ousanas and his counterparts had buried their mutual hatreds to attend to winning the war. But now that the war was over, the enmity had returned full force.

It had closed around Dar like a fist as soon as the *Defiant* had entered Nimbus's orbit. Seeing the touches of green dotting the dusty brown H-class world had only brought back painful memories of happier times for the commander.

The ambassador had brought her nephew once before, several years after her legendary meeting with the infamous Vulcan Spock and the even more notorious human Kirk.

Many ruling class Romulan parents had scared their children to tend their studies by evoking fears of Vulcan and human hordes spreading sterile, soul erasing logic, and humans diluting Romulan purity with deviant, fleshly desires.

Ousanas's father had weaved such tales, sprinkling several well known names, Spock and Kirk among them.

When the five-year-old learned that his aunt had actually met the two creatures and had survived, he had hounded her, begging her to recount her adventure over and over, but unwilling to believe her. How could she survive in the clutches of such amoral beasts? The contradictions between his father and aunt's stories unhinged his young mind.

Eventually the ambassador had secured passage for him to accompany her to the closing of the planet's diplomatic missions. The historic events of the Khitomer conference had made the planet's role obsolete.

The once desert world would be transformed and left as a colony open to any citizens from the triple powers willing to brave its still harsh ecosystems. Paradise City, the planet's one real city, and the home of the legations would also be converted into a museum piece to commemorate the bold attempt his aunt and her colleagues had made.

Almost a hundred years later, Dar still remembered his disappointment that neither Spock nor Kirk attended the ceremony. However, he recalled meeting a grossly obese Klingon and a scraggly human, but he couldn't remember anything that they said to him, or what he said to them likewise.

Staring out at the revived Paradise City from one of the dune hills ringing the more arable settlement, Dar spied the guards standing tensely at the base of the hill. Their silvery black uniforms reflected even in the dimming light given off by Nimbus's two moons.

"The war has revealed the strains on our civilization created by imperial overstretch. The Empire can't return to business as usual. To prosper we need the willing support of our subject races. You might call it politics, I call it survival. And peace with the Federation can go a long way to securing the Star Empire's continuation. Commander Dar, being in good graces with Starfleet Command, and garnering some respect in certain home world circles for your work during the Dominion War, could be a linchpin to fashioning a lasting peace. I would think, as the scion of the Dar family that the proposal would be of interest to you."

"Keep talking," Dar replied, though he kept his gaze on the modular buildings within Paradise City's walls.

"The Senate is torn over how to resolve the Benzar crisis. Senator Hiren supports strengthening our hold on the Benzar system. And I am sure you are aware that many Benzites are not averse to remaining under our aegis."

"You mean that puppet government Praetor Neral installed?" Dar interrupted. Tal'aura didn't respond, continuing on as if Dar had said nothing.

"The war has drained our treasury and left us unable to maintain control over our subject worlds. The Remans have been a particular problem. What I have proposed is returning the Benzar system to the Federation in exchange if the Remans can be relocated to an uninhabited world in the Benzar system. The Federation would get the Benzar system back without blood shed and the Empire would remove an increasingly disruptive element from our society."

"Sounds logical," Dar admitted. "But I'm not so sure that the Remans would be so willing to uproot." He finally looked at the senator again, searching her dark eyes for deception.

"Leave that to me," Tal'aura smiled. Dar shifted his gaze again. The woman's glacial beauty was affecting him more than he wished to admit. It had been a long time since he had spent time with a Romulan female. Though he now claimed Vulcan as his adopted home, Vulcan females, though physically similar and biologically related to Romulans, didn't possess the passion of Romulan women. "Perhaps together we can appeal to the more benevolent factions of our respective governments."

"The better angels of our nature," Dar murmured.

"I don't follow," Tal'aura looked at him askance.

"Abraham Lincoln, a leader of the American nation-state in 19th century Old Earth." A third voice slithered into the conversation.

Dar smiled at the slender, comely Romulan ascending the hill. "I guess recess is over Senator. Your keeper is here." He bowed. "Commander T'San, it's a pleasure to see you again."

"It's not mutual," the woman replied, dismissing Dar with a frigid glance. Once she reached the top of the dune, she gave a curt bow to Tal'aura. "Senator, General Velal requests your presence."

"What has happened?" The senator frowned. T'San looked again at Dar before replying.

"I'm not at liberty to say."

"I can see I'm not wanted." Dar replied. His combadge tweeted seconds later. Activating, the harried voice of his long time acquaintance Admiral Sam Glover squawked through the tiny communicator:

"Commander Dar, your presence is required ASAP." The commander looked at both Romulan women, mirroring Tal'aura's expression. *"Standby for transport."*

"Senator, I think I'm being recalled for the same reason you are, and something tells me that it's not good."

"I concur." Tal'aura said, giving him a small smile before allowing herself to be led away. He was still watching the gentle sway of the regal woman's robe when he transporter beam broke him into a thousand molecules.

Paradise City

J'Onn Arboretum

Nimbus III

"Legate Urlak! Legate Urlak!" Elim Garak cheerfully called. The former Central Command Legate, and reigning magnate of the Urlak Trading Consortium didn't acknowledge the frenetic greeting, his attention solely focused on the exquisite array of plant life and vegetation populating the arboretum that rested in the center of Paradise City.

His loyal retainer Dorcas moved protectively in front of Urlak. Garak pulled up short, regarding the frail Dorcas with mock disappointment.

"Please Retainer Dorcas," Garak held out his arms in an open gesture. "You treat me like a common brigand. I assure you that the scurrilous reputation I received at the hands of my enemies has unfortunately survived the fall of the old regime, and the most unfortunate demise of those most responsible for my exile."

Urlak chuckled, his eyes now focused on a Betazoid *Muktok* plant. He leaned close, pinching the chiming flower, taking in a deep whiff of its fragrant aroma. "You forget that I've worked with you before Garak...and that Tain was a close confederate."

"And so was Gul Dukat...from what I hear." That got Urlak's attention. He looked up at Garak. It had been years but the man remained robust, with avian, dark, shining eyes that missed very little.

"And where did you hear that?"

"Around." Garak rolled his large eyes. "Oh around."

"Around? Around where?" Urlak tried to keep the menace from his voice. He would not make the mistake of others and underestimate the former tailor at Terok Nor. Urlak knew how dangerous Elim was. In part because he had helped train him.

"Here and there." Garak replied. "You know Deep Space Nine was a major thoroughfare and quite a few people were in need of a stitch or alteration."

"And one of these travelers told you of this alleged association with Dukat?"

"Perhaps."

"Well...then they were correct." Dorcas coughed, but Urlak bade him to be quiet. "Dukat was the legitimate head of the Cardassian Union for a time, and being a *loyal* Cardassian I bowed to the authority of the state. When Legate Damar assumed power, I served him, and being the last legitimate ruler, I joined his rebellion."

"*Last* legitimate ruler," Garak picked up quickly on the statement. "And here I thought you were a supporter of Premier Lang."

"I am," Urlak said, nonplussed. "I wouldn't have accepted a position as Trade Provost in Lang's Presidium if I didn't."

"Even despite the recent havoc being wreaked in Crolsa and on Cardassia Prime by former colleagues?" Garak dissected Urlak's expression for any hint of deception. *I've taught you well*, the elderly man thought with a glimmer of pride. "Or your proposal for a commonwealth that runs counter to the overtures for closer ties with the Federation that the Premier supports?"

"I don't answer to you," Urlak replied. "I don't know why Lang keeps you around. Director Darale is the head of the Internal Security Apparatus, a post you refused, yet you appear to assume her mantle whenever the mood suits."

"Ouch," Garak winced. "It appears I've touched a nerve."

"No," Urlak tried to chuckle again, but failed, "Your self-appointed role as Lang's enforcer grows tiresome. If you are such a proponent of the new laws perhaps you should consider taking on a post so that you can be governed by them as well as the Premier, or myself."

"And take away all of my fun? Never," Garak smirked. "But I didn't come here to quibble about your past associations," he declared. "I came to check on your condition."

"My condition?" Urlak looked at the similarly perplexed Dorcas. The retainer shrugged. "Do you know something I don't Garak...but then again, haven't you always?"

"I will always be a student at your knee Provost," Garak gracefully bowed. "No, I came to inquire because you didn't attend this morning's proceedings."

"The Provost just arrived two days ago from Cardassia Prime," Dorcas argued. "He-we-both aren't quite as durable as we once were."

"Nonsense!" Garak offered, though his look of concern seemed genuine, though Urlak had known him long enough to know better.

"Dorcas is correct. The travel was more tiresome than I imagined. Plus, I have been checking back constantly on Prime to see if the perpetrators of the Okparra massacre have been captured."

"Your dedication is commendable," Garak replied. "And Cardassia needs you in good health. Fortunately, there are a host of doctors from myriad worlds in attendance of the trial. Perhaps I can inquire about an elixir to keep your energy up?"

"No!" Urlak replied with more force than he should have. But the thought of alien hands touching him, or unknown concoctions coursing through his body filled him with disgust. The spike of emotion immediately captured Garak's interest. Urlak nervously rubbed the special signet ring given to him by Enabran Tain for his role in the destruction of the Bajoran Higa Metar terrorist cell. That gesture didn't go unnoticed either.

"I didn't realize you were anti-medicine Legate. The Cardassian medical community should be thankful that you were placed in charge of reviving the economy and not our health field."

"Always ready with a witty rejoinder," Dorcas said reproachfully. "Most unseemly behavior."

"That's one of the kindest insults I've ever received," Garak smiled.

"Provost! Garak!" Hogue, the Premier's young assistant thundered into the arboretum, his chest heaving from exertion, his face a deathly pale shade of gray. Urlak was grateful for the interruption. "There's been another attack! Starbase 375!"

"Your former friends continue their winning ways," Garak muttered. Urlak ignored him.

"How many casualties?" The Provost asked.

"We're not sure yet. Premier Lang is meeting with Federation Alliance members at this moment. She wants you both to join her."

"After you Provost," Garak replied.

"I've never turned my back on you Elim," Urlak remarked. "I'm not about to start now."

"Still the wisest man I know."

**Federation Embassy
St. John Talbot Conference Room
Nimbus III**

"This briefing is only for recognized officials for each respective government," Federation Security Advisor Hetal'laal'ak fixed Garak with a doleful stare, his yellow eyes taking on a sickly cast.

"I think Mr. Garak has proven himself not to be a security risk," Adm. Samson Glover barked, unable to restrain his annoyance his pompous superior. "His help in decrypting Cardassian transmissions saved countless lives." He quickly became the focus of the reptilian Security Advisor's gaze. Glover decided not to push the point. He was already on the hot seat for the destruction of Epsilon station, with lax security procedures being tossed about as the most likely reason that the insurgents were able to destroy the base. As head of Starfleet Security, which was charged with overseeing security on all Starfleet vessels and outposts, his department was receiving a lot of intense scrutiny, and at times blistering criticism. And now with the reports streaming in about the attack on Starbase 375, Glover's position was even more precarious.

"Mr. Hetal'laal'ak," Premier Natima Lang, the head of the new Cardassian Republic, patted Garak's shoulder. Glover didn't care much for scales and gray skin, but the woman's beauty and decency showed through. "Mr. Garak is a trusted advisor. If he is not permitted then no Cardassian will be."

"Fine with me," General Lorath, representing the Klingon High Council, snorted. His adjunct, Commander Ch'Pogh guffawed. Their outburst drew loud exclamations from the Romulans General Velal and Commander T'San. Senator Tal'aura seemed displeased with both the Klingons and her compatriots. Commander Dar, sitting beside Glover, looked similarly annoyed.

"Let's get on with this," grouched the diminutive, copper skinned Aluxis, the Ithenite Federation Councilor on hand for the Changeling's trial. He leaned forward in his seat. "Of course your entire delegation is permitted. Please be seated."

"Thank you Councilor Aluxis." The Cardassian party of four: Lang, Garak, the Trade minister Urlak, and the Security minister Thrax found empty seats around the large, circular marble table.

"Mr. Hetal'laal'ak, please proceed." Aluxis prodded. The Security Advisor's naturally long face grew even more so. Glover turned away for a moment until he could force the smile from his face. The hairs of his mustache

twitched his nostrils as he forced his incorrigible lips to form a straight, serious line.

"Assembled guests," Hetal'laal'ak rose from his seat, his full height impressive even for an Ariolo. He activated a padd with a clawed hand. Holoprojectors embedded into the table top clicked to life as the lights in the room dimmed.

Everyone held their breath at the site of the listing Starbase 375 hung before them. "The attack on Starbase 375 occurred four standard Earth hours ago. One of the suspected culprits, a Cardassian militant was taken into custody before the blast, and her current status is presently unknown."

"How many casualties?" Captain Jarod Singleton, from Starfleet Intelligence, asked.

"As it stands, there are fifty deaths and over a hundred injuries of varying severity," Hetal'laal'ak replied.

"I see a lot of Klingon ships surrounding the station," Lorath stated. "How many of those killed or injured were Klingons?" Glover could hear the rage building in the man's voice.

"At the present moment, we have not received that data. However, General K'Vada was present and has surely submitted some information to the High Council." Lorath nodded in the direction of Ch'Pogh. The younger man leapt from his seat and stalked quickly from the room. *The closest thing to a run for a Klingon warrior*, Glover thought, before reminding himself of the graveness of the occasion that had called this meeting into being.

"What will be the retaliatory response?" Lorath asked. "Surely the Federation will no longer tie our hands in Crolsa. Your trepidation has only encouraged the Crimson Shadow and similar terrorists to increase their respects."

"Perhaps K'Vada's loutish methods are to blame," General Velal offered. "Militant activity in the Romulan occupation zone is almost nonexistent."

"Of course, since you've limited access to your Cardassian holdings we only have your word of that," Lorath sneered.

"Generals Lorath and Velal, I am object to your referring to Cardassian space as if it were chunks of carved *tojal* meat." Lang said. "And I beseech you not to let your long standing hatreds blind you to the menace presented by Gul En'Roel and the Crimson Shadow. Since the election of my administration, the Shadow has escalated its attacks, each one more bold and daring, and the harsher the response, the greater the backlash and the more desperate Cardassians flock to En'Roel's banner."

"What do you propose Premier?" Aluxis asked.

"We need more aid, and better loan terms, and an indefinite suspension of reparation payments," answered Lang.

"A removal of Alliance soldiers from Cardassia Prime would help allay insurgents' claims of a permanent occupation," Thrax added.

"And more beneficial trade agreements to jump start our economy," Urlak chimed in.

"Retreating from your commonwealth idea," Tal'aura asked. The silver haired Trade minister shifted in his seat, and regarded the Romulan senator with cold, gray eyes.

"No Senator Tal'aura. It is the fact that I offer alternative ideas that our sagacious Premier has included me in her government. Of course, I think that Cardassian interests would be best served strengthening our ties with our pre-war satellites, the current political reality doesn't augur such an occurrence."

"The High Council will not be blackmailed into giving more resources to a conquered people." Lorath spat. "You should be thankful that the trefoil flag of our Empire hasn't been planted in the middle of your Imperial Plaza."

"I am forced to agree with General Lorath," Tal'aura said. "The Romulan Senate will view this new round of violence as further cause to reduce the amount of aid it has been supplying. The Continuing Committee had been gridlocked for several weeks following the assassination of Sub-Admiral Danclus."

Danclus, serving at the time as one of the triad of civil administrators in control of Cardassia until elections installed Lang as head of the new republic, had been assassinated three months ago by the True Way terrorist cell; a band of renegades that had been put to pasture by his son Terrence and his crew on the *Aegis*. Glover's thoughts shifted briefly to his son, flitting memories merging with new worries.

He hadn't talked to Terrence in weeks; the last time was right after he had been rescued from the True Way's clutches. But he always kept an eye on his only child through his myriad contacts in the Fleet, often without Terrence's knowledge. At the moment he knew that his son was close to reaching Jaros II for a ninety day stint at the military stockade based there.

The admiral had tried to use his influence to abrogate the sentences, but his pull had floundered as of late, with Hetal'laal'ak and many of the Federation Council members using his department as a scapegoat for the insurgency.

"And the Federation Council likewise has been debating the merits of rebuilding Cardassia while so many Federation worlds are still struggling to recover from the war." Aluxis added. The small man's strident voice pulled Glover back into the present moment.

"Though I am not a recognized authority," Garak slid smoothly into the conversation. "It doesn't take an elected or appointed post to tell you all that

if the Alliance abandons Cardassia it will create a breeding ground for more terrorism and endless internecine warfare that will destabilize the quadrant."

"The Federation Council is well aware of the risks," Aluxis said. "And I'm sure that the Romulans and Klingons are too. But the Cardassian people are going to have to show that they are committed to fighting for their own freedom as we have been."

"I assure you Councilor Aluxis," Lang replied. "The vast majority of my countrymen are as opposed to the Crimson Shadow and other violent sects as you are. But we are still rebuilding our institutions and infrastructure, and don't have the ready means to fully combat the terrorists."

"Well, it's time that you started proving it," Aluxis remarked. "If your administration shows more effort, I will do all that I can to support the continued support for Cardassia in the Federation Council."

"President Santiago's office has always been open to sharing intelligence and coordinating efforts with the Cardassian Security Forces," Hetal'laal'ak stated emphatically.

"Even more so since his poll numbers have been dropping," Commander T'San remarked, drawing the attention of the room, and baleful stares from both Velal and Tal'aura. The woman didn't seem perturbed by the negative reaction. In fact she looked at each person, even awarding Glover with an unsettling tight lipped smile.

"I will have Provost Thrax schedule a meeting with Admiral Glover at the conclusion of this meeting," Lang then stood up, squaring her shoulders. "And I have decided to show the Alliance that the Cardassian Republic is grateful for the support it has received. I've been mulling this for a long time...but I've decided to leave Nimbus III, with Provost Thrax remaining in my stead, and attend the commemoration of the Bajoran relief workers killed at Okpara during the Bajorans' concluding Day of Atonement." The statement caused a current of gasping and raised eyebrows to sweep around the room.

Glover had been surprised that Lang had issued a public apology and used some of the scant funds available to her government to pay for the transport of the bodies back to Bajor. But for the leader of a Cardassian government, even one that had been put together by the Federation and its wartime allies, to actually attend the memorial of Bajoran nationals during the final Day of Atonement. It was almost too progressive, too forward thinking and hoping for the admiral to actually believe. But Lang had just said it. And his respect for her had mushroomed.

"That would be a very gracious gesture," Aluxis admitted.

"And perhaps dangerous," Tal'aura ventured. "There are still a lot of hardened feelings among the Bajoran populace toward the Cardassians, the Dominion War crystallizing them. And to arrive on their planet during a

holiday devoted to remembering the Cardassian occupation of their world. It might not be safe for you."

"I would be under no more, in fact, less danger than many of your soldiers and civilian workers are in Cardassian space," Lang replied. "And I think it will send the right message that Cardassians are committed firmly to peace."

"I can't argue with that," Aluxis said.

"Well, I can," Thrax spoke up, causing all the attention to shift in his direction. Glover paid close attention. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Singleton perking up as well. Up to this point the Cardassians had done a skillful job of maintaining a united front behind Lang.

The admiral had thought Urlak, based on his previous criticism of the rebuilding effort would be the obstacle among Lang's cabinet. But so far, the man had proven to be a fairly amenable and practical sort. Someone not swayed by rhetoric.

Lang remained standing, but looked down at her security minister. Her expression was not disapproving, but merely curious. Thrax took her silence as a cue to continue.

"The situation on Cardassia Prime is still too fluid. Our government is only three months old, and its authority hasn't been sufficiently established for you to make such a bold gesture. There is considerable grumbling among many that you've taken money from hungry Cardassians to waste on Bajoran corpses, and a journey to Bajor will only stoke those sentiments."

"I am certain that Presider Remec, along with the rest of the Presidium can keep things from stirring to a boil if the Premier decides to make the trip." Urlak rejoined. That statement surprised Glover further. In recent statements, Urlak had proposed establishing trade ties with the Bajorans, the admiral knew that Urlak's corporate holdings had profited handsomely from Bajoran slave labor.

The intelligence reports Glover had received on the man bespoke of a deep-seated bias towards non-Cardassians. So, he wondered what kind of angle the trade minister was playing. Perhaps the magnate saw the way of peace was lined with *leks*. The admiral could only hope that other Cardassians could be so selfishly enlightened.

"The Legate, I mean Trade Provost is correct," Garak chimed in. "The Premier's role is not to pander to nativist fears but to force our people to see the hard truths and be redeemed by the experience." Lang smiled at Garak. He former tailor returned the gesture.

"I concur with both Urlak and Garak. According to the Bajoran comnet, the Bajoran relief workers will be memorialized in Dakhur Province a fortnight from now." Lang said. "If I leave immediately, we should be able to attend that service."

"I will inform First Minister Shakaar of your intentions," Aluxis said. "It is doubtful that he would object."

"The antidote of your journey to Cardassia should counter the poison peddled by En'Roel and his ilk, in addition to dominating the newsnets," Tal'aura said, "A cunning stratagem Premier."

"Thank you," Lang paused for a beat. "I think."

"It is much deserved," the Senator replied. Glover imagined that the Romulan was looking at him when she said it, but when he glanced in her direction, she took a marked interest in patterns knit into General Velal's uniform.

"Meeting adjourned," Aluxis stood up from his seat, the rest of the table following suit.

As the small group headed toward the door, Glover sensed the young Romulan looking at him again, but before he could confirm it, Security Provost Thrax clamped a hard, scaly hand over his shoulder. "We have much to discuss."

"Of course," the admiral said, looking at Thrax, but thinking about the curious Senator Tal'aura.

Mining Facility Bomos Crolsa System (The Former Cardassian Union)

The commotion outside his cell's door woke Lt. Jonin Faltyne from his usual dreams of drowning. His antennae twitched as he was pulled from the malevolent cyan seas surrounding the Cirensa islands.

They can't break me, he thought, so now they've finally come to kill me. He had thought the same thing each day after his capture by Cardassian militants on Lakesh. They had intercepted the fishing trawler that had rescued him from the rough seas, after he had escaped the insurgents' lethal assault on his starship, the *Phoenix*.

Beaten, tortured daily, subjected to excruciating psychological distress, Faltyne's sturdy Andorian constitution in addition to his Starfleet tactical training had made him nearly impervious to their attempts to break his will, to turn him into a mouthpiece for their anti-Federation propaganda.

It had been months, at least, or so he gathered that he had withstood them, refusing to give them information, no matter whatever strange devices and probes the terrorists injected or poked him with.

After the terrorists had murdered his crewmates and turned his captain into a vegetable with a biological weapon, Faltyne had promised the

deities of his ancestors that he would rather rip the antennae from his forehead than disgrace the memories of his fallen compatriots.

But for at least several days he had not received a visit, his tormentors leaving him alone in the dark, dank cell, his body covered in filth and his own waste.

He held his breath as the heavy footfalls drew closer. Ashamed, he closed his eyes as the loud, heated voices neared his door...and opened them again as they passed by.

The *ladarium*-laced walls and door to his prison muffled the voices, but the vehemence coiled in the words made the former Operations Officer smile. Perhaps the insurgency was no longer on the upswing...

"Even good gamblers lose sometimes," Captain Awokou would often inform his crew.

"Here's to one of those times," Jonin muttered through cracked lips, as he fought against pain and entropy to raise his hand in a salute to the lost crew of the *Starship Phoenix*.

Gul En'Roel turned away from Guls Dien and Sescal, preferring to look at the pocked and barren landscape of Bomos's surface, through the thick, dusty windows in his small stateroom, rather than strangling them both.

The lean, almost emaciated Vaidar Dien had served in the famed Militia 41, receiving two Proficient Service Medallions during the war against the Federation Alliance.

Harika Sescal had even topped that. She was one of the few living holders of the Legate's Crest of Valor for her actions in defending the Betreka Nebula from the Klingons.

Just the thought that Betreka, a sterling symbol of Cardassian pride, of Cardassian ascendance, now residing in the befouled clutches of the knobby headed animals, roiled his stomach almost as much as news of the failed attack on Starbase 375.

He had not authorized it, and he wanted to know who had. Dien and Sescal were his two most trusted lieutenants, if not personally loyal to him, both were committed to Cardassian self-determination, which was good enough for En'Roel. The gul had no delusions of godhood, unlike his predecessor.

"Let's try this again," En'Roel stopped pretending that the gray rocks and pitiless stars above them held even his remote interest. "I did not authorize Liantha to attack that starbase, so who did?"

"I don't know," Dien said. "My cell has followed your commandment to cease attacks after Lakesh. I agreed with your reasoning that that attack alone was enough to fracture the tenuous Klingon and Federation concordance over

how Crolsa should be administered. But I do recall that Gul Sescal had a different opinion.”

Here we go again, En’Roel rolled his eyes. The two had been arguing since they left the small space port shielded beneath a holographic blind.

Sescal glowered, her hooded eyes almost become lost in the folds of her scrunched face. The sculpted woman took a few moments to collect herself, expelling her anger in a long and loud gush before she spoke. “It is true that I disapproved of your order to not press our advantage after *Ohombri-Var* and *Lakesh*, and I didn’t hide my displeasure while we were in council. But I have held my soldiers at bay.”

En’Roel put on his most winning smile before as he back stepped to the seat behind his desk, never breaking eye contact with his subordinates as he sat down. “Of course I believe you both. We haven’t always agreed on how to conduct this war, but I have no doubt that your hearts are Cardassian. It’s not you that I am worried about.” He gestured for the two to take the seats planted in front of his cluttered desk.

“Then who?” Dien asked, quickly sitting down.

“Yes, who?” Sescal’s voice was pregnant with menace as she plopped into the other chair beside Dien.

En’Roel poured himself a draught of *kanar* from the carafe on his desk. The costly, crystalline bottle had been a gift from his wife *Letras*, the only thing he hadn’t atomized or smashed after the woman had divorced him in absentia and spoken out publicly against his war against the occupiers. His only relief whenever thoughts of her slithered into his mind were that he hadn’t polluted his bloodline by siring children with the elitist turncoat.

“Urlak,” En’Roel grumbled. “I think Legate Urlak was behind this.”

“Why would you think that?” Sescal asked. Despite her military prowess, the woman was quaintly oblivious to many of the machinations the Trade Provost had employed to try to retain leadership over the insurgent movement.

In fact En’Roel secretly believed that the wily old *wompat* had also been behind K’Vada rousting him from *Lakesh*, but he had never voiced his suspicions, afraid that it might splinter the Shadow.

But Sescal still naively believed that they were all on the same side, fighting the same adversary. En’Roel gave her a smile, pitying smile.

I had once been like you, he thought. But he said, “Urlak’s tentacles are still rooted in this movement, no matter if he becomes Lang’s foot scraper next. This botched attack not only left one of our operatives in the hands of the enemy, but it will doubtlessly rekindle the once ebbing vengefulness of the Federation’s citizenry. I want you to root out Urlak’s confederates in the Shadow. Do it quietly. If we excise this cancer before it spreads we might be able to turn this debacle to our advantage.”

"What about Drazon?" Dien asked. "If they have her, they might be able to extract information from her. Not even an Obsidian Order agent can withstand a Klingon mind-sifter."

"I'm sure that the reports that Drazon is still alive are Alliance disinformation," En'Roel sniffed. "The Order inserts cranial implants that can emit lethal toxins. I'm sure they think if we believe Liantha is still alive that it will rattle us, and cause us to make a mistake."

"But shouldn't we be concerned?" Sescal pondered.

"I'm more worried about the *voles* in our midst Harika," En'Roel replied. "And even if one of our cells fall, we are spread throughout the Crolsa system. It would be impossible to strike a death blow against our movement."

"Unless you wound up in the Alliance's crosshairs," Dien sorrowfully stated. En'Roel mulled the possibility for a few seconds, gazing at Vaidar's stricken expression. He gave a soft chuckle to allay the man's disquiet.

"That's one contingency plan that you don't have to worry about. This base's holographic blind and sensory scramblers would make that devil K'Vada hard pressed to find me again." He grinned, for the first time today feeling truly at ease. "You find Urlak's conspirators and I'll find a way to make use of this unexpected turn of events."

U.S.S. Aegis B'hava'el System (Bajoran Space)

The transfer ceremony had been brief. Despite the discomfort rolling off the man in sheets, Commander Thorpe felt that Captain Glover had been very professional when he announced the transfer of his ship's command to Thorpe over *Aegis's* intercom.

And then in a flash Glover was gone, and the *Aegis* was now his. Still getting used to Glover's ready room, with its throne like chair and the man's equally imposing ebonite desk, Jeffrey felt overwhelmed but he tried not to show it. He also tried not to display his attraction to his new Executive Officer.

"So, what do you think about the senior officer reassignments?" Lt. Cmdr. Aquiel Uhnari rose out of her seat to hand him the padd with her recommendations. He glanced over them.

"Fine, they appear fine," He nodded. "Of course I trust your judgment. In your normal capacity as *Aegis* Chief Engineer you probably know everything there is to know about this ship and her crew. I didn't want to make my appointment even more disruptive by bringing a lot of new faces with me."

Aquiel smiled, the gentle ridges running along her eyebrows crinkling. "I'm glad you have such faith in me. I hope that I live up to it."

"That should be the least of your worries." He checked the padd one more time, raising a finger. "Commander?"

"Yes."

"Your choice for acting Chief Engineer: Lt. Pierpoint?" The Haliian nodded. "When I was reviewing the crew manifest I'm sure that there was another person on your crew with more experience...a Lieutenant Moss?" Commander Uhnari's face darkened.

"You're correct," she said slowly.

"So, what's her problem?"

"She's a Tellarite."

"Well that explains it."

"No, it's not like that. It's just...well, how can I say it? Tellarites have a reputation for being surly, and Lt. Moss has been put on report several times on previous postings and twice by me for her abrasiveness."

"But she is the most gifted engineer in your department," Thorpe replied. "At least that what her service record intimates."

"I would stand by that assessment," Aquiel nodded tightly. "But her attitude could use major adjustments. She doesn't know how to lead a crew, to get the best out of a team."

"But how will she learn if she isn't given the chance. To be frank, your service record was sprinkled with a few reprimands, and my own isn't nothing to cheer about. I say give her a chance."

"But sir, don't you think that we should discuss this after the mission? With me on the bridge, or leading the Away Team, I'm a little worried about Moss's ability to comport herself appropriately."

"Absent your presence in Engineering, I want the best officer in your stead. The *Prometheus*-class is the most advanced breed of ship in the Fleet. And Moss worked on the engines of the original prototype. If anything goes wrong during this mission, I want someone capable and who knows what they're doing down there."

Uhnari sighed. "Okay, I'll inform her of the promotion immediately. I'm assuming that you want her present at the mission briefing?"

He nodded. "Yes." The Haliian stood up.

"Permission to be dismissed?"

"Of course; Dismissed," Thorne said, before nearly shouting a second later. "Hold on Commander!" She jerked around, a concerned look on her face. Thorpe smiled sheepishly, "I just-just wanted to tell you that your other picks were great." Her return smile was almost worth his embarrassment.

"Well...thank you, sir. The meeting will commence at 0300 hours?"

"Correct."

"I'll see you there."

"It's a date." Jeffrey replied before wincing. "Not an actual date...I mean..."

"It's okay," Uhnari nodded sympathetically. "I've spent enough time around humans to learn their idioms."

"That's a relief," the commander breathed. "Please, carry on. I don't want to hold you up."

"You're not." Thorpe could feel the rosy blush on his cheeks. Commander Uhnari seemed to notice it as well. Her eyes dilated before narrowing, and her breath caught in her throat. "Perhaps I should go."

"Yeah."

Commander Thorpe was glad that the ready room had sound proof walls so that the bridge crew beyond them couldn't hear the loud smack he applied to his forehead as soon as the First Officer left.

In a strange contrast, *Aegis's* observation lounge didn't appear nearly as big as its counterpart on the *Soval*, or even as imposing as Glover's ready room.

Still feeling like he was drowning in the larger man's chair and he hadn't even tried the command seat on the bridge yet, Thorpe looked around the table at his new senior staff.

With the incarceration of almost all of *Aegis's* senior officers, the only two remaining being Aquiel and Dr. Amoros, Jeffrey imagined that many of them must be feeling as in over their heads as he felt, particularly the entirely new entrant, Lt. Cmdr. Tristan Curbeam, a Strategic Ops Officer replacing Lt. Donar at Tactical. The security portion of Donar's role would be filled by an in-house selection, a Zaldan named Zim.

The slick coiffed Zim also was present at the table, sandwiched between Ensigns Lomar and Zene, the respective temporary Ops and Flight Control Officers. On the other side of the table sat Amoros, Aquiel, and Lt. Moss.

The smallish room was fraught with tension. The news about the deadly attack on Starbase 375 had come over subspace a little over two hours ago. Nearly two hundred dead and almost a thousand injured. Thorpe was certain that the death toll would escalate. *Just like Lakesh...*

He grimaced, phantom pain lancing his body. The commander still didn't know how he had survived the explosions that rocked the refugee camp, caused by genetically altered bats he would later learn while recuperating aboard the *Soval*.

Over three dozen soldiers and civilians had died in the assault, hundreds more at the KDF citadel. He learned that militants had strafed both

the camp and the citadel after the bats had set both on fire, mowing down anything in their path, whether they were Cardassian or not.

T'Shanir had fortunately survived the attack, but the Cardassian medic Hizeal and the child he had sought assistance for had not. Captain T'Prea had informed him that the dead had been vaporized to prevent a pestilence outbreak.

He was glad he had been unconscious for that because he didn't believe he could've given that order. Which Thorpe now found ironic because Adm. Shanthi had plucked him from the *Soval* when the ship docked at Starbase 375 to lead a mission that required severe decisiveness.

"Why me?" he had asked from his biobed, the burn marks covering most of his body not fully faded.

"Because you know how to follow orders," Shanthi had stated bluntly, pausing a second. "And I want someone who for this mission who won't think outside the box. This has to be a precision extraction, no need for self-aggrandizing actions."

"Oh." The commander had replied, still remembering the sting of the Fleet Admiral's backhanded compliment. "I aim to please." He had tried to make light of her assessment.

"What?" The gelid woman had asked; her brow furrowing. Then, to his surprise, the stiff woman had actually smiled, and gently squeezed his shoulder. "I think you're going to work out just fine Mr. Thorpe."

I hope so, Jeffrey thought/prayed to/for himself. He squared his shoulders and exhaled, wishing that the rest of the crew could do the same, but the anger in the room was thick and palpable. The vengeful mood circled like a cloud over the gathering.

Thorne cleared his throat. All eyes turned towards him. "Though Captain Glover introduced me to you via the ship's intercom, I would like to formally introduce myself: I'm Commander Jeffrey B. Thorpe, and I am now the *Aegis's* commanding officer." He paused, allowing the reality of it to settle over the command staff.

The commander was pleased to see no hard expressions or displeased looks. "For the sake of time, I'll forgo having you all go down the line and telling me a little something about yourselves. I've already reviewed your personnel files, and I'm very approachable in the mess hall." He inhaled a gulp of air. "Now, let's get down to business. Mr. Curbeam?"

Curbeam, a lithe man with charcoal colored skin and hair tied severely into neat black cornrows, leaned forward. The ritualistic looking scars adorning both of his cheeks gave an intimidating cast to his face. He cracked the knuckles on his long, thick fingers before getting up from his seat and approaching the small view screen behind Thorpe's seat.

Shanthi hadn't told Jeffrey much about the man whom she had originally proposed to serve as his XO. His highly classified dossier had noted his last assignment as commander of the *Huascar*, a small *Saber*-class vessel during the war. Before that, Curbeam had worked with Starfleet Intelligence in the former Demilitarized Zone separating Federation and Cardassian space. Everything else was omitted from the man's file.

And that had been part of the reason Thorpe had even surprised himself by standing firm against the Fleet Admiral. The man's obscure, shady past, with the insinuated ties to Starfleet Intelligence made Jeffrey uneasy.

Plus, the commander felt it would be more beneficial to ease his transition if he had Commander Uhnari, who had been serving as acting CO after *Aegis* had returned to DS9.

The dazzling technological sophistication of the tactical cruiser, with its regenerative shields, ablative armor, and multi-vector assault mode demanded that an officer familiar with its systems sat at his side, if not in the captain's chair.

The mission before them would be even riskier with two novices at the helm. And Shanthi had merely scowled when Thorpe had asked her why she wanted him in command instead of Curbeam. There was obviously something about the man that gave her pause. Thorpe turned half way in his seat, his attention divided between Curbeam and the rest of the crew.

The Lt. Commander activated the tiny screen. When it blinked on, most of the senior staff gasped at the image of a trussed Ferengi, bound to a chair in the middle of a stark, harshly lit room. His bulbous head was discolored with bruises and ochre-hued face drenched with perspiration, and his prominent lobes were swollen and distended.

"This is DaiMon Inish, a reputed weapons merchant that has supplied several Cardassian terrorist organizations and Son'a holdouts."

"Why is that man bundled," Zim paused for a beat, "like a pig?" Moss snorted, opening her mouth to retort before Uhnari silenced her with a loud shushing noise.

"Is it truly necessary to treat the DaiMon that way?" Amoros asked; his deep voice filled with compassion. Curbeam frowned, his face becoming even harder.

"This...*Ferengi* is in league with our enemies." Despite Curbeam's tough appearance, his voice was rich and musical, a vestige of Caribbean forebears. "He's one of the last people who deserve our pity...or our mercy."

"Don't you think that's a little harsh, presumptuous even?" Uhnari spoke up, voicing what Thorpe was thinking. But he had held back, forcing himself into a more hands off role, allowing his crew to come to their own conclusions, just like he had on the *Degra*.

"Inish's vessel was captured during a routine patrol by the *Starship Bluford*. The cargo holds of his vessel were brimming with weapons bound for Cardassian space. The Ferengi proved very amenable to interrogation."

"I bet so," Uhnari quipped, her expression souring. Curbeam pressed another button. A gigantic, craggy asteroid replaced the image of Inish.

"This is Bomos, a semi-operational mining facility located at the rim of the Crolsa system. Inish claims that Gul En'Roel has been using Bomos as his base of operations after being driven from Lakesh."

"Semi-operational?" Moss asked.

"Yes," Pitcairn answered, without elaborating.

"Bomos continues producing *ladarium* and other precious metals vital to rebuilding the Cardassian economy." Thorpe finally waded into the conversation. "In fact, the *Soval* visited the outpost several times after K'Vada set roots down on Lakesh, providing protection for freighters carrying the stuff. I can't believe that was right under our noses and not one of the Cardassian miners said one word."

"The miners might not have had much choice," Uhnari suggested. "I'm sure that En'Roel appealed to their desire for to keep breathing along with their Cardassian patriotism."

"This information has come from a prisoner under duress," Zim pointed out. "So it might not be correct."

"Starfleet Intelligence believes it is," Curbeam countered. "Enough to send *Aegis* to investigate Inish's claim and to procure En'Roel if he is at the base by any means necessary."

"So, does the outpost have any defensive systems?"

"En'Roel's base is on the opposite side of the asteroid, away from the mining sector. According to Inish, it is protected by System-5 disruptor embankments, transporter scramblers, a holographic blind and standard shielding. He didn't have the shield modulation frequency unfortunately. But owing to *Aegis's* unique technology, the gul is going to open his doors willingly for us."

"Oh?" Zim's question was loaded with skepticism.

"Lt. Moss?" Curbeam ventured. Thorpe swiveled around to gaze at the Tellarite. The woman ran a stubby hand over her coarse mud brown hair, her snout twitching with reluctance.

"Commander Curbeam and I have outfitted the ship's outer hull with multi-spatial emitter nodes."

"What?" Both Thorpe and Uhnari said at the same time, but Jeffrey was glad he hid his surprise better than the Haliian. Suppressing his anger, however, was another matter.

"Commander Curbeam why wasn't I informed about this sooner?"

"I know that you were familiarizing yourself with this ship's system and crew. I knew that Lt. Moss was capable and that time was of the essence."

"And Moss, you felt no need to inform Commander Thorpe or myself?" Uhnari asked. The Tellarite shrugged.

"Commander Curbeam is a senior officer," she grumbled. "He ordered and I obeyed. That hasn't happened often. I thought you would be pleased."

"Well, I'm not," Jeffrey replied. "That's not how things are going to run around here. You got that Commander Curbeam?" He stared the man down until the Strategic Ops officer finally shifted his eyes back to the screen.

"Understood," the corn-rowed man replied, with a constricted voice.

"Carry on."

"The emitter nodes will enable the *Aegis* to take on the appearance of a Ferengi marauder *Greel* and the elaborate array of holo-projectors spread throughout the ship will allow us to people the bridge with holographic Ferengi that should be able to withstand the scrutiny of insurgent sensors. And even if it isn't, *Aegis* has enough weapons to atomize the asteroid if En'Roel proves to be on it?"

"I'm not an assassin." Thorpe said stonily.

"I'm not asking you to be," Curbeam replied. "But we do have our orders. En'Roel is to be neutralized. One way...or the other."

"What about the power output for this multi-emitter? Or masking our warp signature?" Uhnari asked. *You can take the engineer out of Engineering...* Jeffrey thought.

"The emitter nodes have already been integrated into the ship's systems." Moss answered. "When they are activated only secondary systems will be affected. Assuming that the nodes will not stay on long, there shouldn't be a significant power drain. The masking of the warp system to match that of a *D'Kora*-class ship awaits the commander-Captain's command," Moss nodded in Thorpe's direction. He nodded back.

"As soon as this meeting is over, I want you to get on that ASAP Lieutenant, the sooner the system is up and running the better," he paused. "Now, did this DaiMon Inish volunteer a layout of this base?"

Curbeam grimaced. "Unfortunately Inish had never been granted access into En'Roel's lair. They conducted business via subspace and transporter."

Jeffrey leaned back in Glover's chair. "I assume you've also developed a plan to storm the base and picked out an Away team to carry it out."

"Yes sir I have. With your permission I would like to schedule a meeting with them at 1400 hours."

"That's fine by me...so long as you include Commander Uhnari. She'll be leading the Away Team."

"Excuse me?" Curbeam's voice was glacial.

"Commander Uhnari will be leading the Away Team," Thorpe reiterated. "That is standard Starfleet procedure."

"But sir...this is a mission that requires the most delicate execution. Commander Uhnari is an engineer." Moss grumbled, and Aquiel shot up in her seat, a retort forming on her lips.

"And you're telling me that keeping the warp core stable and functioning doesn't require delicacy and attention to detail?" Thorpe said quickly to stave off Uhnari's eruption.

"Well...no, I'm not...saying that." Curbeam said slowly, tripping over his words. "It's just..."

"It's just that she'll meet with you, actually you will meet with her." Jeffrey looked into Aquiel's flashing dark eyes. "Is 1400 hours fine with you?"

"Yes." She curtly nodded.

"All right, meeting's adjourned." Thorpe said. As the senior staff rose from their seats, he called out. "I want both Commanders Uhnari and Curbeam to meet with me as soon as your tactical meeting has concluded."

Jeffrey felt Curbeam's eyes on his back, but he ignored it. He rushed to catch up with the vacating Uhnari. "Commander?" The woman slowed her pace.

"Yes." Her smile was dazzling.

Thorpe took a deep breath before responding. "Where's your mess hall?"

"The Oasis?" She asked, her eyes twinkling with devilment. "I'm headed that way myself. Care to join me?"

I would want nothing more, Thorpe thought. But he said. "Lead the way Commander."

CHAPTER FIVE

Mining Facility Bomos

Gul Javin En'Roel was happy for the interruption. He slid Preloc's *Meditations on a Crimson Shadow* to the side. The thick tome foretelling a future war in which the Cardassians would emerge victorious over the Klingons had been a gift from the more cultured ex-wife during happier time. Outside of the title, from which he had used to name his army, the book held little interest for him. "What is it Gil Chene?" He asked the young woman hanging onto his door frame.

"Sir, a Ferengi Marauder has entered orbit. The DaiMon...Inish...is requesting that he speak with you."

"Inish," En'Roel rose slowly from his desk, his neck ridges twitching in consternation. "So the sniveling Ferengi has finally showed up with his shipment...two weeks late!" If En'Roel didn't need the weapons the arms merchant peddled he would teach Inish the importance of punctuality.

But with the dwindling array of Dominion super weapons left at his disposal, and fearing a strong backlash for attacks on Lakesh, Okpara, and the space stations he would need all the armaments and munitions he could procure. "Tell the DaiMon that I am busy...and well respond to his request in due time." There was no need to appear eager. The craven Inish knew better than to leave the Crolsa system without receiving permission from En'Roel to do so.

"Right away Gul En'Roel," Chene smiled nervously before running down to the small, makeshift operations center at the end of the corridor from En'Roel's similarly ad hoc stateroom.

En'Roel proceeded to straighten the few items on his desk, mentally counting down the minutes. He then paced around his office until twenty minutes had passed.

Finally deciding to leave his office, he wrinkled his nose as he passed the cell holding the Andorian prisoner. He made a mental note to hose the room and the Andorian down after he had conducted his transaction with Inish.

Then again, he might finally dispatch the Andorian. While Urlak had been in charge he had taken a curious interest in the captured Starfleet officer, determined to break him and use him as a propaganda tool. Despite spending hours, days even, with the prisoner, the legate had failed to extinguish the Andorian's fire.

After Urlak's ouster, En'Roel had partly kept the Andorian alive as a symbol of Urlak's impotence. Plus, many of his lieutenants enjoyed toying with the Fed.

Stepping into the dimly lit, cluttered control center, the walls filled with screens and sensory equipment, not all of it operational, the gul nodded at Glinn-sed Sohail, the beefy sentry at the tactical controls, a Breen made CRM-114 hand cannon lying idly beside him on the floor. Chene, sitting beside Sohail in the cramped room, turned around at the sound of the gul's footfalls.

Though Bomos was En'Roel's current headquarters, he had made certain that it held a sparse contingent of soldiers. The lessons of Lakesh had taught him never to concentrate his forces together in one area, and that no base of operations is impregnable.

Now, even if Bomos was compromised and he was killed, the movement would go on without him. En'Roel wasn't as self-absorbed as he led many of his enemies to believe. Under his direction, the Crimson Shadow could operate in perpetuity, or at least until Cardassians determined their own destinies again.

He leaned over Chene's seat, the woman shifting to the side so that he could look into the small screen. Inish's large, toothy grin almost overloaded the screen's illumination controls. The groveling man bowed quickly. "Gul En'Roel, it's a pleasure to see you again."

"I wish the feeling was mutual," En'Roel riposted. "Where have you been?"

U.S.S. Aegis

Commander Thorpe leaned forward in the command seat, in awe of the scene playing out before him. Even though he wasn't a novice about holotechnology, Jeffrey was still amazed that En'Roel only saw a Ferengi bridge and crew.

The facsimile of DaiMon Inish stood in front of Thorpe, bowing profusely. "I was held up, engine troubles...nothing to trouble you about."

"I'm not," En'Roel said coldly, before smiling. "So, what have you bought with you?"

The Inish recreation stood up, spreading his arms wide. "I have a plethora of armaments." The very life-like Ferengi used tapped a finger on his other hand as he listed the contents of his cargo hold: "*Varon-T* disruptors, phased *polaron* beam weapons, compressed *tetyron* beam weapons, *ultritium* concussion shells, pulse mines, *remat* detonators, locator bombs, spatial charges..."

"No warheads?" En'Roel asked, pursing his lips in reproach. "In our last conversation, I requested warheads. Our warships can't throw tube worms at the enemy."

"Tube worms are quite the Ferengi delicacy, and quite a bargain might I add. Perhaps on my next visit I can bring you several caseloads?"

"I don't eat insects," En'Roel said, "and I shouldn't do business with them either. But of course life is never as it should be. Prepare to transport your cargo to these coordinates. After they have been delivered, you will receive payment." Coordinates inside the asteroid rolled across the interface outfitted to the captain's chair.

Thorpe could see the gul turning away from the screen, stopping when the hologram made a loud sigh. His head whipped around, his dark eyes brimming with both annoyance and suspicion. "Is there a problem?"

"Well...our transporter is inoperable. We will have to ferry the cargo by shuttle." En'Roel looked off to his left, speaking to someone not within the viewer's range.

"Scan the ship." The gul ordered.

Thorpe's breath hitched in his chest. He hoped that Curbeam and Moss's deception had been thorough enough to pass En'Roel's demand. Waiting for the scan to finish, the gul looked back into the screen.

"Ferengi, I hope that you are not being duplicitous. The weapons I have trained on your vessel at the moment could vaporize your vessel in an eye blink."

Thorpe turned in his seat, looking at Lt. Zim at the Tactical Console. The masked Zaldan rasped quietly. "We have the coordinates sir."

"Send them to Shuttle Bay One."

"Aye sir." Thorpe sighed, settling into Glover's throne. The chair sat on a ledge of the upper ring of the bridge, with the Ops and Flight Control Consoles down in the command well in front of him.

Flanking the captain's seat were the chairs reserved for the First and Second Officers. Both were currently vacant. "Normally" Aquiel would be occupying the left seat. His heart fluttered at the thought of the slim, walnut brown skinned engineer.

Focus, Jeffrey chided himself. Now was not the time for wistful dreaming. He had to be ready with a contingency in case Curbeam's gambit went south. And even though he liked to consider himself an optimist, Thorpe felt the icy grip of failure closing around them all.

Starfleet Shuttle *Anderson*

Lt. Commander Aquiel Uhnari clutched the phaser rifle to her chest. *Here we go*, she gulped, as the shuttle *Anderson* lifted off of the deck. Sensing

the engineer's nervousness, Petty Officer M'Lur placed a reassuring paw on her shoulder.

Uhnari mouthed a silent thanks to the beige furred Caitian. Then she quickly looked to the front of the shuttle, glad that Commander Curbeam was finally more focused on piloting the shuttle instead of eyeing her. The man had been staring her down ever since she conducted the tactical briefing outlining the plan to extract En'Roel from Bomos.

En'Roel's rugged face was frozen on the tiny screen hanging above Curbeam's head. For a Cardassian, the man was attractive, reminding her slightly of the late Legate Damar, the Cardassian that had led the resistance to the Dominion.

Puncturing the atmospheric screen keeping air in Shuttle Bay One, the blackness of space poured into the cabin through the shuttle's forward window.

Deciding to combat her anxiety by being productive, Aquiel put her weapon down, left her seat and went to the small engineering compartment.

Unzipping her tactical jacket for more mobility, Uhnari leaned over the engineering console. Moss had tied a multi-spatial emitter into the *Anderson's* systems, giving it the outward appearance of a Ferengi shuttle.

"Is everything in working order Commander?" Aquiel jumped, turning around quickly. Her sudden movement caused Lt. Karla Weathers to step back.

"Didn't mean to startle you."

"You didn't." Uhnari flashed a reassuring smile, more for her own benefit than for the Lieutenant's.

"I just wanted to know if the emitter was functioning properly."

Aquiel nodded, "Come on over and see for yourself." The other woman did, nodding with approval several seconds later. Once Weathers had returned to her seat, Uhnari pulled up information from the shuttle's sensors. Though she knew that Curbeam was monitoring the sensors in addition to piloting the shuttle she wanted to keep their conversations to a minimum. She felt it would be better for her service record, in addition to her blood pressure. She humorlessly smirked at the information that came across the instrument panel. The Bomos hideout appeared to be even more lightly defended than they had suspected. Of course, she realized that the heavy asteroid's *ladarium* deposits were possibly skewering the shuttle's sensors.

That's why each team member had been given a pair of *exogenic* goggles that could see through walls. Uhnari fingered the pair hanging from her neck.

"All right people," Curbeam called over his shoulder. Aquiel looked in his direction. Beyond him, the ash-gray surface of Bomos was rapidly filling up the forward window. "It's time to suit up. Our advantage ends as we're

inside the station's shuttle port. We need to be fast, merciless." *Anderson's* other two occupants, a K'normian specialist and Zaranite ensign, rechecked their projectile weapons before slinging them over their shoulders.

Everyone, except Uhnari was carrying TR-116 rifles. Curbeam had brought a case of the discontinued weapons along with the spatial emitters. Adm. Shanthi had signed off of their usage, as a contingency against any energy dampening fields the insurgents might employ on Bomos.

The almost infinite access the Crimson Shadow had to hi-tech weaponry had been a key reason for their devastating successes. With the prospect of peace on the altar, Shanthi didn't want to take any chances: En'Roel was to be taken into custody or would not be taken alive at all. Escape was not an option.

However, Uhnari wasn't an assassin, and she wouldn't let anyone under her command become one either. She had insisted that each Away Team member also carry a phaser with them, and to use it first, resorting to the surely lethal TR-116 only if an energy field was encountered.

She had chosen not to even carry one of the projectile rifles, taking a phased energy one from the armory instead. Uhnari had been surprised that Curbeam hadn't put up too much of an argument about her decisions. *At least he knew when to give in*, she surmised. The engineer zipped up her jacket, and moved to the front. A blinking light on the console beside the piloting controls drew her attention.

"They're tracking us?"

"Yes commander," Curbeam replied, "En'Roel's hideout is defended by System-5 disruptors. They could rip through this shuttle with ease. In fact, they could even penetrate *Aegis's* regenerative shields and ablative armor at this close range."

"Are you sure this bulldozing snatch and grab are going to work?" Uhnari asked, wishing that she had more tactical experience to be a competent judge herself. Curbeam's plan flashed quickly through her mind: After *Aegis* created a distraction, thrust the shuttle into the bowels of the station, with its phaser banks set on stun for a wide dispersal to take out any guards waiting for them, while the rest of the team would transport to various sections of the base.

"With you leading us, how could we fail?" Curbeam's expression was deadly serious.

"Thank you for the high praise," Aquiel replied with mock earnestness. "I'm going to take your comments at face value. I would hate to have to put you on report for insubordination when we return."

"If we return."

"What's that's supposed to mean?"

"Nothing."

"Oh, it's more than nothing," Uhnari heatedly replied, before getting hold of herself. The last thing the rest of her team needed to see before a dangerous mission was its two senior most officers at odds.

Leaning down beside Curbeam, she whispered in his ear. "We'll continue this when we're done. And we'll all return to the *Aegis*. I'm not losing another person under my command."

"Another?" Aquiel thought about smiling at the man's agitation, but an image of Lieutenant Mercer surfaced in her mind, squashing her spike of demented glee.

A beeping, flashing light on the console interrupted their repartee. The *Anderson* rocked. One of the team members cursed in response.

"It's okay," Uhnari glanced back into the cabin. "They've just attached tractor beams on our hull to guide us in. Everyone get ready." She left the front, and returned to her seat, picking up her weapon. The rest of the team surrounded the shuttle's tiny transporter pad.

An infernal light washed over the cabin as the asteroid's docking doors opened. "Punch it Mr. Curbeam." Uhnari ordered. The *Anderson* rattled again as it broke free of the gentle tractor beams and shot into shuttle port.

U.S.S. Aegis

"Target the disruptor and transporter scrambler embankments," Thorpe ordered as soon as the *Anderson* thrust into the bowls of the mining station. "Fire photon spread on my mark."

"Aye sir." Zim replied with flourish, obviously pleased that action was about to commence.

"Fire!" A fan of photon fire rained from *Aegis's* weapons emitters gouging into the Bomos's already pitted visage. "Status?"

"The asteroid's defensive systems are offline. So are the life support systems." Zim answered with self-satisfaction.

"Casualties?" Thorpe was out of his seat, striding down into the command well, headed for the smoldering image on the main viewer. He was awed by the amount of firepower he had just unleashed. He had never commanded, much less even served on a ship with such destructive capacity.

"Inconclusive."

"Let me know as soon as the picture becomes clearer." He clapped the shoulder of the youthful Elloran sitting pensively at the helm.

"Don't worry Ensign, things are going to be fine."

"I hope so."

Without answering, Thorpe looked longingly at the doors leading to the captain's ready room, sitting adjacent to the helm. He wanted to wait out the rest of the mission alone, so that the crew couldn't see his fear, but Jeffrey

thought it might send a worse signal for him to leave the bridge at such a vital juncture.

So instead he forced himself to sit back down in the captain's chair, and trust in others to do the work that to be done.

Mining Facility Bomos

An instinct honed on dozens of battlefields put Gul En'Roel on alert as soon as the scarab-looking Ferengi shuttle screamed into the shuttle hold.

That craft's engines don't sound like a Ferengi crafts, he thought as his body was already moving towards the exit leading into the rest of his base.

Sohail, who had been standing idly beside En'Roel had barely registered the man's suspicious reaction before the whole of Bomos rattled, rock and dust falling around them. Everything went dark. En'Roel leaped into the hallway, not even looking back as emergency lighting quickly came back on and he heard the discharge of weapons.

The smell of ozone singeing his nostrils, the gul scrambled down the hallway, screaming, "We are betrayed! We are betrayed! Activate defensive systems!"

He dashed by Andorian's prison, his mind focused on reaching the operations center. He had to wipe the station's data banks before he escaped in one of the *Ordis* fighters berthed on the other side of the asteroid. With a *D'Kora*-class starship outside the station, he doubted that escape would be painless, but he was confident that he could out fly any vessel.

His eyes filled with a blinding flash of light as a transporter whine filled the cramped corridor in front of him, blocking his path. Before the being had fully coalesced, En'Roel slid a dagger into their translucent throat.

A hairy beast gurgled, writhing and spitting up blood as it fell against the wall, helped by a rough shove from En'Roel. The gul jerked away from as the alien's prehensile tail sought to wrap around his wrist. He glanced at the creature long enough to identify its species. *Caitian*, he realized. *Federation*, he concluded.

So, Inish had betrayed him, the gul fumed. He promised any of his brethren that had fallen today that Inish and his entire bloodline would pay for his treachery.

Though it was only a short distance from the docking bay to the control center, En'Roel's chest was heaving, and his breath ragged as he pounded

through its door, turning only to activate its door lock before racing to the primary companel. The reinforced doors slammed closed with a loud clang.

Gil Chene was still sitting at the terminal, her back to the door, motionless. He grabbed the young woman more roughly than he intended. "Gil!" He screamed into her face. "Chene! What is our status? Are our disruptors offline?" He paused then, to catch his breath and reappraise their situation. The woman looked up at him with dulled, tear filled eyes.

"Are you hurt?" En'Roel asked, his voice filling with concern. He removed his hands from her, quickly giving her a once over. "Are you injured?"

"Forgive me gul," the woman blubbered.

"What?"

"I'm sorry," the woman wailed.

"It's not your fault," En'Roel said. "The Federation has caught us completely by surprise. All we can do is our loss and ensure that they gain nothing from this." He turned his back to the woman, his fingers flying over an interface.

Growling in frustration seconds later, his impatience getting the best of him, he whipped out his phase-disruptor rifle. He aimed it at the console, prepared to melt its data inside the computer's permasteel casing.

The pistol, with his arm attached disappeared, his nerve endings tingling in fiery protest seconds later. En'Roel stumbled against the console that should've been slag, unable to comprehend what had just happened, shock and agony battling for primacy in his mind.

Chene stood over him, a smoldering disruptor in her hand. "I can't let you do that Gul." The woman wiped the last of her tears away with her free hand.

"Why?" En'Roel gasped through the pain, "Why?"

"It's not my choice, I believe in you, I still believe in the Union," Chene protested as she aimed the disruptor pointedly at his forehead. "But my family, he has them. I don't have a choice."

"Who?" En'Roel asked, his anger dimming his pain. Despite her betrayal, he was furious that someone had infiltrated his organization so thoroughly-*again*-but this time turning one of his most trusted soldiers. "Urlak!" The gul spat, blood and bile hitting the young woman's boots. "That vole is behind this isn't he? He's set me up!"

"I wish things could've been different," the gil whispered. "I'm sorry." Taking deep breaths, Chene calmed herself, holding the disruptor aloft steadily in both hands. En'Roel propped himself against the console, staring defiantly at the woman.

"Get on with it," he demanded. The pistol wavered slightly before the beam lunged from its emitter cone. *Dissolving isn't half as painful as it sounds*, En'Roel thought before his molecules scattered.

Lt. Karla Weathers couldn't help retching as soon as she materialized in the dark, humid room. Her *exogenic* goggles cut through the gloom, pinning the hanging figure immediately in her sights.

Despite the darkness and filth covering the prisoner, the man's drooping antennae gave away his species instantly.

"Andorian?" Weathers gasped, regretting the sharp intake of foul air into her mouth. Covering her mouth, her mind wrapped quickly around the revelation. It didn't take her long to pull from the ether of her memory that several Starfleet officers had gone missing when the Federation had handed control of the Crolsa region over to the Klingons.

This had to be one of them, the tactical officer realized. She placed the TR-116 back over her shoulder, and pulled a smaller firearm attached to her belt. She quickly cut through the Andorian's bonds.

The man fell in a heap. Holding her breath, she wrapped sinewy arms around the Andorian and propped him against the wall. Before she could detach a tricorder also clipped to her belt, the man's eyelids fluttered and he inhaled a large gulp of air.

"Who are you?" He croaked, through cracked lips.

"Starfleet," the woman said tersely, trying to limit the amount of foul air entering her mouth. "Is Gul En'Roel here?" The Andorian meekly nodded.

"Thanks," Weathers said. She smacked the compin on her chest.

"Uhnari here."

"Commander, I've found a prisoner. He's one of ours."

"Is he alive?" The lieutenant gave the man a quick once over.

"Yes sir, but he's suffering from severe injuries."

"Get him to Aegis, pronto."

"The shields are down?"

"Yes. I'm in the operations center now. There shouldn't be a problem beaming out."

"Is En'Roel in custody?"

"No." The commander's disappointment came through clearly.

"Alright. I'll see you and the others on *Aegis*."

Weathers frowned when Aquiel didn't respond immediately. "Yes..." the woman said slowly. *"See you onboard."*

After communicating with *Aegis*, Weathers took a deep breath before embracing the injured Andorian. As the starship's transporter took hold of them both, Weathers thought with relish about the sonic shower in her

quarters. *I should've had the Transporter Chief beam me directly there, the lieutenant thought,* already on the spotless floor of the ship's infirmary before she winced at her bad taste.

II PLANS WITHIN PLANS

CHAPTER SIX

Bajor Dakeen Monastery

Ghirta Dulcett looked out at the clear, beautiful morning and shuddered. *I don't belong here*, the woman realized, quickly wrapping herself in the thick velvet-colored bedding on the guest bed.

Ghirta stretched, a yawn escaping from her lips. Even though she felt like a stranger, she had to admit that the plush bed was addictively comfortable and simple, ascetic décor in her room was a pleasant change from her former residence on Cardassia Prime, and even the spacious quarters she had been given on Deep Space Nine.

In keeping with the new humility brought on by the disastrous wars against the Klingons, Federation, and the Dominion, she had eschewed many of the opulent trappings of her birthright to better understand the misery afflicting many of her brethren.

But one vestige of her past, as the scion of the Dulcett Pharmaceutical conglomerate, had been her quadrant spanning contacts. Her mother's brief service on the Detapa Council before the war had also opened up new markets for her. It was those connections, in addition to the massive supply of medicines Dulcett had on hand, even after the Dominion's treachery that had compelled Premier Lang to appoint her as Coordinator of the Cardassian Relief effort.

Never swayed by the flames of politics Dulcett had readily accepted. She would do all she could to rebuild Cardassia, even if it meant going places where she didn't belong, and feared that she might not truly be welcome. Like the Dakeen Monastery on Bajor.

The monastery was a note place of Bajoran religious study and contemplation. And Dulcett Pharmaceutical's tragic involvement in using Bajorans for experimental drug trials, with its abdominal support for monsters such as Crell Moset, was a shroud that would forever weigh on Ghirta's shoulders. But the rector of the monastery, a kindly Vedek named Sarkin had been so insistent that she remain with them overnight after she had delivered the last payment for the internment of the Bajorans that had been slaughtered at Okpara.

Feeling the ghosts of more dead Bajorans on her conscience, she had relented. And she had accompanied Sarkin as he had brought to a close the eleventh Day of Atonement, a two week long period of remembrance for the

Bajorans lost and changed forever by the Cardassian Occupation of their world.

Sarkin, the favored candidate to become the Bajoran's next Kai, had been tapped by First Minister Shakaar to oversee the burial arrangements of the Okpara victims on the fourteenth day, the latest victims of Cardassian brutality. But the day that would be made even more symbolic by the surprise news that Premier Lang would be coming to Bajor to join in the mourning.

Ghirta shook off her discomfort and wrapped a sheet around her as she went to the room's adjacent refresher unit, gliding as quickly as she could over the frigid stone floor. She was pleasantly surprised by the water shower, the hot rivulets running down her scaled skin erased any apprehension she had.

A light tapping greeted her as soon as she had fastened the green cincture on her darker green tunic, completing her outfit as if she had been observed, and reared in a totalitarian regime Ghirta couldn't discount the possibility despite the Bajorans' hospitality thus far.

"Yes," she said, after clearing her throat.

"Are you lucid Coordinator Dulcett?" The strong, yet warm voice radiated through the heavy wood door. Vedek Sarkin, she realized, smiling in spite of herself.

"Yes...", she ran a slightly quivering hand through over her hair to tamp down any errant strings. "Very." *Stop acting like a schoolgirl*, Ghirta chided herself. But she couldn't help it. For a Bajoran, there was something very commanding about the simple cleric. She reminded herself that she would check with some of her sources about Sarkin's background when she returned to the station.

"May I enter?"

"Of course. Of course you may."

The door opened slowly to reveal the tall, broad shouldered Vedek, the bearded stumble around his cheeks adding to the man's ruggedness. "You look fetching Coordinator," Sarkin smiled. Dulcett couldn't believe her heart actually fluttered.

"Why...why thank you. So, do you."

The man chuckled, holding out his arms as he glanced down at his bulky purple and red robes. "Vedeks aren't supposed to look fetching. We are supposed to be simple, humble, self-denying folk."

"I didn't mean any offense."

"And you didn't give any." The man laughed again before holding out his hand. "I came to accompany you to the morning meal."

"Breakfast?"

"So, that's what Cardassians call it?" The man's face suddenly turned serious, his cerulean eyes boring into her, as if drilling into her soul.

"Well...yes. I thought that's what everyone called it."

"Well..." he drew out the word, his tone deadly serious. "They do." He chuckled again, before grasping Dulcett's hand. The man's touch was surprisingly cooler than she expected. "Come with me before there's not anything left. Prylars, Ranjens, and Vedeks aren't quite the abstaining lot we appear to be. I wish you could stay here longer, and you would learn quite a few other disillusioning truths."

Despite herself, Dulcett wished she could stay longer too.

Deep Space Nine

"What now?" Kira Nerys growled as she pulled herself away from the report she was reading, tossing it atop the pile of papers on her couch.

She had promised herself that for once she would leave her work in the office, but she knew that the stack of reports left on her desk at the end of the work day would only increase while she tried to relax.

And with the *Defiant* en route from Nimbus III and *Aegis* wrapping up its mission in the Crolsa system, the station was left more vulnerable to any insurgents seeking revenge for the failed strike at En'Roel's hideout.

From the last encoded message Commander Thorpe had sent, En'Roel had not been captured in the raid. He speculated that the militant had somehow escaped. And he had requested that *Aegis* remain in system until it could determine how the Crimson Shadow leader had fled.

With En'Roel at large and possibly seeking another target, Deep Space Nine, now the closet operational Federation starbase, center, and symbol of the Cardassian relief effort, Kira hadn't even wanted to leave her office or the Operations Center.

But Dr. Bashir had evoked his medical authority when he had refused to give her additional stimulants, and he had consigned her to her quarters until she could get some rest. She had forced herself not to protest, her voice strained as she had tried to argue that the highest ranking officer left aboard the station was Lt. Okala Lahn, a member of the Bajoran militia in good standing, but the woman was a Science Officer. She wasn't ready for command.

"Jadzia had been a Science Officer," Bashir had replied. *"Would you say the same about her?"*

"Okala's not Jadzia," the colonel had snapped. *"The comparison's unfair."*

"We'll never know until she gets a chance, and she will get one today."

The young medic had been adamant, and Kira had finally relented.

The door chimed again. "Keep your shirt on," Kira mumbled. When she reached the door, she punched the release. "What," she started, shock clogging her vocal cords as her mind sparked with recognition.

The Cardassian woman smiled; her teeth bright against thin, blackened lips. Kira had seen this woman before....years ago. The Obsidian Order had kidnapped her, altered her, attempting to deceive her into believing that she wasn't a Bajoran, but was really a Cardassian, a spy named Illiana Ghemor. An agent of the Order surgically altered to infiltrate the Bajoran resistance, the only daughter of Cardassian legate Tekeny Ghemor.

It had all been a cruel, elaborate ruse to expose Tekeny Ghemor as a dissident. Ghemor had turned out to be a man of honor, who had risked all to help Kira, whom he had first thought was his daughter to help her escape from the Order.

And even after discovering the truth, Ghemor had maintained a paternal presence in his life, even sharing the intimate *Shri-tal*, a Cardassian tradition that passed on information about Ghemor's enemies, on his death bed.

In her Cardassian guise, Kira had looked almost like the woman standing in her doorway. "Sister," the woman's smile widened, but her eyes were glacial.

Before Kira could respond, she heard the rustle of cloth and the flash of metal. Her body convulsed as a fist of energy hit her chest, hurling her back into the room. Now wrapped in a glove of pain, she didn't even feel the hitting the floor beneath her. But even through her agony, Kira felt the cold shadow falling over her from above.

Her Cardassian double leaned down, whispering into her ear. "We have much to discuss...starting with your authorization codes, and then our father's *Shri-tal*."

USS Defiant Nimbus System (Federation Space)

Elim Garak's smile appeared genuine when he stepped off the transporter pad. "It's been a long time since I've been aboard this fine vessel," he remarked taking in the small, utilitarian transporter room as if it were a Hebitian treasure vault.

Commander Ousanas Dar bowed stiffly before gesturing at the room's open door. "Please accompany me to the ready room."

"The ready room? Is that a new addition? I don't ever recall Captain Sisko or Colonel Kira availing themselves of a ready room. Almost all their business was conducted upon the bridge."

"Something tells me that you are more than aware that this ship sports a ready room," Dar regarded the former spy with a cynical smirk. "I'm also sure that you know more about this ship's systems than just about anyone currently serving aboard it...with the exception of Chief Engineer Nog."

"I'm flattered that you would consider that my knowledge of this fine vessel rivaled that of its valued Chief Engineer, but I can assure that I only traveled upon this vessel sparingly, always as a guest."

"And always as a spy," Lt. Daneeka interjected, impatient with the verbal fencing Cardassians like Garak and Romulans like Dar seemed to enjoy ad nauseam.

Still smiling, Garak regarded her with hooded eyes. "I take it that Lieutenant Daneeka will be joining us in the ready room."

"You're correct," Dar answered.

"I'm getting the distinct impression that you didn't request my presence here for a social visit."

"Correct again."

"I assure you that I probably won't be of much help to you."

"How can you say that Mr. Garak?" Daneeka needled the seemingly addled man, unable to resist. "You don't even know what we want to talk to you about." She clutched the Cardassian's elbow. He looked at her hand with distaste but didn't attempt to remove it.

"Are you sure you're not escorting me to the brig instead of the ready room?"

"Why would we need to do that," Dar replied. "That's no way to treat a guest."

USS Defiant Ready Room

"Ah, the plot thickens," the smile remained on Garak's face but no longer resided in his eyes. "Captain Singleton, a pleasure to meet your acquaintance again." He gave a curt bow.

"Save it Mister Garak," Singleton said, refusing to stand in order to greet the Cardassian. Instead the lanky man leaned back in the chair normally occupied by Dar. Ousanas frowned at how easy the man had planted himself in his seat, as well as had taken over his ready room. He had never liked Intelligence types, and both the Romulan and Federation varieties seemed more similar than not at times.

"So, what is the purpose of this impromptu meeting?"

"Direct, hmmm," Singleton replied. "You've changed Mr. Garak. Your dossier described you as a man who loved verbal gymnastics."

"Don't believe everything you read Captain. However, it does appear that you might suffer from such an affliction, so may I sit down?"

"Of course," Singleton glanced at Commander Dar. Dar immediately grabbed the back of the seat facing his desk, pulling it out slightly for Garak.

"Why thank you Commander Dar. And however the rest of the Quadrant feels about Romulans, I can assure you that I am not in that number."

"Thank you," Dar replied stiffly. "I think."

Singleton smiled, his smile even less sincere than Garak's. "Lt. Daneeka, you're dismissed." Even though Singleton was the ranking officer aboard, the Bolian female shot Dar a quick look. The Romulan nodded.

"Aye sir." The Security Officer replied, turning crisply on her heel before exiting. After she was gone, Singleton looked at Dar.

"Commander Dar, please take a seat as well."

"I would prefer to stand sir."

Singleton shrugged. "As you wish, it is your office after all." The captain got out of Dar's chair and walked over to the tiny office's replicator alcove. He tapped in instructions, and then said, "*Karvino juice*, chilled." Seconds later a glass filled with a dark green liquid appeared on the replicator pad. He lifted the glass, admiring its coloring before taking a sip. "Excellent," he murmured before looking at Garak.

"Would either of you care for a beverage?" Both waved or nodded no. Dar shrugged. He padded back over to the desk, taking a seat before he finished his drink.

"Though Nimbus has come a long way, its climate is still a little too arid for my taste."

"The Vulcans in attendance didn't seem to mind it," Garak observed. "Neither did the Romulans." Garak added quickly.

"We just do a better job of hiding it," Dar replied. Garak chuckled.

"Honesty, that's a rare commodity these days." Singleton rapidly leaned forward.

"I didn't think honesty was in your voluminous vocabulary Mr. Garak."

"There's no need for insults," the miffed former spy declared. "We are all friends here. Remember, we all helped evict the Dominion from the Alpha Quadrant."

"How could I forget," Singleton replied. "We lost a lot of good people against yours and the Dominion."

"Captain," Dar began.

"Silence Commander!" The captain made a slicing gesture through the air. "That's an order!"

Dar's hands and jaw clenched at the same time. The Romulan started to reply, but Garak beat him to it.

"It appears that the war isn't over for you yet Captain, but neither is it for the billions of Cardassian lives gutted by the Dominion."

"And the Federation Alliance," Dar whispered. Garak nodded, but didn't respond.

"The war is not over," Singleton hissed. "Not as long as the insurgency in Crolsa and all over Cardassian space is going strong. And I want to know what you know about the insurgency."

"What do you mean-what *I* know?"

"Don't be coy with me Mr. Garak. You are a former agent of the Obsidian Order, perhaps once the greatest intelligence outfit in the entire Quadrant. You've kept your fingers on the pulse of your home region during the duration of your exile to Deep Space Nine. Old habits die hard. Plus, since you are not an officially recognized member of Lang's government, I am certain that you have even more access to information than the Republic's intelligence apparatus."

"And I assure you that I don't. I'm a mere advisor to Premier Lang, that's all. Cardassia doesn't need men like me any more. They need true patriots like the Premier."

"That sounds sweet, but I know better. Starfleet and Federation lives are being ground up in Crolsa and all over the former Union and it has to stop."

"And Cardassian lives aren't?" Garak challenged. "For every single Federation citizen that has died since the fall of Broca's regime, ten Cardassians have perished. As far as I am concerned, the insurgents are trying to finish the genocide the Dominion started."

"So, you're telling me that you don't have any more information than Starfleet Intelligence has concerning the insurgents' leadership, troop levels, armaments, and strategy?"

"To answer authoritatively, I would have to review what data Starfleet Intelligence has compiled."

"Not on your life."

"Then how can you ask me that question in all fairness?"

"Perhaps I you would be more cooperative if I subjected you to a bioscan?"

"That's not going to happen," Dar said, stepping forward.

"What did you say *Commander*?"

"Captain, I am sure that you are well versed in my biography as well. And you know that I if I defied the Tal Shiar, which makes even the blackest SI operative look like a Halkan in comparison, that I don't respond well to

threats, and am not going to let you perform an unauthorized invasive procedure on Mr. Garak on my ship."

"You will if I say you will Commander Dar."

In response, Dar tapped his combadge. "Yes," Daneeka's voice sounded tinny coming from the small communicator.

"Lt. Daneeka, I need you to come into the ready room and escort Captain Singleton to the brig."

"With pleasure sir."

"Dar out."

"What?" Singleton exploded out of his seat. "You can't do that. I'll have your commission for this!" The doors swished open less than a heart beat later. Daneeka, her hand hovering over the phaser clipped to her hip, approached the captain.

"Captain Singleton, if you will accompany me to the brig."

"This isn't over." The captain sneered, but he didn't resist. Once he was gone, Dar reclaimed his seat. It was his first ready room, and he was starting to become possessive over it all ready.

"So, Mr. Garak, perhaps you would be more willing to tell me what you know about the insurgency."

"I'm not sure that I know any more than you or Captain Singleton."

"Perhaps we could compare notes?"

"That sounds like a plan," Elim Garak smiled for real this time.

Cardassian Cruiser Iloja

Six hours later...

"Premier Lang please let me extend my apologies on behalf of Starfleet. Captain Singleton's behavior was untoward and he will be disciplined." Admiral Samson Glover's sincerity poured through the monitor.

Natima Lang shrugged and smiled. "Apology accepted, but it is totally unnecessary. The fact that there aren't more officers like Captain Singleton is a testament to the virtues of democratic governance I suppose. But personally, I can relate to the captain. His treatment of Mr. Garak paled in comparison to the constant threat of persecution suffered by the average Cardassian, or Bajoran, during the dark days of military rule."

A smile spread underneath the older man's bushy mustache. The tension seemed to seep out of him in a flash. "I appreciate your graciousness, but the captain will be taken to task nonetheless."

Lang nodded. "Of course, that is an internal matter. Do as you see fit. These are perilous times, and I can empathize with the climate of paranoia

infecting the Federation at the moment. My visit to Bajor could be a target for insurgents. Let's not beat around the bush, as I believe you Earthmen say."

"Then why go to Bajor then?"

"Because it's the right thing to do."

"Really? I can't believe you just said that."

"Why?" Lang couldn't help but chuckle at the surprised look on the man's face.

"Well...because it sounds so decent."

"Cardassians are quite decent folk...when you don't have resources that we wish to acquire."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"See that you do," the premier replied warmly. "Admiral Glover, I would think that the Security Advisor would be making this call instead of you. Don't get me wrong, I do enjoy your company of course."

"A true politician," Glover grumbled with good nature. "But the Security Advisor was called into a special session with President Santiago. They are crafting a response to SB 375 attack, as well as the assault on Bomos. Somehow the Federation News Service has already learned of it, and is plastering the newsnets with reports of Gul En'Roel's demise."

"That hasn't been conclusively proven yet has it?" Lang asked, a sad hopefulness wreathing her features.

"No Madame Premier, it hasn't. From the last report I was privy to, the *Aegis* is still in the Crolsa system, investigating leads. It appears that several fighters escaped the extraction attempt. It is quite possible that En'Roel escaped on one of them. Command has already ordered additional ships to join in the investigation."

"*Aegis* is your son's ship correct?"

"Yes Madame Premier, but Terrence was not in command."

"I know, I know." She shook her head. "Let me extend my apologies for what the True Way did to your son and the crew of the *Aegis*. Even Legate Tarkon, that faction's former leader found their actions to be reprehensible. I think his strong stand against what happened at Razad Kor has been the cause of several recent attempts on his life."

After a respectful pause, Glover replied. "The situation on Cardassia Prime is still very dangerous. I kept my own counsel, but I am inclined to agree with your Security Provost, perhaps its best that you return to Cardassia. Are you certain that order can be maintained with you away for such an extended period?"

"I'm not sure order can be maintained if I patrolled the streets with a phase disruptor myself. The reactionaries will continue scheming, plotting, and terrorizing whether I'm at the hearth world or not."

"But don't you think that you are reaching too far, too fast with this olive branch to the Bajorans?"

"I'm surprised that a Starfleet officer, an Admiral no less, would say that?"

"Well, it's just, that I," Glover stopped himself, totally flustered.

"Despite all that my people have done to the Bajoran people, many of them died fighting to free Cardassia from the Dominion, and First Minister Shakaar, a man whom would've been executed on sight during the Occupation, is solidly behind providing relief to Cardassia, giving what little we didn't take from them. I wouldn't be much of a leader if I didn't try to show my people that giving is much more satisfying than taking."

"And less likely to generate enmity too."

"Correct Admiral," Lang smiled. "Besides, I look forward to seeing Bajor again, and Terok Nor. I was a communications officer there before I saw the evils perpetrated by the Central Command."

"I've already conversed with Colonel Kira aboard station, as well my Bajoran counterpart in the Security Ministry. We will do all we can to insure that the victims of Okpara receive the attention they deserve without any unnecessary interruptions."

"I have every confidence that things will happen as they are intended to." The human cocked his head, giving her a puzzled look.

"Is there any thing that I can assist you with Madame Premier?"

"No, no, you've done so much. But I do have a piece of advice, for President Santiago. As a recent survivor of political warfare, please pass on that people respect Presidents that defend themselves. He's been leaving himself too open to his rival's attacks."

"Respectfully Madame Premier, in the Federation it is not the policy of the military to wade into political contests."

"I think that's more wishful thinking than reality Admiral. But it is a lovely sentiment."

Glover nodded. "Perhaps this is a discussion that we can revisit after the election?"

"I would look forward to it. You must visit Cardassia sometime."

"I would be honored. As soon as my schedule allows, I'm there. Glover out." After the screen blinked off, Lang pushed back her seat. Standing up, she stretched before going to the tiny view port adjacent to her bed. Each star they streaked by brought her closer to Bajor. *Closer to destiny*, the odd thought popped into her head.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Deep Space Nine Infirmary

"You appear to be experiencing a mild myogenic headache, more likely resulting from all the strain you've been under Colonel," Dr. Julian Bashir concluded, doing his best to frown some sense into his headstrong commander.

Kira frowned back, but then winced. "Are you sure that's all it is Julian?" One of the most pleasant developments in their initially tempestuous working relationship was the colonel's now referring to Julian on a first name basis. It was a milestone almost as precious as the Carrington Award.

"I could perform a more thorough scan?"

Kira waved away the suggestion. "I don't have time for that. I've got to make sure everything is ready for Premier Lang's visit. The station is bustling with visitors and onlookers, eager for a glimpse at her. Even Shakaar is coming up to greet her. Why she had to insist on visiting DS9 first is beyond me!" She huffed, throwing up her hands.

"Homesickness, nostalgia?" Bashir offered good-naturedly.

The colonel fixed him with a hawkish stare, the ridges on the bridge of her nose crinkling. "If I wanted your opinion Julian I would ask for it."

He stiffened up. "Oh. Of course. Yes. Well..." Kira stuck out her hand.

"Just give me some medicine. I'll cope."

"Right." Julian moved the old fashioned medical cabinet he had placed in the far corner of the infirmary, a gift from Ezri. Just the thought of her, and her considerateness made him smile. Rifling over the rows of bottles, he sighed with satisfaction a few seconds later. "Ah, here we go."

He turned around, shaking the bottle. Kira ground her teeth. "Please don't do that doctor."

"Of course." He handed the bottle to the Bajoran. "Take two of these Paracetamol tablets every four hours, or until the headache resides."

"Thank you." Kira made to get up, but the Doctor waved her to remain seated.

"But the best advice I can give you is to stop pushing yourself so hard. Find time to relax, and delegate. A lot of this staff is new but they are good. You just have to trust them."

"Trust is earned, not given Doctor. Now if you'll excuse me." Kira slid off the cot and brushed by Bashir.

Watching the wiry woman pound out of the Infirmary, Julian was glad, for the perhaps the millionth time that he wasn't the station's commander.

USS Aegis Mining Facility Bomos

"What's the prognosis Dr. Amoros?" Commander Thorpe asked as he looked down at the battered Andorian, the parts of him not covered by instruments and sheets a mass of blue-black welts and bruises. Even sedated the young man's face wore a mask of pain.

"Surprisingly, the healing process has already begun," Amoros replied with optimism, shaking his shaggy head with happiness. "Andorian physiology is amazingly durable in regards to physical duress. Now their resistance to energy directed weapons is an entirely different affair..."

"So, he's going to be all right?" Thorpe hadn't meant to cut the Grisellan off, but he didn't have time for a dissertation about Andorian biology at the moment. There were other pressing concerns on his mind. Namely, that the whereabouts or fate of Gul En'Roel hadn't been discovered. In fact, nothing of value had seemed to come from the mission.

Another Crimson Shadow cell had been routed for sure, but they had been able to wipe their databanks before Commander Uhnari had made it to their command center. And Aquiel had only discovered the headless body of a young Cardassian woman, and the residuals of a disintegrated body. He had Ensign Lomar investigating whether the remains could possibly be En'Roel. It was feasible that the man chose suicide instead of capture, but unlikely.

Thorpe had already submitted a request to Cardassian authorities for a genetic scan of En'Roel's to compare with their findings. The officious bureaucrat he had spoken to quickly told him that those records had been lost in the war. So, there was really no way to confirm the identity of the vaporized person at all. It appeared that Petty Officer M'Lur had given his life for very little indeed. The thought soured his mood to no end.

"Just keep me informed Doctor. I would like to talk to Lt. Faltyne as soon as he is lucid enough." The commander turned toward the door.

"Will do," Amoros chimed. But Thorne didn't turn to acknowledge him. Instead he went to his quarters.

Hold it together, Thorpe cautioned himself, as he paced around the room, tension knotting around his chest. Something wasn't right. Things hadn't gone as smoothly as they should, and one of his people had died. One of *Glover's* people had died. And how was he going to explain that to Captain Glover when he handed back control of *Aegis*?

Terrence Glover didn't have the nicest reputation in the Fleet. He was a man who didn't suffer fools gladly. Chief T'Shanir had served with him, and he

asked her advice about what type of ship a man like Glover would run, and the slight upturn of her lips had given Jeffrey chills.

But so far, the crew wasn't the servile automatons or anal show offs that he had feared. They were very competent, professionals and they looked to their commanding officer, whoever it was to get them home. And Thorpe had already failed his first time out.

He wondered if Shanthi would regret her decision of bringing him aboard for a few seconds before his nervousness about informing M'Lur's relatives of their son's fate drowned that selfish concern.

He stopped his pacing long enough to snatch the basketball resting on his rumpled sheets. Jeffrey was a man who had always traveled light. He was definitely not a pack rat. He held the orange ball between his palms, squeezing it.

It was his one prize possession, and he had carried him with him to the Academy and on every assignment. Before he had decided to join Starfleet he had dreamed of hitting the hardwood in the revived Martian Basketball League.

Even though he had been somewhat successful in starting an intramural league at the Academy, it wasn't quite the same.

Whenever burdens started to weigh down on his shoulders, he often grasped his trusty ball and rhapsodized about the dream he shelved.

The trill of his combadge broke the wistful spell. "Thorpe here," he brusquely replied after activating it.

"Sir, we have a Cardassian ship approaching on long range sensors." Commander Uhnari said.

"What?"

"It's a Galor-class warship. Should we pull our people from Bomos?"

"Not yet. Are they in communications range?"

"They will be within five minutes."

"I'm on my way." The basketball hit the metal wall with a loud smack, but Thorpe didn't hear it because he was already out the door.

"Yellow alert," Jeffrey called as soon he stepped out of the turbolift onto the bridge. The lights brightened slightly in response to the heightened alert. Thorpe stood by the command seat, watching the manta-ray shaped battleship speeding toward them on the main viewer.

"Status Commander Uhnari?"

"The ship is approaching at Warp 6, weapon banks and shields are deactivated."

"Hailing range?"

"They are within hailing range sir."

"Good," Thorpe paused as he tried to remember the name of the person currently at the Ops console. It was usually occupied by Ensign Lomar, or it had been for as long as he had been on the ship.

Now a masked Zaranite ensign manned the station. "Mr. Zewott," Thorpe remembered, more pleased with himself than he should've been. "Hail that ship."

"Aye sir," Zewott's breathing mask made his voice sound muffled and watery. "Sir, the Cardassians have received our hail and are responding in kind." He responded almost a tense minute later.

"On screen." The main viewer shifted quickly from the warship to the image of an intimidating Cardassian woman. She leaned close to the screen, squinting at the *Aegis* bridge crew as if they were insects.

"I'm Commander Jeffrey Thorpe, acting Captain," Thorpe began.

"I know who you are," the woman cut him off. "Gul Sescal, Cardassian Security Forces. I have been ordered to offer assistance in your search for Gul En'Roel."

"I didn't send out an offer for assistance," Thorne replied, trying to hide the annoyance in his voice. Unwarranted rudeness was one of his biggest pet peeves.

The woman gave him a humorless smile. "Of course you didn't. In the new spirit of cooperation, Commandant Macet sent out the order to assistant you as soon as it became aware of the strike. Of course Gul En'Roel might've not have evaded capture if we had been informed of the strike beforehand."

"Take that up with Starfleet Command," Thorpe said. He didn't add the very real suspicions Command had about militant sympathizers and agents being rife in the Security Forces and in Premier Lang's new government. "Since you are here to help, I suggest that you make an all stop, and set up a scan for ion trails. Our search hasn't progressed as far as you are currently."

"Why?" The woman frowned.

" 'Why' what?"

"Why hasn't your search covered such a tiny fraction of space? If En'Roel did escape it is possible that he could be half way to Xarantine space by now, not accounting for the real possibility of Crimson Shadow nests littered throughout this sector."

"I don't owe you any explanation Gul Sescal, but in the spirit of cooperation, I'll tell you that some of my crew aren't certain that Gul En'Roel escaped at all. Our forensic experts are currently studying residual matter left from an energy disruption to ascertain if the remains belong to Gul En'Roel. Perhaps you could help us."

"Have you checked with Central Archives?"

"Yes, but they told us that there genetic registration database is fractured and incomplete during the war."

"Then I don't see how," Thorpe smiled when he cut her off this time.

"I thought you were here to help?"

"I am-*we* are." Sescal huffed.

"Then I'm sure that your medical and scientific staff has more knowledge of Cardassian physiology than we do." Sescal gave a tight nod. "I'm glad we are in agreement."

"Relay the coordinates for transportation, and I will send a team led by Gil Depas." Thorpe looked at Zewott. "Ensign, send them to Away Team's coordinates on Bomos."

"Right away sir." Seconds later Sescal smiled tightly again.

"Coordinates received Commander Thorpe."

"Ensign, inform Mr. Curbeam that he'll be receiving company very shortly."

"Aye sir."

"*Do you think that's a good idea?*" Curbeam's voice crackled through Thorpe's combadge.

"Standby," he said, motioning for Zewott to mute the viewer's communication system.

"You have a problem working alongside the Cardassians?" Thorpe turned away from the viewscreen, lowering his chin into his chest as he spoke.

"*Are you sure they are who they say they are?*"

"Actually, I haven't checked that yet," Thorpe admitted, his voice dropping an octave. "They just arrived here."

"*Don't you think that should be your top priority?*"

"I don't need you to tell me how to do my job," Jeffrey winced as his voice rose; drawing anxious stares from the crewmen at stations behind the command chair. "If Sescal has something up her sleeve, we'll find out soon enough. This vessel can tear her ship apart, and I'm certain that you can handle the team the gul plans to send."

He jumped as a feathery touch landed on his shoulder. He turned to gaze into Commander Uhnari's concerned face. "Perhaps I can be of assistance?"

"Yes," Thorne smiled, warming to the idea. "I'm sending Commander Uhnari back down to the surface."

There was a pause before Curbeam grumbled. "*We have more than enough crew members on the surface. Our investigations are almost complete.*"

"She'll be keeping an eye on the Cardassian team. Her recent experiences with the True Way make her an expert in dealing with insurgents."

A voluble sigh issued from the compin, eliciting smiles from both Thorne and Aquiel. *"If you insist Captain. I'll be awaiting Commander Uhnari's arrival."*

"I do." He then tapped the communication line off and glanced at his Halian First Officer. "Are you ready to troll the catacombs again?"

"Anything for you *Mon Capitan*." She smiled, the gesture pushing back the coldness starting to settle along Thorne's shoulders.

I wish that were true, the thought sluiced through his mind. Thankfully it died before it could reach his tongue.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Deep Space Nine

Nitala'Rax centered himself. He didn't want to open his eyes, leave his enclosure, or make the request, but he knew he had to.

And he also knew that his greatest concern was fear, the fear of rejection, the fear that the Colonel would tell him no again, like she had when she refused his request to accompany the Founder to Nimbus III. And he was certain she would also veto his desire not to be a part of the Bajoran Day of Atonement festivities.

To be constrained by an inferior was anathema to him. If Founder Odo hadn't entrusted him with the responsibilities of representing the Dominion, he would've slammed the Bajoran female's head through a pylon.

But he had restrained him, and further, he had stayed out of her way, even he understood the necessity of being civil among such social creatures, and he hadn't been in a civil mood.

After the *Tsushima* left with Lieutenant Donar aboard, he had remained in his quarters since, meditating and practicing his art. Unable to continue hiding, he opened his eyes.

His quarters were sparse, with no furniture, and he requested that the replicator unit be taken out. Sustained by *ketracel* white he had no need or desire to ingest Bajoran or any other type of cuisine. The sniveling Ferengi barkeep, Quark, had sought to purchase the device when he learned through some back channel that Nitala' Rax wanted it removed from his domicile.

One stare from him had stopped the Ferengi in mid-swindle. At least Jem'Hadar still struck terror into the hearts of Ferengi, Nitala'Rax tried to mollify his sense of ineffectualness.

Kneeling on the bare, hard floor, his posterior resting on his booted feet, Nitala' Rax croaked. "Computer, contact Colonel Kira."

"Unable to comply."

He frowned. "Computer has something happened to the colonel?"

"Colonel Kira's communicator is currently offline."

More alarmed than he cared to admit, Nitala'Rax asked, "Why is the combadge not activated?" He was already on his feet, his limber muscles tensing for action.

"Unable to answer."

"Where is the Colonel now?" The Jem'Hadar pressed.

"Colonel Kira is currently in at the lower level of the station's computer core."

"Are her life signs normal?"

The computer paused. "*Colonel Kira's life signs are within normal parameters.*" Nitala'Rax frowned at himself for almost sighing with relief.

"That will be all computer...Thank you." It was a new expression he had learned, taught to him by Lt. Dax. Despite the woman's profession as a counselor, she had been extremely circumspect about approaching him and seeking out his mindset. He was appreciative of that. The idea of one's feelings being important enough to actually discuss sickened him.

The Jem'Hadar decided to seek Colonel Kira out. At least he could accept the sting of denial if he had a few days to deal with it rather than a few hours.

Deep Space Nine (Computer Core)

Nitala'Rax knew he had nothing to fear, but his instincts told him otherwise. He couldn't help but move stealthily through the darkened, deserted Core. The large central processing system that ran into the room's ceiling and beyond, a blinking, whirring cylindrical tower of *isolinear* datachips and the newer *bio-gel* packs, took on a forbidding cast.

It reminded him briefly of the obelisks the last of the Rishtiin'Pah sought refuge in before he lead Dominion forces in slaughtering them. The Rishtiin had foolishly rejected the divinity of the Founders, claiming that their deities resided in the obelisks they claimed not to have created.

The divine roosts, and the foolish Rishtiin that had clamored to them, had burned as easily as any other that had dared opposed the armies of real gods. The smell of their burning carcasses mixed with the scorched stone had been almost as invigorating as the *ketracel* white pumping through his veins.

He had always relished sharing the tales of his actions on Rishtiin'Pah with the younger brood. But he knew without having to rely on Lt. Dax or another Alpha Quadrant denizen that his recollections would only engender fear and revulsion if he shared them here on the station.

So he kept them to himself, particularly his role in the elimination of New Bajor. He had learned that there was some value to the human axiom, 'Discretion is the better part of valor.'

"Colonel," he called, raising his voice each time he repeated her name, "Colonel Kira!" The fifth call was accompanied by a crashing noise, metal scraping, and cursing. He looked up into the latticework of catwalks encasing the core. His sharp vision quickly spotted a slender, dark shape moving quickly along the walk. "Colonel Kira, is that you?" Nitala'Rax's eyes narrowed as he tried to get a better image of the person. But they were moving fast, erratic, weaving in and out of his range of sight. Something wasn't right. Even

if it wasn't the Colonel, most of the crew knew him enough to respond to an inquiry, or were too scared of him to be brusque.

One of the more interesting aspects of his posting to Deep Space Nine was the criminal element thriving on the station, much of it revolving around Quark. He had never seen such behavior in the Dominion. The maintenance of order was paramount to the Founders. Such seamy behavior was never allowed to take root. But the weaker powers in the Alpha Quadrant seemed unable to stop the gangrenous spread of crime and exploitation; in fact many government officials thrived on it. Nitala' Rax couldn't help but snort with disgust.

He moved toward the turbolift leading to the upper levels, but then decided to take the stairs. For all he knew the lift might've been sabotaged or its open carriage would make him too easy a target. Reaching the stairs, he shrouded, his body becoming invisible to most humanoid ocular senses.

His ears tracked his bumbling prey as easily as if he had attached a homing device to the person. His heart pounding, his pulse and pace quickened as the thrill of the chase suffused him. Nitala'Rax hadn't faced real danger since he slew the rebel Jem'Hadar that had sought to assassinate the Founder at the Kran-Tobal prison.

Even Kira had kept him away from recovering the Founder from the attempt to rescue her from the radical True Way. But Nitala'Rax believed that Eilif, the Vorta sent by the Dominion to assist in the recovery effort had been more to blame.

The Vorta seemed most distressed that the prestigious Charge d'Affairs position went to him, a Jem'Hadar, a mindless brute that only knew how to kill, or so the Vorta believed.

If Nitala'Rax knew how to smile he would as his hearing informed him that his prey was actually rushing to meet him...and then they were there.

The slender, robed figure stepped off the step onto the platform. Heaving with exertion, the person had some type of device in their hands. They moved to a console, knelt before it.

As they raised the device to the console, Nitala'Rax sprung up the remaining steps, un-shrouding. He gave a feral yell which caused the petrified person to bolt upright. Before they could move, the Jem'Hadar was on them, grabbing them with his rough, pebble skinned hands, turning them around. The person's robe fell off, black hair flying from underneath it...

"I know you." He whispered, shock freezing him for a split second.

"Charge d'affairs Nitala'Rax," the woman, a fine featured Cardassian replied. She smiled; her fear an illusion. In fact, Nitala'Rax was now the more unsteady one. She quickly pulled a disruptor from her cloak. He glared at the gun before locking eyes with the woman once again.

"I see that Cardassians aren't the only species with eidetic brains."

"I remember you from New Bajor. But you were different then, looked different...looked Bajoran." She nodded.

"Yes, I *was* Bajoran, at least on the surface. I was gathering intelligence for the Obsidian Order, an organization your people destroyed." Nitala' Rax had been in the Ifaras System when the Romulan Tal Shiar and the Cardassian Obsidian Order had mounted an ill conceived preemptive strike against the Founders. Both of them had been wiped out, a handful of survivors had been kept for interrogation purposes. Just like a few Bajorans had been kept from the New Bajor mission.

"My unusual biology and my admission to the Vorta in charge of the New Bajor assault are the only things that kept me alive. I returned to Cardassian space during our brief alliance," the woman said in an off hand, distracted manner, but her gun hand never wavered.

"What are you doing here now, and what have you done with Colonel Kira?" Nitala'Rax was in no need for a history lesson. Though he couldn't help but remark how similar the woman looked to the colonel. In fact, he had thought Kira had been a survivor from New Bajor but had kept the suspicion to himself. He was certain if that had been the case she would've responded differently to him immediately, unless she thought all Jem'Hadar looked alike.

"Colonel Kira is fine, safe, and with me now."

"I doubt that. Where is she? Don't make me ask again." He took a step toward the woman, but was stopped by a blast from the disruptor. The beam sizzled through his right arm, taking off his hand and forearm up to the elbow. He bit back a scream and forced himself to stay on his feet. His legs quaked and his vision swam as the *ketracel* white ramped up to flood out his pain. He looked as nonchalantly as possible at the stump left of his arm, allowing his growing rage to work in concert with the white.

A vein throbbed in his jaw, as he said slowly, "This is your last warning."

"I'm here Nitala'Rax." Forgetting himself, he turned his back on the Cardassian woman, following the direction of the familiar voice. If he was a weaker being he would've been beset with fear and disappointment to find Colonel Kira pointing a Type-2 Starfleet phaser at him.

"Colonel, please dispatch this butcher," the Cardassian ordered.

"Colonel Kira what is going on here? If you are conspiring against the interests of peace I will have to take you into custody."

Kira's phaser wavered as doubt flickered in her brown eyes. "I-I can't."

"I just gave you a direct order," the Cardassian prodded.

"Odo."

"The Founder," Nitala'Rax grew excited at the mention of the god's name. "Have they given you an assignment?" He was a little disappointed if

that turned out to be the case and they hadn't relied on him first. Then again Colonel Kira had access to the station that he didn't.

"No, Odo sent you," Kira shook her head, as if trying to wake from a bad dream. "Odo trusts you. You're-you're his friend."

Despite himself, Nitala'Rax protested, "He is a god. I am a servant. There is nothing more."

"No," Kira protested, lowering her weapon. "There is."

"Kill him." The edge in the Cardassian female's voice was sharper than a *kar'takin's* blade. Nitala' Rax regretted that he hadn't brought his with him, or any other weaponry. Because he would've planted it into the woman's skull by this point; He had no one to blame for his predicament but himself. He was still confident that the woman would die by his hands shortly enough. But he had to make certain that Kira was well. Odo had taken a special interest in the Bajoran.

Nitala'Rax would gladly give his life to preserve hers because he knew that Odo valued her.

"This Cardassian has done something to you. Hand me your phaser." He reached out his hand. Kira shrank from him.

"No, no, I-I don't know."

"Kill him *now*."

"No!" Kira's scream ripped through the silent Core. The Bajoran sank to her knees, both hands pressing against her ears. The phaser clacked loudly on the platform's metallic floor. Seizing his opportunity, Nitala'Rax dove for it. Before he could reach it, a hole opened up in his chest, followed by several others that tore apart his torso.

Staggering, still on his feet, the phaser just within hand's reach, Nitala'Rax marshaled all of his strength. Instead of lunging for the gun, he pivoted quickly, leaping at the startled Cardassian.

Unfortunately, his surprise move didn't rattle her enough. A searing hole ripped through his throat. She stepped daintily to the side as he crashed in a lifeless heap at her feet.

Lifeblood seeping out of him, his body twitching Nitala'Rax still tried to slash the tendons in the woman's feet with his claws. Spittle splashed upon his face. And then the woman's boot demolished his right eye. But he was too far gone to feel the pain.

He couldn't see, but only heard a loud slap and the woman's harsh admonishment. "Colonel, it appears that you remain somewhat resistant to the Ceti eel. I will just have to give you another. You will bend to my will!"

For some reason, Nitala'Rax was happy to go to his death finally understanding why Odo took such interest in Kira Nerys.

Deep Space Nine (Promenade)

"I'll get you the next time," Lt. Easun smiled, wiping rivulets of sweat from his brow.

"Next lifetime perhaps," Lt. Okala clucked, swinging her *springball* racket through the empty air. "I'm not called the Adarak Assassin for nothing."

"I bet," Easun replied with a mock frown. "So, what are you doing tonight?" The Bajoran Science Officer cocked her head, taking her time with an answer as she studied him.

Easun, a Deltan was used to members of other species gawking at him. There was still a lot of mystery surrounding his species. Others found Deltan society, with its incorporation of sexual intimacy into many of its social interactions, infinitely fascinating. Mostly it amused Easun when others stared at him, with obvious lascivious intent, particularly many of the Orion and Ferengi he had encountered in his travels.

But he didn't see lust gleaming in Okala's soft dark eyes. There was something there, and he didn't know what it was. And it made him a little uncomfortable. The Deltan cleared his throat.

"Well?"

"I'm thinking," Okala chuckled, playfully nudging his arm. The light touch sent currents through him. He blinked, surprised that the touch of a non-Deltan could have such an effect on him. A product of a sexually evolved species, it was usually he that was the catalyst of such reactions.

She continued regarding him silently. Easun couldn't help but begin looking at his surroundings, trying to find an out so she wouldn't have to reject him. The pheromone inhibitors that he regularly took allowed him to bypass the Oath of Celibacy that had kept previous generations of Deltans from intimate contact with sexually immature species.

But he guessed that his other qualities made up for the dip in biochemical potency. He couldn't even remember the last time he had been turned down for a date or assignation.

"I...I don't know." Okala said, drawing out each word. Easun tried to smile, but couldn't. During his short time on Deep Space Nine he had found the demure Okala Lahn extremely alluring, her reticence around him had been refreshing.

The daily springball games the two shared since *Defiant* had left for Nimbus III and Easun had been ordered to fill in for Lt. Blackwolf as Security Chief had been the highlight of his day.

He hadn't cared for the assignment, preferring to be on the *Defiant*. He had been brought on to be the ship's Tactical Officer. But Dar had wanted a more "experienced" hand at Weapons in case the Cardassians or any other

disgruntled party sprung anymore attacks, in an attempt to rescue or kill the Founder they ferried.

Easun had done some work in security when he had been an ensign, one of the guard attachments at the Tholian Embassy on Earth but had never wanted to pursue the field after that dreary assignment. And he hadn't cared much for having to match wits with Quark and the other assorted criminals crawling around the station.

But Commander Dar said the experience would be a good for him, and who was he to argue. At least he had gotten to spend some more time with Okala, which is what he had wanted since he first spied the cinnamon skinned beauty when Colonel Kira introduced him along with Ensign Hetis as the newest officers assigned to the *Defiant*.

He had bided his time, trying to figure out how he would approach her and had been fortunate to concluding a round in Quark's holosuite to find her and Vedek Tonsa, both in *springball* leotards, waiting to enter the holo-chamber for a few fierce rounds.

Seeing the first hint of passion in the woman's eyes, Easun had studied the game when he got the chance, and practiced a couple of times before he made his challenge. And even though he lost, and lost badly, he was sure he would still be the true victor tonight if he had been able to secure a date. Now, he felt like a complete loser.

"Look, I didn't mean to rush things."

"You're not, you're not rushing things. It's just...I just met you."

"I've been assigned to DS9 for four months."

"Not like that, I *know* you, but I don't know *you*," She grimaced, "You understand?"

"I think so," even though he didn't. On Delta IV, relationships were much more fluid. Easun had often wondered what a monogamous relationship would be like, but he had never really met anyone that held his interest enough to attempt it. But there was something about Okala...

The Tactical Officer slid his racket under his arm before gently squeezing Okala's shoulders. "That's okay Okala."

"Please, call me Lahn."

"Lahn," Easun couldn't help but smile. "That's a beautiful name."

She smiled in return. "Thank you. It was my mother's." And they stayed that way for an interminable period of sweetness, his hands resting gently on her soft shoulders, lost in each others' smiles.

"Lt. Easun?" He jumped, his hands flying from Okala's shoulders. The Science Officer looked similarly startled. Their nervousness drew a loud chuckle from Dr. Bashir.

"Julian," Lt. Dax punched the medic in his arm. "Be nice."

"I couldn't help it Ezri," he grinned at her. "It's certainly springtime. Ah, young love. Doesn't it bring back memories?"

"We haven't been together that long." Ezri pointed out.

"But it feels like forever."

"So, are you saying that we've become old hat," the Trill teased.

"No, no, of course not," Bashir protested with a hint of exaggeration.

"Sorry to interrupt," Dax replied, "but I was wondering if either of you have seen Nitala'Rax?" His embarrassment fading, Easun finally realized that both Dr. Bashir and Lt. Dax were dressed in chain mail from medieval Earth.

"No, I haven't seen him." Easun replied.

"We just finished a springball game in the holosuite," Okala's squeaked. Ezri frowned.

"I went by his quarters, and he didn't answer his door. The computer can't account for his whereabouts. Do you know if he left the station?"

"I'll have to check that," Easun answered. "Wasn't he wearing a communicator?"

"Actually he would be required to, as a diplomatic representative," Bashir chimed in.

"But he's a Jem'Hadar," the Deltan exasperated, that declaration being answer enough.

"That doesn't matter." The doctor said.

"I can look into right away Lieutenant Dax."

"No, no. It's okay," Ezri waved away the cloud of concern that had been growing over the quartet. "He's probably just shrouded himself to observe station life without having to deal with the staring and pointing. I'm sure he'll turn up when he wants to."

"It is a pity though," Bashir added. "I think he would've enjoyed this holoprogram Miles sent me. It's the 12th century siege of Jerusalem by Saladin. I think Nitala'Rax would appreciate joining us."

"There'll be other times," Ezri assured him before fixing her gaze, and widening smile on both Easun and Okala. "We really didn't mean to bother you. Carry on, that's an order." Easun felt the warmth radiating from Okala, her light brown skin darkening with embarrassment.

Easun decided to speak for them both. "Thank you Lieutenant Dax." He then nodded in Julian's direction. "Doctor Bashir." After they both left, he turned back to Okala. "So where were we?"

"I think this might be a mistake," Okala said, "I-I'll see you...around." She slipped past him. Watching the woman's retreating back, Easun was disappointed but not disheartened. Something had occurred between them, and he was determined to find out what exactly it was.

But first he decided to check on Nitala'Rax's whereabouts, since his night was suddenly clear. The idea of a Jem'Hadar lurking around the station without a leash didn't set right with him. And he was going to remedy it.

III CHECKMATES

CHAPTER NINE

Mining Facility Bomos

"The more the merrier," Lt. Commander Tristan Curbeam cracked as the whine of several transporter beams filled the dank cavern.

"Sarcasm doesn't suit you," Aquiel Uhnari chided, stepping in front of him. She quickly straightened her rumpled uniform. The beams resolved into four figures. A burly Cardassian pushed through the others. He gave Uhnari a quick once over, his lips curling with distaste.

"I am Gil Ventikan Depas, this is our science contingent," He jabbed in the direction of the remaining trio. He was the only one among them wearing the staple clamshell armor of the Cardassian military.

"Hello," Aquiel put on her best smile. "I'm Lt. Commander Aquiel Uhnari, First Officer of the *Aegis*." The situation was already tense enough without adding kindling to the fire. Unfortunately, the new Tactical Officer Curbeam hadn't learned that lesson despite his long years in the service. It gave her a new appreciation for the laconic Lt. Donar. The Angosian rarely had to speak, his size said enough.

Thoughts of Donar immediately brought Ivan to her mind. Both were close friends, with a long history that Ivan had only glossed over whenever she had asked him about the exact nature of their relationship. It had been one of Cherenkov's many evasions.

Now is not the time to think about this, she told herself, frowning on the inside though her smile remained plastered on her face. She gestured toward the other members of the Away Team, "And these are..."

"There is no need for introductions," Depas cut her off, "just show us where the control center is. We would like to scan the residual remains immediately."

"Of course," Uhnari said around the smile. "I'll show you the way." She walked around the tree trunk, but stopped when she realized that he hadn't moved. Twisting her head around, she asked, "Is there something wrong Gil Depas?"

"I'll remain with Lt. Commander Curbeam," Depas remarked matter of factly.

"How did you know his name?" Aquiel couldn't hide her shock. She looked to Curbeam to provide some answers, but the man shrugged, his impassive face giving away nothing.

"Cardassian intelligence is quite comprehensive," was all Depas said, a ghost of a smile touching his gray lips.

"I can imagine," Uhnari said. "Well it appears you have us at a disadvantage." Depas looked past her to a sprightly woman in brown civilian garb. "This is Daara, our lead forensics expert. She will provide any information you need to know." The woman gave a sharp, smart nod.

Aquiel was impressed immediately by her professional demeanor. "Okay, let's go." She continued walking, with Daara and the other scientists falling in line behind her.

This just might work out after all, Aquiel imagined.

U.S.S. Aegis (Three Hours Later...)

"Sir," Zewott's moist voice broke through the pall of inactivity that had seized the bridge. Thorpe forced himself not to leap from his seat.

"What is it Ensign?"

"We are receiving a hail from Gul Sescal."

"Put it onscreen." The commander looked expectantly to his right. Aquiel looked up at him with an equal light of eagerness in her eyes. The Away Team had wrapped up its investigation on Bomos almost two hours ago.

Since then they had been waiting while the Cardassian team ran analyses with their shipboard computers to determine if the specks of matter left in the operations center were all that was left of Gul En'Roel.

Sescal had balked at Thorpe's insistence that Commander Curbeam and Ensign Lomar accompanied Gil Depas back to the Cardassian ship. Thorpe wanted to make sure that he had his people seeing the results. He wasn't quite ready to trust Sescal.

The emotional scars left over from the attack on Lakesh still were fresh, and he felt ashamed of himself that he looked at all Cardassians a bit more suspiciously than he did before.

Lomar's placid face filled the screen. The Kelvan's expressionless, unusually blue eyes were the only thing remarkable about the alien in its human guise. But Thorpe had heard enough stories about the hideousness of a Kelvan's natural state to prefer the bland fiction to harsh reality.

"Mr. Lomar, report."

"Captain Thorpe." Lomar paused, his voice and face somber. "The remains are those of Gul En'Roel." The commander squeezed both hands into fist, but made sure to keep them off screen. He was certain that Gul Sescal was

standing nearby Ensign Lomar and it would probably not set well with her for him to pump an upraised fist into the air.

Jeffrey nodded. "Good work." He was happy that the mission was over; soon the knot in his stomach would unravel and he could return to Deep Space Nine to await the next assignment, and Thorpe was starting to really warm to the idea of being the one to take this sleek bullet of a starship on a trek through the stars.

Nothing succeeded like success, Captain Michel, his first CO, was fond of saying. And hopefully with En'Roel out of the picture, following so quickly on the heels of Gul Keshet's demise, it might signal the death knell of the insurgent movement.

Both men had been charismatic and the other insurgents didn't seem to possess their skills, tactically or politically, from what he Adm. Shanthi had shared with him. But Jeffrey didn't want to jump too ahead of himself. It was obvious that En'Roel hadn't died in the strike. Someone, more than likely the headless woman Commander Uhnari found, was responsible for En'Roel's assassination. *Why*, was the question now permeated Thorpe's thoughts.

Had there been so time of personal, internal dispute? Had En'Roel ordered the woman to kill him to prevent capture? Or had the woman been ordered to kill En'Roel?

Jeffrey rubbed his chin, his last question souring his stomach. If En'Roel's disintegration had been ordered that meant that someone else was calling the shots; But who could that be? And what would it mean for the Federation and the Cardassian rebuilding effort?

"Commander Thorpe," Commander Curbeam was speaking now, the familiar strain of annoyance in his lilting voice even more pronounced. "Request permission to return to *Aegis*?"

Thorpe grinned sheepishly, his cheeks reddening at allowing himself to grin before the Cardassians, or Curbeam for that matter. "Of course, I'll meet you in Transporter Room Three. And please extend my thanks to Gul Sescal for her assistance and that of her crew."

"Very good sir," Curbeam replied. Thorpe shot up from his seat.

"That went well Commander Uhnari." He said, turning to his First Officer.

"A little too well in my opinion," Uhnari replied, playing the skeptical Exec role even better than Thorpe did.

"Hopefully our luck holds until we get out of the Crolsa system and back in Federation territory."

She smiled. "I hope so too." Thorpe's heart fluttered.

"You have the conn," he squeaked, his throat arid. On his way to the lift, Zewott called out,

“Transporter Chief Fredericks reporting both Commander Curbeam and Ensign Lomar are aboard.”

That was quick, Thorpe thought as the doors to the turbolift opened. Crossing the threshold, Zewott spoke again. “Cardassian warship is powering engines.”

He’s a conscientious one, Jeffrey reasoned, but he would have talk to the man about not peppering the person at conn with needless information. Thorpe turned around to get another glimpse of the bridge and the waxing prow of Sescal’s ship.

It looked like it was getting bigger. Perhaps the viewer’s graphic sensors need to be adjusted. He stepped back out of the lift prepared to order Commander Uhnari to perform a system’s check on the viewer when Zewott waived this time.

“Cardassian warship is on a collision course!”

What? The question screamed through Thorpe’s mind. There wasn’t anything wrong with the viewer at all. The curved bow of the Cardassian ship now filled the screen. *Sescal’s going to ram us!*

“Pull back! Pull back!” Uhnari yelled, her fingers digging into the command chairs armrest. The warship pressed on, devouring the miniscule gap between them.

“Red alert! Raise shields!” Thorpe added. But it was too late.

“Cardassian warship has gone to full impulse!” Zewott said, just before the main viewer exploded, jagged shards ripping through the Zaranite before he was pulled into the vacuum. Several other bridge officers also fed the void.

Thorpe, blacking in and out of consciousness, a searing metal shard lodged in his shoulder, fought the fiery pain, wrapping his arms around the captain’s chair. Above him he could hear Uhnari’s ragged breathing as she fought against the frigid grasp of space.

Within seconds the ship’s emergency shields activated, and its auxiliary life support system quickly reestablished a passable atmosphere.

But Thorpe didn’t recall when all of that occurred. His eyes creaked open at the sound of the First Officer, her voice calling him back from the brink.

“Captain Thorpe!” She fiercely shook him, placing two slick fingers on his neck. “Captain, please wake up.”

Aquiel’s bleeding face came into focus after a few seconds. “Wuh?”

“The Cardassians, they rammed us.” It was exactly the right thing to jolt his system out of shock. Thorpe allowed Uhnari to help him to his feet. His clothing felt damp with blood and his right arm was totally useless.

He was certain the dull gray shard rooted in his shoulder had caused nerve damage, but that was the least of his worries. His legs shaking, he waved away Aquiel’s help now, steadying himself on the back of the captain’s

chair. Through the hole now in the front of the bridge, he could see the pitted ventral section of Sescal's ship. He could imagine that from the outside it looked like the Cardassian ship was an ungainly, cancerous growth attached to *Aegis*; which in actuality it was.

Jeffrey took quick stock of the situation. The few bridge officers that were lucid stood or sat by dead consoles, the dazed expressions in their eyes almost as lifeless as the equipment. No one had seemed to escape injury, and he shifted his gaze from the broken bodies he saw on the deck. "Status?" He asked weakly, spitting out a tooth.

Aquiel hobbled over to the nearest console, slamming both fist on it after failing to reactivate it. With a savage grunt, she bent down on her twisted leg and begun detaching the plate underneath the console. Thorpe rushed to help her.

"Are you all right?" He murmured, but the woman ignored him. She thrust herself into the console, cursing and grumbling, her lower half twitching whenever she ran up against a live connection.

After a few tense minutes, the whole back row of consoles crackled back to life. Thorpe helped Uhnari out from under the station. He latched on to her as the deck convulsed and an ear splitting rip of metal filled the bridge. Both fell back against the command chair, sliding onto the ground.

"What was that?" Uhnari gasped, but Jeffrey didn't need to see a monitor to know what was going on.

"The Cardassians...they're trying to disentangle themselves, going to finish us off."

"We can't let that happen!" Uhnari declared, trying to rise, but her injured leg gave way. Jeffrey carefully propped her against the chair for support.

"Let me take care of that," he whispered. Struggling to stay upright he staggered back over to the console. A few other officers were also making their way to the active stations. *There might be a way out of this yet*, he thought.

Thorpe brought up the ship's status, pushing his fears and concern for the crew deep inside him. It wasn't the time for emotion. He didn't believe he had time to save the entire ship, but the unique design of *Aegis* allowed for multiple-separation of its three primary sections.

Right handed, it took him a few precious seconds to enter the command sequence to initiate the separation, biting down obscenities and bile when the blood red message scrawled across the screen: "Unable to comply."

Thorpe frantically resubmitted the code, only to get the same damnable answer. "Shit!"

"What is it?" Aquiel winced, tears escaping her eyes as she tried to rise up again.

"The multisector assault mode," Jeffrey felt like crying himself, "its disabled."

"Oh no," the rest of the statement was lost in tears. Jeffrey knew that Uhnari knew the same thing he did, with *Aegis's* unique ability to separate into three vessels now gone; the possibilities of any of the crew surviving another collision with Sescal's ship were almost zilch.

The Cardassian had already shown a suicidal streak with her sneak attack. Who knew what she might be plotting next, another spear, or even worse blowing up her own ship, taking out the defenseless *Aegis* in the process.

I have to do something, he screamed internally. I can't let her maintain the edge. Looking down at Uhnari's angelic, battered form, the thought came to him. If he routed all remaining power to the ship's thrusters it would give him enough juice to return Sescal's gesture. If he could spear into the Cardassian warship he might be able to shift any blast radius to where it could do the least harm, especially if he used *Aegis* as a bulwark.

"Abandon ship," his voice sounded hollow as it circulated through the few bulkhead speakers still working. He quickly shut off the accompanying klaxon. "Abandon ship!"

Thorpe shifted his shoulders, the metal stuck in him flaring with pain. His eyes swept quickly over the remaining bridge crew. "Everybody get the hell out of here!" The numbed crewmen recoiled in shock. Aquiel struggled to her feet.

"What are you planning on doing?"

"There's no time to explain," he paused to catch his breath. "Rabin and Giotto, take Commander to the the aft escape pod."

"No!" Uhnari declared, freezing the men in their tracks.

"You heard me," Thorpe's voice dropped an octave becoming as cold as the space surrounding them. The men moved quickly, locking their arms through Aquiel's elbows and hoisting the woman off her feet. To her credit, she no longer protested, but she twisted to stare at him until Giotto had activated the escape pod's door along the wall and both men had eased her inside.

Jeffrey smiled at her before the escape hatch closed. He would carry her beautiful gaze with him into the great beyond. "All everyone, to the pods, take as many injured as you can."

Thorpe tried to help with the lifting and carrying, but his right arm prevented him, so he stood back and tried to take some pride in the grim efficiency of the crew. Even though he hadn't had a hand in their training, he fancied that he did. And he was proud all the same.

After the bridge had cleared, Jeffrey turned his attention back to the console. The gutted ship groaned as he eased it along on thrusters, turning it hard to port before it rammed through the Cardassian ship.

The horrendous rending of metal and the shock of impact threw him to the deck, the shard digging deeper into the meat, sinew, and bone in his shoulder. In his mind's eye he could see the vicious metal slicing tendons and nerve endings as easily as he carved the family turkey during the last Thanksgiving he had spent on Earth, a year before the war.

The thought of his family warmed his heart, until he envisioned the pain that would darken his mother's face when Command informed her about him. But there was nothing that could be done about that now.

After escaping the razor's edge on Lakesh, he had felt like he was on borrowed time. Now, the universe was coming to collect. And Jeffrey Thorpe thought it was only proper to be on his feet when Death rang the door bell. It was only right that he faced the judgment awaiting him for destroying the *Nightingale* standing and ready for condemnation.

As if in prelude, the aft row of computers erupted in a wall of flame and sparks, scorching pieces of plastic, wires, and metal pelting him. He staggered under the deluge, but maintained his footing.

In fact he decided to walk toward the flames. *No use in wasting time*, he thought, proud that his humor could still be in such sardonic spirits on the eve of his death. Father would be proud, he smirked.

The deck bucked and twisted beneath him, throwing him towards the inferno. Strangely enough his skin prickled with cold. *Maybe Hell is more like Andoria than Vulcan*, he surmised, finding something fascinating even about oblivion. And then he was gone...

Crolsa System

The Devil had tentacles. Another cordlike, slimy tentacle slid itself across Thorpe's nostrils, its pungent odor bringing him to full wakefulness.

He screamed at the tenebrous monstrosity standing above him. It was a mass of slithering, twitching tentacles covering dozens of slavering mouths and eye stalks. It wrapped several tentacles around him, holding him firmly within its grasp.

"Captain." The voice was familiar...a mixture of melody and steel. Thorpe looked wildly about him, seeing dozens of haunted expressions, until his eyes found the source of the summons.

Lt. Commander Tristan Curbeam pushed through the crowd surrounding Thorpe and the beast about to consume him. "Captain, it's all right. You're safe...for the moment."

Jeffrey craned his neck, forcing himself to look at the thing holding him again. "Define safe for me."

"Ensign Lomar, please let the Captain go."

"Lomar? That's you."

"Yessss Captain," the creature replied. The voice was faintly similar to the deadpan Lomar's, but much more silibant.

"What happened?"

"I was injured in the attack; it required me to revert to my natural form to begin internal healing."

"Oh."

"Release the Captain." Curbeam ordered again.

"Of course." He gently laid Jeffrey on the deck. Thorpe sat up quickly, looking around him. The small enclosure was packed with crewmen.

"Where are we?"

"*Aeroshuttle Bullard*," Curbeam replied. "We got as many into the shuttles as possible once we heard the order."

"How did you know about me?"

"Commander Uhnari, she told us you were still aboard," Curbeam answered. "Since our ship was faster and had the strongest transporting tech aboard we swung around to pick up."

"Where's Commander Uhnari?" Thorpe looked around Curbeam, hoping to see her among the gaggle.

"We're not sure," Lomar said.

"What do you mean?"

"There were dozens of escape pods that ejected from *Aegis*. We haven't had time to locate her."

"Well do you have an idea about how many people were able to escape?" Geoffrey's voice broke, his annoyance creeping through.

"We don't know at the moment," Lomar replied.

"Right now we're just trying to get enough distance from both *Aegis* and the Cardassian vessel."

"How long before they explode?" Thorpe asked, understanding immediately. Curbeam nodded his head and turned back to the bow of the shuttle. Jeffrey followed. The monitor on the control panel was showing its aft view.

The *Aegis* was wrapped in an odd embrace with the Cardassian warship, an infernal glow pulsing at their jagged point of joining. "The breach has already occurred," Curbeam said tightly. "We've only got seconds."

Curbeam nudged the hefty Lt. Moss out of the cockpit seat. The Tellarite snorted. "All you had to do was ask." Curbeam merely grunted. Thorpe leaned against the back of the commander's chair. The lithe man's fingers moved like tachyon pulses over his panel.

"Priming the engines for warp speed," he said more to himself than Jeffrey. Thorpe balked.

"But what about the other people who can't get away fast enough?"

"There's no time for to save them," Curbeam kept his eyes locked on the instrument panel. "And we don't have the space or towing capability even if we did."

"But," Thorpe let the protest die on his lips. Curbeam whipped around quickly.

"If you order us to stay here and die along with everyone else, then I'll stop what I'm doing, otherwise I would advise you to find something safe to hold onto and let me do my job."

Stung, Jeffrey's cheeks reddened with anger. But he held back the retort and moved alongside the similarly fuming Lt. Moss. He grabbed whole of a handrail running along the ceiling of the aeroshuttle. On the viewscreen, the scarlet glow had consumed both *Aegis* and the Cardassian vessel, and was rapidly spreading outward in a destructive wave, smashing the few unfortunate escape pods caught in its wake.

I hope one of them wasn't Aquiel, Thorpe thought as the *Bullard* jumped into warp, the transition throwing him into the sturdy Tellarite. Moss snarled.

"Watch it," she snapped, before her propriety returned. "Sir." She added meekly. But Jeffrey wasn't thinking about the Tellarite or her attitude at the moment. His thoughts and hopes rested with Aquiel.

Whatever transitory joy he felt about escaping Death yet again had been extinguished. And they would remain so until he knew she had made it through the cosmic storm released by the passing of the *Starship Aegis*.

CHAPTER TEN

USS Defiant (Bajoran System)

"I take it this isn't a social visit," Captain Jarod Singleton drolly remarked as he unfurled himself from the hard cot attached to the wall in his cell.

Commander Ousanas Dar composed himself, drawing in his grief and outrage, as well as his personal animus for the arrogant officer. It wasn't the first time he had wished for the emotional detachment of his Vulcan cousins. Though he had attempted kolinahr once before, he knew he would never approach those heights of control again.

"Something has happened." The smirk evaporated quickly from Singleton's face. His demeanor became all business.

"What is it?" Dar pressed in the release code on the pad by the cell's wall. The energy field that held Singleton in the cell dissipated. The man strode quickly over the threshold.

"The *Starship Aegis*," Dar began. "It has been destroyed."

"What?" Singleton gasped. "How many survived?" Another point in his favor, Dar acknowledged. Singleton cared more about possible survivors than the loss of one of Starfleet's most advanced tactical cruisers.

"We don't know yet," the Commander moved toward the door, not stopping as it slid open automatically. Singleton moved to walk abreast. "Reports are still coming in. The *Aeroshuttle Bullard*, with Commander Thorpe aboard, contacted us less than an hour ago. I relayed the message to Deep Space Nine. Admiral Covey informed me that *Defiant* will proceed to the Crolsa system at once to help in the rescue and recovery efforts."

Singleton stroked his chin, murmuring, "It would be terrible if the insurgents got hold of any of *Aegis*'s advanced technology or weaponry, not to mention any more of our people. They did enough damage to the relief effort parading Jonin Faltyne around."

Dar didn't respond to that. Instead, he straightened his shoulders and looked Singleton straight in the eye. "As the ranking officer aboard I have been ordered to cede command of the *Defiant* to you for the duration of the rescue mission."

Singleton merely nodded. "What about the *Iloja* and Premier Lang?"

"We are within Bajoran space with DS9 only a few hours away," Dar explained. "Command feels confident that the ship is safe enough. And Premier Lang has given her approval."

"With Elim Garak aboard I don't see how Command could ever make that assumption," Singleton's face darkened. "But then again Garak seems to have his fans." He looked pointedly at Dar. "I wonder why that is so."

"I'm sure you already know the answer," was all Dar said. Singleton smiled tightly,

"But I would prefer you to tell me."

"Now is not the time for this."

"It is if I order it," Singleton's voice hardened. "Would you care," that was as far as he got before his eyes rolled back in his head and he crumpled to the floor. Dar removed his fingers quickly from the man's neck. He hadn't achieved kolinahr, but he could give a neck pinch to rival the best *Suus Mahna* masters.

The Romulan left Singleton on the deck as he rushed back to the bridge, his smile receding as he prepared for the grim task ahead.

Deep Space Nine (Promenade)

Lt. Easun walked around the Promenade for a final time, being less surreptitious with his tricorder than he had been before. Though he wasn't sure if the device could effectively penetrate a Jem'Hadar shroud, he had had Dr. Bashir download Nitala'Rax's biosignature into the scanner.

He had been hoping that his makeshift *pheromonic sensor* would pick up his quarry. But so far he hadn't had much luck. It also didn't help matters that the thoroughfare was brimming with Starfleet officers in dress whites, Bajoran officials and civilians, all awaiting the arrival of Premier Lang. He had ignored the looks, winks, smiles, and a few gropes he received as he made his way through the throng with proud aplomb.

Her ship was scheduled to arrive within the hour. Unfortunately, his own interest was tempered by the news of the destruction of *Starship Aegis*. Only the senior staff knew about the tragedy.

Easun wished he were on the *Defiant*, where he belonged, and where he felt he could do the most good. He had developed an almost symbiotic relationship with the tough little vessel's sensor array. If required, he might've been able to give it a few extra tweaks to boost its range. And that might mean life or death for some of the survivors trapped out in Crolsa; Enemy territory as far as he was concerned.

But he wasn't on the *Defiant*, he was still on DS9. So he figured that he could make the most of his time and unravel the mystery of Nitala'Rax's disappearance. Finishing his sweep, the Deltan decided to finally go the one person he should've talked to in the first place.

(Operations Center)

Easun's heart thumped when the lift pulled up to the Operations Center. Lt. Okala looked up from her console and gave him a quick smile. He chuckled a thumb in the direction of Kira's closed door, and the young woman nodded, then mouthed "*She's busy.*"

Easun sauntered over to the Science Officer, checking the glass doors of Colonel Kira's office. Unfortunately he could see several bodies blocking his view.

Not so unfortunately, it gave him an excuse to strike up another conversation with Okala. "Lieutenant," he remarked with starched solemnity.

She smiled again before frowning. Now that he was close to her he could see her furrowed brow and her tired eyes. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she sighed, looking down at her panel before meeting his gaze again. "It's just I'm getting some strange power surges from computer core...the phaser bank subsystems." His interest immediately piqued, Easun moved beside her, taking a look for himself.

"There is an unusual amount of build up in the auxiliary systems," Easun remarked. "Probably a glitch in one of the phaser coil regulators."

"Where's Mr. Nog when you need him?" Okala tried to joke.

"On the *Defiant*," Easun replied deadpan.

"Well I know that," Okala remarked with exaggerated exasperation. "I would hate for there to be a power surge or something and short out the whole system."

"Just take the auxiliaries offline until Nog gets back."

"I just tried that, but the computer is not responding." Easun pursed his lips.

"That is a conundrum. It might require a lot of work."

"I know," Okala frowned again, "And I had really wanted to see Premier Lang too."

"Well, maybe if I help you we can get you to the reception Quark is having for the Premier at least."

"I can't ask you to do that," Okala's sympathetic look melted him. "But it is so kind of you to offer."

"No, no I insist. I am a Tactical Officer, so I know a *little* something about weapons systems."

"But didn't you come up here to see the colonel."

"I did, but this is more important. What I have to talk to Colonel Kira about can wait a few hours I suppose."

"But as a senior officer, aren't you supposed to be in the receiving party," Okala tried one final time to dissuade him.

"Yes, but the colonel will have to find me before she can skin me," Easun chuckled, crooking his arm. "The sooner we get down to the computer core, the sooner you can hobnob with the Premier and I can take my punishment from the Colonel." Okala giggled, but didn't hook her arm in his.

"I'll take you up on your offer," Okala's smile dropped. "You're a good friend Easun."

He winced. "'You're a good friend?' What a terrible thing to say to a man."

(Promenade)

Lt. Ezri Dax leaned closer to Julian Bashir, her eyes beaming with anticipation. Despite the tragic news that hung like a cloud over them regarding the loss of the *Aegis*, she was still as enthralled as many of the unknowing citizens as the *Iloja* came into view.

It was a grand ship, not at all like the typically bulky, artless design of Cardassian warships. *Iloja* was sleek and shining, as elegant and radiant as Premier Lang herself. The crowd watching from the view ports with them or from monitors strung throughout the Promenade burst into celebration, clapping and singing.

Swept up in the tide of emotion, Ezri threw her arms around her lover. The doctor, dapper in his dress whites, smiled down at her. She knew he was doubly excited because his old friend Garak was accompanying the Premier. "This is a momentous day," he said softly, but somehow his voice carried over the cacophonous celebration.

She pulled his face down to hers and gave him a quick kiss, and then looked past him to see if any of the other dignitaries had noticed. Both Ezri and Julian were at the end of a train of Bajoran and Federation standouts, most notably Bajoran First Minister Shakaar, Vedek Sarkin Noma, Relief Coordinator Ghirta Dulcett, and Rear Admiral Monica Covey who had arrived only yesterday from Cardassia Prime.

Covey was the driving force behind training the Cardassian Security Forces in less repressive techniques. Ezri recoiled when the relatively young, raven haired woman frowned at her. Obviously she had seen her expression of affection and not approved. Ezri looked at Kira, standing beside the Admiral, in hopes for a little moral support. But Kira seemed more transfixed by the approaching cruiser, her face flushed with perspiration.

Ezri tugged on Julian's sleeve, rising up to whisper in his ear. "Julian I think something is wrong with the Colonel." Unabashed when medical issues arose, Bashir swung his head around pointedly to look at Kira. He scowled,

and Ezri grew instantly worried. Julian's genetic enhancements made his visual senses almost as acute as a medical tricorders.

"She doesn't look well." Bashir stepped out of the line, the break in protocol drawing a disapproving stare from Adm. Covey. The doctor ignored her. "Colonel Kira, are you all right?" Shakaar, standing on the other side of the Colonel, turned his gaze from the window after hearing the question. Concern was instantly etched on his face. He placed a hand on Kira's trembling shoulder.

"Nerys," he began but she shrugged it off.

"Don't took me you traitor!" Despite the vehemence in her voice, Ezri noticed a robotic quality to it. The commotion drew the attention of over a dozen revelers in the nearby vicinity. Kira moved away from Shakaar's grasp, swing around to confront him.

Stung, confused, Shakaar's voice was interspersed with hurt. "What are you talking about Nerys?"

"Selling out Bajor's future," Kira replied, his lips quaking, as if she were struggling to think clearly. Sweat pouring down the woman's face now. She wiped it from her eyes and brow with a sleeve of her uniform.

"Colonel Kira," Julian interjected, trying to step between her and Shakaar but the burly First Minister wouldn't let him. "You don't appear well. Let me take you to the Infirmary."

"No!" Kira screamed, as she pulled her belt buckle off of her dress burnt orange uniform. She pressed a hidden indentation in the center of the belt. "I've just activated a plasma charge. If anyone dares defy the Will of the Prophets I will detonate it."

Deep Space Nine (Computer Core)

"Why are the lights off?" Okala asked, futilely tapping the control by the door to turn them back on. "This power shortage might be more widespread than we thought."

"I kind of like the dark," Easun smiled.

"Not now Easun," Okala replied.

"Lahn, I just don't understand you sometimes," he remarked. "The other night I was sure you didn't want to take things further, but today in Ops you seemed more amenable."

"I meant what I said," Okala replied, "You're a real good friend."

"That's all?"

"Yes," she nodded. "I'm sorry if you want more. I just can't give that to you right now."

"Why not?"

"Hmm...it's complicated."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Ssshhh." Okala cocked her head to the side.

"Ssshhh?"

"Be quiet!" The Science Officer said more forcefully, this time looking up into the network of crosswalks. "I thought I heard a noise. Maybe one of the repair crew is already working on the problem." She raised her head, placing cupped hands around her mouth, but Easun pulled one of them down. "Hey!" she gasped.

"No," he replied. Easun couldn't put his finger on it, but there wasn't something right going on. Any power outage should've registered in Ops. He had a sneaking suspicion that something larger and more ominous was going on, and that dark thought led him right back to the missing Jem'Hadar.

Easun pulled his phaser from his holster. Okala's eyes grew wide. "What are you doing?" He tapped the combadge on his chest but nothing happened. He pointed to Okala. She tried hers, but it was inoperative too.

Must be some kind of radiation or dampening field, something that hadn't shown up on sensors either, Easun realized, his stomach starting to twist in knots. "Got to the nearest com station and alert security," he told Okala.

"I'm not leaving," she replied, crossing her arms across her chest.

"That's an order."

"You don't outrank me, and if there's something happening here, I can help you. I've been on this station far longer and I know these systems not quite as good as Nog, but at least I'm passable."

"Certifiable is more like it," Easun grumbled. "Look," he lowered his voice, "the problem I suspect we're having has very little to do with a computer glitch and a lot to do with a missing Jem'Hadar."

"Nitala'Rax?" Fear darkened the woman's features. "You think he's behind this?"

"I'm sure of it." Easun nodded, "and I'm going to put a stop to it."

"I'm not leaving you."

"Yes you are."

"You can't take on a Jem'Hadar alone."

"You don't even have a weapon," Easun observed. "Jem'Hadar can cut through your stubbornness a whole lot easier than I can. No, go!"

"But?"

"Go," Easun said more softly, putting a quieting finger to Okala's soft lips. The woman deflated.

"I'll right back with a security team, I promise." Easun nodded, but he knew that a team couldn't be assembled in time enough to prevent him from taking on a Jem'Hadar solo. During the war he had only killed them in spatial combat, never experiencing the horror of close quarter combat against them.

He had considered himself lucky. *But I guess my luck has run out*, Easun surmised as he bent into a crouch, running low up the stairs, his finger resting on the phaser's activation button.

Deep Space Nine (Promenade)

"Will of the Prophets?" Sarkin Noma now spoke up. Ezri didn't know the popular Vedek personally, but was familiar with his bio: He had been a low-level bureaucrat during the Occupation that had morphed into one of Bajor's non-violence activists against Cardassian rule. Most recently he had been Shakaar's point man in Bajoran relief efforts for Cardassia. "What are you talking about Colonel?"

"I wouldn't expect you to understand," Kira raged, spittle flying from her lips, her entire body quivering. "You've been deceived by them too Noma, but it ends today! Today I will strike a blow for all of Bajor!"

"Colonel...Kira, we don't understand." Ezri tried to get through to her friend, using her most soothing counseling voice.

"Bajorans stare while Shakaar wants to give our food to the Cardassians that oppressed us!"

"I'm right here Kira," Shakaar said, "Talk to me."

"It's too late for that."

"It's never too late," Sarkin said.

"Colonel, I order you to release that plasma charge," Covey ploughed into the tense situation.

"And the Federation is no better, polluting Bajoran culture with their treacly values!"

"Amen to that," Quark said somewhere in the crowd.

"Not now Quark!" Someone quickly rebutted the Ferengi barkeep. Ezri was glad they did it so she didn't have to. Julian edged closer to the Colonel, still talking as calmly and rationally as he could.

"Colonel, I don't need a tricorder to tell that you are under extreme duress," he said. "Please let me help you."

Kira turned quickly in his direction, flashing the plasma charge in his face and stopping the doctor's approach. "I don't need anything from the Federation."

"Then what do you you want?" Dulcett asked gently.

"I want you and the Federation out of the Bajoran system!"

"That doesn't even sound like you Kira," Ezri finally spoke up. She had observed the frenzied woman quietly for a few seconds. The soulless tone of the woman's voice, the robotic movements of her body told her that Kira wasn't herself. There had been documented cases of external possession by alien entities that pre-dated the Federation.

In fact Trill civilization was built upon a joining of two different species. And Ezri was skilled enough to know, as a trainer observer of behavior and as the holder of the Dax symbiont when there was an outside influence present.

Kira brought the bomb front and center, holding it at her chest. The woman closed her eyes, tears streaming from them. She bit down on her lips so hard that blood trickled from them. It was at that time that Ezri noticed a hint of crimson along the Colonel's earlobe. The Trill moved close to Julian, jerking his arm. "Something's controlling the Colonel," she whispered harshly into his ear.

He nodded. "I thought as much."

"Colonel Kira's a Changeling!" Someone blurted out. Sarkin Noma rushed forward, followed by Julian, Ezri, and the crowd. The Vedek wrapped his arms around Kira, the woman convulsing in his fierce grip, her mouth frothing. The bomb fell to the floor, causing everyone to stampede, the entire Promenade buzzing in frenzy and fear. Ezri rushed to scoop up the bomb, and quickly deactivated it. The remaining stragglers then surged around the the struggling Vedek.

"Stand back!" Covey ordered, but no one complied. Sarkin looked helplessly at Dr. Bashir. Julian helped the man wrestle Kira to the ground. It wasn't such much that the woman was protesting, it was just that her body seemed to be in full revolt, twisting as her legs kicked and her arms thrashed.

"Julian, look!" Ezri screamed, pointing at the trickle of blood running out of the Colonel's ear. A pulsing, brownish thing was emerging from it.

"My God!" Bashir said in shock. "I thought those things were extinct!"

"What is it Doctor?" Covey asked, rushing to stand behind Ezri. The creature plopped onto the floor, and Ezri recoiled in disgust. Kira shuddered before passing out.

"A Ceti eel...from Ceti Alpha V," Julian said, staring at the twitching, dying creature. "A deadly parasite; we have to get the Colonel to the Infirmary now."

It was ridge plated, sand colored, and hideous, scuttling across the floor toward her with insect legs and small, clacking pincers. On reflex, Dax brought her boot down on the thing, squishing it with a wet crunch.

"I really wished you hadn't done that Ezri," Bashir admonished. "We could've used it for further study."

"Use what's left of it," Covey stole Ezri's retort. The doctor scowled before turning his attention back to the Colonel. "Vedek Sarkin, First Minister Shakaar, could you both help me carry the Colonel to the Infirmary?" Both men gently grabbed hold of the colonel's legs without reply. Bashir hooked his arms underneath hers. Together they carefully rose with the woman.

The doctor had barely taken a step before the lights on the Promenade went out causing another wave of panic. The confusion and terror were only magnified when the station rattled beneath them.

"No!" Ezri said, realizing what had just occurred. "Someone is firing the weapons' banks!"

"What?" Covey called through the darkness.

"Where?" Dulcett replied, her voice choking. "Look out the window!" Ezri complied, her blood freezing, the symbiont within her shriveling up, as they both noted the rain of golden spikes heading straight for *Iloja*.

"My God," Julian whispered. "Someone is firing on the *Iloja*!"

"Not *someone*," Ezri's voice was steeped with terror. "Us. It's Deep Space Nine."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Cardassian Cruiser Iloja

"Please hold still," Elim Garak mumbled around the long needles he held between his lips. He adjusted the violet gossamer cape flowing over the left shoulder of Natima Lang's elegant black dress. Taking the needles out of his mouth, Garak smiled with obvious delight. "Excellent." He gently placed his hands over the Premier's shoulders, careful not to pinch her neck ridges, and guided her to the long standing mirror adjacent to her bed chamber.

Lang looked into the mirror and frowned. "I guess it's acceptable."

"You guess?" Garak replied with alarm. "Premier I'll have you know that I stayed up for twenty four hours tailoring this dress so that it would fit you perfectly. The cape itself is made from the finest Tholian silk on the market."

"If you say so," Lang replied. Garak placed a hand over his heart.

"There is no greater torture than to bear your displeasure." He said.

"I doubt that," Gil Lysaron grumbled. The burly military attache stood at attention by Premier Lang's door. He was decked in the new dress uniform of the Security Forces, a rather drab gray tunic and slacks that melded with his grayish skin. Black stripes running along the pants legs and sleeves were the only things that accented the unimpressive ensemble. Garak frowned, rolling his eyes.

The exchange drew a snigger from Hogue, the Premier's youthful advisor. Garak noticed that the earnest, solemn Hogue seemed to perk up whenever Lysaron and Garak were in the same vicinity. The young man seemed to enjoy their barbs, and truth be told, so did Garak. There was very little to find joy in these days, with the terrible state his people were in, hampered even more by insurgents spreading fear of the necessary change Cardassia needed to survive.

Hogue wasn't as interesting a foil as Dr. Bashir, Odo, or Gul Dukat, but Garak often pulled his punches to give the martinet the illusion that they were on the same *kotra* board. Sighing loudly and turning away from Lysaron with a flourish, Garak remarked, "Well, Premier, perhaps I can scrounge up one of your standard pants suits, but my professional opinion...."

"Your professional opinion as a dressmaker or spy?" Lysaron interjected. *Oh, he's begging for it today*, Garak thought, but he continued on as if the gil hadn't even spoken:

"Those pants suits should be relegated to the drafty environs of academia. Now this outfit here positively declares you to be a person of galactic import, of exquisite taste."

"I don't need a dress, or a title for that matter, to prove that," Lang protested. "The Cardassian people made that decision at the voting booth."

"And the Cardassian people expect their leader to represent them with the finest raiments befitting a person they have imbued with the majesty of our great nation."

"Well said," Lang smirked. "This isn't the first time that I thought you might make a better Premier than me."

Garak hastily waved away the suggestion. "I don't think I have the finesse to navigate the treacherous waters you do on a daily basis."

"Somehow I very much doubt that Mr. Garak." The Premier reached out and squeezed his shoulder. "Thank you for the alterations."

Garak bowed. "It was a pleasure." And he meant that. Natima Lang, a scholar and leader of the Cardassian underground, was truly the best choice to lead Cardassia to a more democratic future. She had spent much of her life dreaming of a new Cardassia, while people like Garak and Lysaron had did all within reason, and much beyond, to prop up a decayed regime.

"The pleasure is mine." Lang smiled. "I'm looking forward to returning to Deep Space Nine. What is our ETA Gil Lysaron?"

Without having to get confirmation, the thorough man reported. "We should be arriving at Terok-Deep Space Nine in fifteen minutes."

"Thank you," Lang nodded. "I have some old acquaintances I'm looking forward to seeing again, as I'm sure you are too Mr. Garak?" Garak nodded, smiling as a thought of Dr. Bashir raced across his mind. He had missed his old friend terribly in the dark days following the end of the Dominion War. The letters they had exchanged hadn't done much to fill the void. And he was very anxious to see Julian again, along with Ezri, Kira, and even Quark.

Many pundits on Prime had wondered what Garak had done to enamour himself to the Premier, never realizing the role Quark played in bringing both Garak and Lang together. The strange attraction that existed between Quark and Lang had made the barkeep get involved in the Cardassian dissident movement, securing a cloaking device for Lang, Hogue, and another of her protégés to escape extradition back to Cardassia.

Gul Toran, an old rival, had briefly tempted Garak with the promise of ending his exile if he eliminated Lang and her students. But once Toran went back on his word, and after he had personally witnessed the transformative power Lang could have over a Ferengi, Garak decided to spare the special woman by killing Toran instead. Or so that was the story he liked to tell himself.

They shared a private smile between them for a few seconds, ruined only by the loud clearing of Lysaron's throat. "Yes Gil?" Lang broke eye contact with Garak to look in Lysaron's direction.

"Would you care to view Deep Space Nine from the prow of *Iloja*?"

"That is a keen idea," Lang decided. Before she could take a step she was flung to the floor, Garak thrown on top of her, knocking what little air was left in her lungs. The lights dimmed before blinking back on.

Garak slid off the Premier, shaking his head to clear it of haze. Still not fully lucid, his well honed instincts took over and he hopped to his feet, pulling the premier with him. He pursed his lips as he took a look at the shaken woman, a trail of blood leaving her lips. "Are you well Premier?"

"It's nothing," she said, her voice thick. "Just cut my lip and tongue." Garak gave her a once over.

"What happened?" Hogue pulled himself the ground, eschewing Lysaron's efforts to help him. Besides his dress suit being rumpled, the young man looked none the worse for wear. The gil looked up, but Garak beat him to the punch. He had been in enough fire fights to know when a ship had been fired upon.

"We've been fired upon." He said right before the ship shuddered again, this time throwing Lang into his arms.

"By who?" Lang asked, alarm and confusion warring in her gaze. Garak avoided her eyes and looked at Lysaron, releasing her from his embrace. He knew the answer, but wanted to see if the gil was as sharp as he thought he was. Lysaron shrugged.

"Insurgents? Bajorans?" Garak said nothing. He was closer to the truth than the former tailor cared to admit.

"I want to go the bridge and see what's going on," Lang declared, but Garak grabbed her by the arms, halting her advance. "Let me go!" she demanded, fighting futilely against him.

"You heard her Mr. Garak." He heard the subtle rustle in the man's clothes that Lysaron's posture had shifted from parade rest to attack mode. Without even looking in Lysaron's direction, Garak replied.

"I don't think that would be wise." He left it open as to whom he was referring. "Premier it might be best to make sure you are safe and usually in an attack the bridge is not the safest place to be."

Lang's eyes widened. Her voice caught in her throat. "This is an attack? Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"But who?" Garak hesitated again.

"Mr. Garak," The Premier's voice grew reproachful, "you are keeping something from me."

"It wouldn't be the first time," Lysaron quipped, but Hogue no longer seemed amused.

"Elim," she said more softly, "what is going on here?" The words froze on his tongue. He just couldn't bear to bring himself to share his conclusion with her. Lang's face with pity, and she gently shrugged out of his grasp. She

moved around him, and addressed Gil Lysaron. "Gil Lysaron, go to the bridge and find out what has occurred."

He clicked his heels together crisply. "Yes Premier." He turned as the door opened. A bloodied Legate Urlak spilled through the door, falling into the startled Lysaron's arms.

"We are betrayed," the man croaked, before passing out. Before any of them could process the portent of the insensate Trade Provost's words, another strike sent them all to the floor again, the ceiling lights sparking, their bulbs exploding. Shards of glass rained down on them as the cabin began to spin.

Deep Space Nine (Computer Core)

Lt. Easun had been on the station long enough to learn the particular rattle that accompanied the firing of the ship's weapons systems. He paused before he leaped up the stairs.

If something was occurring and the station was in danger, his duty was to return to his post and await orders. But something told him that the activated weapons systems had something to do with the missing Jem'Hadar, and he his time would be better spent proving or dispelling that theory.

He moved quickly, enjoying himself a bit too much, stopping every few minutes when the weapons banks fired again. The recoil was extremely strong in this area of the station; the whole room seemed to pulsate with each discharge.

The Deltan turned quickly onto the platform leading to the central phaser array node. He pulled up as he saw the throbbing arachnid-shaped device attached to the array's instrument panel, with dark, mechanical tentacles plunged deep into the console.

For an interminable second, he was back on the cloistered corridors of Deep Space Five three years ago during the last Borg invasion. He had been serving as Tactical Officer on the *Vostok* when it had responded to the starbase's frenzied warning.

With the ship being near Ivor Prime, which DS5 orbited, Captain Marchbanks ordered the starship to lend assistance to the station. In the three hours that it took for *Vostok* to arrive the small detachment of Borg that had been left behind had assimilated a great deal of the station.

The biomechanical device spread over the weapons control looked eerily similar. *The Borg*, the crazy thought quickened his pulse. *Here?* He knew when a situation exceeded his grasp. Easun tapped his combadge. Nothing happened.

Trying again, he muttered a curse. Whatever that device was doing, it appeared to also be jamming his communicator. I guess it is up to me, he thought, before advancing cautiously toward the device.

He bent down in front of it, but hopefully far enough to prevent any automated defense mechanisms from jutting from the thing to inject him with Borg nanoprobes or some kind of poison.

Easun knew he was making a big assumption about the device being of Borg manufacture. It just didn't make sense. The Borg's *modus operandi* had always been straightforward and roughshod; cunning and duplicity didn't seem to be their way.

Closer to it now he could see that it had a slick, wet sheen and appeared to spasm with each triggering of the weapons systems, a bioluminescent glow permeating it. It's not Borg he realized after a few seconds, but it was cybernetic, a perversion of the *bioneural* technology that Starfleet now used in place of duotronic and isolinear circuitry.

He had spent long hours helping Chief Forsythe replace the isolinear circuitry with bioneural gel packs when *Vostok* had been ordered to undergo the mandatory refit and he had quickly become familiarized with the technology.

But he had never seen this type of application before. The glob writhed again, the platform beneath him rumbling. Unfortunately he didn't have time to study the device further or to ascertain the extent of its corruption of the computer core's bioneural network.

That thing was in control of Deep Space Nine's tactical systems and whatever it was firing at was probably not in the interest of protecting the station or guarding the Federation's interest.

He stepped back from the device and raised his phaser. Thumbing it to the kill setting, Easun aimed and fired. The smell of ozone singed his nostrils. After he saw that the weapon had no effect after a minute, Easun removed his thumb from the trigger.

Perhaps if I remove it by hand, he pondered. He moved back over to the console and bent down beside it. Scrunching his face, he gingerly touched the slimy, pulsing device. Pulling with all his strength he felt the thing starting to give way after a few minutes of struggle, a painful jolt scorching his fingers. Easun pulled back with a yelp, checking his fingers for serious damage. The current appeared to be some kind of defense mechanism, he realized.

Deltans had a complex bioelectrical-chemical nervous system, and could withstand a dosage of energy that might fell a human, Andorian, or Vulcan, but he wasn't certain how much charge the device could generate. But at the same time Easun didn't have much time to contemplate it either. Real lives might hang in the balance while he twiddled his thumb. He quickly centered himself, before going back to work.

Each root made a wet, suction sound as he uprooted it, its defensive charge growing in intensity, but he ignored the pain.

Easun was starting to make real progress when he heard a furious chirp of a communication device behind him. *How is that possible?* Before he could turn around to find out the answer, a biting pain exploded in his neck, followed by a jet stream of blood. He forgot what he was doing immediately, currents of pain jolting through his body.

Flopping on the floor, the air filling with the coppery smell of his own blood, Easun ripped out the spanner that had just been implanted into his neck, quickly placing a hand there to stanch the geyser as best as possible.

He attempted to slide around and see who his assailant was, certain he would meet the baleful eyes of Nitala'Rax. Shock briefly quelled the pain when he looked up into the obsidian eyes of a Cardassian female. She was now holding his phaser.

Dressed in a Bajoran Militia uniform, the slender woman bore an uncanny resemblance to Colonel Kira. The woman merely watched him as he struggled to get to his feet, his boots sliding in his own blood.

The edges of his vision wavy, his left hand and side of his uniform drenched with blood, Easun did his best to stay focused. "Who-who," he began, before the pain robbed him of speech.

"I apologize for the mess Lieutenant. I prefer cleaner kills." The woman replied matter-of-factly. "But he spoiled that," she frowned, shaking an oval communicator in one hand while aiming holding Easun's phaser in the other.

"Nitala," he spat, "in league..."

The woman shook her head, her features hardening. "Not quite Lt. Easun. I serve a different master. Your pet Jem'Hadar intruded upon my work as well, and you will pay the same price that they brute did."

"Where," Easun started, his teeth clenching on his tongue as a searing pain lanced through his chest. The blast hit him with such force that it hit knocked him against the pulsing device.

"I guess my work here is done," the mysterious woman's voice felt far away. Easun tried to stay awake, but the susurrations of biomech devices lulled him to a place beyond sleep.

Cardassian Cruiser Iloja

The frigid water stung more than the slap that followed it. "Who?" Mintof Urlak groggily asked. He blinked away the remaining haze. Almost immediately he realized he was on the floor, his back resting against a wall as a worried Premier Lang, her assistant Hogue, and Garak stood over him. *Had*

they found him out? Did they know that this was his doing? The horrible thought clamped around his heart, the pain shooting through his body.

"My apologies Legate Urlak," Elim Garak leaned down in front of him, his impassive expression betrayed by fear lit eyes. "But we have to evacuate this ship."

"I know," Urlak tried to sit up, his body still enflamed in agony. Garak placed a restraining hand on his shoulder.

"Not yet." The man's voice was warm, soothing. "You've sustained several severe injuries with possible internal bleeding."

"I'm fine," Urlak groused, as the cranial implanted inserted into his brain by the Obsidian Order began flooding his system with endorphins, masking the severity of his injuries.

"Despite the endorphins coursing through you at the moment, I beg to differ." Garak protested.

"Can he stand?" Lang asked.

"Yes." Urlak used both arms, and the wall as leverage, to slide up, stopping every few seconds as the floor and wall rattled. He wriggled away from Garak's offer of assistance. Once on his feet, his chest screaming in torment, the Trade Provost paused to catch a pain-dipped breath. "Premier Lang, we are under attack," with a voice only slightly shaky. "Deep Space Nine is firing on us."

"We know," Lang replied. "I sent Gil Lysaron to the bridge right after you arrival. Before we lost contact with the bridge he informed us of the same thing."

"But why would the Federation do such a thing?" Hogue wailed. Urlak smiled kindly, wincing as he patted the young man's shoulder in an avuncular fashion.

"Don't be too hasty to accuse anyone. It could just as likely be the Bajorans behind this. The station is run by a Bajoran terrorist after all."

"Colonel Kira fought at Damar's side against the Dominion to free Cardassia!" Garak hotly replied. Lang nodded her head in strong affirmation.

"And Kira Nerys was also a known consort of the Founder Odo. Lest not forget that his people nearly eliminated our race."

"Odo had no part in that!" Garak shot back. "He was different from the other Founders."

"So you say." Urlak threw a piteous look in Garak's direction.

"There's no time to rehash these arguments," Lang cut in.

"That's right," Urlak then turned to her. "We must get you to an escape pod."

"I'm needed here, to help make sure everyone else is able to flee first." The Legate merely glanced at Garak. The former tailor nodded before turning to the obstinate Lang.

"Premier," he began, his voice silk-smooth, "going down with the ship is a human aphorism that doesn't apply here. *You* are the future of Cardassia. You must be protected at all costs."

"But wouldn't I be just as much of a target in an escape pod?" Urlak and Garak nodded, both acceding the point.

"However you would be one target among dozens," Urlak reasoned.

"I concur with the Provost," Garak agreed, quickly hooking his arm around Lang's.

"I'll lead the way," Urlak offered. "The *Kail*-class was one of my father's last design and his favorite. I know these ships as well as the scales on my neck ridges. I'll get us to the quickest set of escape pods." He turned toward the door, heartened when Hogue touched an elbow and offered support. With the increasing weight pressing against his chest, this time Urlak didn't protest.

The foursome bunched together as they crossed the threshold, ignoring the shuddering deck plates, the rising heat, and the far off explosions as the *Iloja* fell apart around them.

Deep Space Nine (Promenade)

Okala Lahn dove into the sea of chaos, fighting against the surging crush of bodies, her alarm growing with each snippet of conversation she heard.

Premier Lang's ship appeared to be under attack, and someone on the station-us-appeared to be firing on them. Confusion, fear, and terror boiled in her stomach, a deep chill settling over her body.

Her instinct told her that the locus of the unfolding tragedy resided in at the Computer Core. And with her communicator on the blink and with Colonel Kira and most senior staff on the Promenade, she figured it was best to alert the colonel about what she and Easun had discovered immediately.

She pushed back her thoughts of the dashing Deltan, whispering a quick prayer to the Prophets that she would find him well very soon.

She crashed into the lumbering body of the garrulous Lurian named Morn. "Out of my way!" Okala snapped, resolving to buy a drink for him later at *Quark's* in apology. He looked down at her and merely shrugged.

Okala was about to repeat her demand when she realized that everyone had stopped and had pretty much quieted down.

"Please clear the way!" Someone else was shouting. She recognized the clipped, British accent instantly. Doctor Bashir! "Please create space, we have injured here." The crowd parted without incident. A harried Lt. Dax and the Relief Coordinator Ghirta Dulcett were helping clear a path.

Okala gasped as she saw Dr. Bashir, First Minister Shakaar, and Vedek Sarkin carrying the unconscious colonel, the pallor of death tinging her face. Okala jumped out of the crowd, stopping the procession.

"Move Okala!" Dax barked.

"But Lieutenant...there's something happening in the Computer Core."

"Admiral Covey should be at the Operations Center by now," Ezri offered. "You can take that up with her after she finds a way to shut down the phaser banks."

"Can't you see that the Colonel needs immediate medical assistance," Dr. Bashir replied coldly, "you should log your complaint with the engineering department." Bashir guided the trio past Dax and Dulcett. The Trill turned away from Okala, preparing to follow him, but the Science Officer wouldn't be denied.

"But I think it has something to do with the why the weapons are misfiring!" That froze Dax. The small woman turned back around, a veil lifting from her eyes.

"Oh Gods," she whispered. "I've been so damned concerned about securing Kira..."

"The Computer Core," Okala added. "Easun's already there." Dax quickly scoured the crowd, making eye contact with several guards. Nonetheless, she stood on her tiptoes and shouted into the crowd.

"I need every security guard to follow me and Lt. Okala right now!" Okala was already racing back toward the Computer Core before Dax had finished her declaration.

I'm on my way Easun, she promised. Please be all right when I get there.

Cardassian Cruiser Iloja

The ship groaned as its structural integrity systems failed. The entire ship would rip apart within a matter of minutes.

Body heaving, chest on fire, Urlak shoved Hogue into the pod. Premier Lang was already strapping herself in.

"You next Mr. Garak," he ordered.

"But what about you Legate Urlak?"

"I-I've got to find my retainer...Dorcas. I was on the bridge when we were first hit."

"Then let me help you. Our Chatelaine Mila always spoke highly of Retainer Dorcas."

"That really isn't necessary," Urlak forced himself to remain calm. Illiana had already acknowledged his summons and should be waiting for him.

"I insist," Garak said more forcefully, moving to seal Lang and Hogue into the pod. Before Urlak could react, Garak quickly pulled the release lever, the pod ejecting *Iloja* with a loud whoosh.

"You were always too headstrong Elim. I told Tain his support for you would be his downfall."

"His overarching ambition was his great failing, one that appears common to venerable spymasters." Garak returned, with a devilish smirk.

"What are you implying?"

"Nothing, nothing at all," Garak said. "I suggest we find the retainer, and quickly." On cue several side panels exploded along the corridor, shooting sparks and spreading debris.

"Follow me." Urlak ordered.

Deep Space Nine (Computer Core)

Lt. Easun gasped to wakefulness, his body numb. How long had I been out? He wondered, frustrated at his weakness. He had a job to do, and he had allowed himself to succumb to pain.

But now he felt nothing, his head strangely detached from his body. He knew he must've lost a lot of blood by now, and he tried to raise a hand to his neck, feeling only his fingers twitching from far away.

This is it, he realized. *I'm about to die*. And there was so much left to do. He wanted to scream, but he couldn't. His throat was dry, raw, his despair caged inside him. He barely felt the rumbling beneath his body...the weapons system.

It's still firing, he realized. *I've got...to...* He shook his head vigorously, forcing himself not to slip back into unconsciousness.

*Got to...do something...*Easun found his anger, his despair at being caught off guard by the Cardassian, of her robbing him of a chance to find future mates and sire children, and he used it to animate his lethargic limbs.

After a few frustrating minutes, he was able to flip over, his lips brushing against the slimy mass spread over the weapons array. Closer than I thought, he quipped, before his gag reflex took over.

Making the most use of the movement his disgust momentarily provided him, he slid his fingers around the device again. Thankfully the Cardassian hadn't reattached the thing back onto the console fully. Sparks of electricity shot into his fingers, the burn now more pleasing than painful.

The current awakened dying muscles. He planted both feet against the console, while gathering strength in his arms.

With his remaining power he pulled with all his might, the mass writhed, sending spikes of electricity through him. The *bioneural* device

screached as it was wrenched free, flopping beside him, but Lt. Easun was no longer there to celebrate his triumph.

Cardassian Cruiser *Iloja* (Urlak's Quarters)

"Dorcas!" Urlak called, the pain in his chest more jagged with each call. The endorphins were losing the fight to keep his agony manageable. The Legate's eyes teared from the flames and smoke spread throughout his retainer's spacious quarters.

Though not as large or ornate as the room Premier Lang had reserved from him, Dorcas still was not lacking the finer amenities once reserved only for Cardassian nobility.

Lang's democratic principles disturbed him to no end. The whole concept of equality was subversive, and portended a society of permissiveness that would keep Cardassians at the bottom permanently.

He couldn't let that happen. Standing at the entrance to Dorcas's room, unwilling to traverse the walls of flame and smoke to rescue his old acquaintance, he pulled out the detonator he had hidden in his pocket.

He peered into the smoke, seeing no signs of Dorcas or of Garak, who had braved the fire to find the retainer. Feigning a bout of coughing, keeping up appearances always, Urlak turned around, bending over as if overcome by smoke.

Knowing the nature of Illiana's attack hadn't prepared him for the severity of it, or protected him against injury. But that had worked to his benefit, giving him the appearance of loyalty that would keep him above suspicion.

With *Iloja* being a gift to the new government from the Urlak Trading Consortium, he had had access to all of its systems from day one. And he had used that knowledge to attach explosive devices to several specially marked escape pods. At least one in each of the ship's designated escape pod areas. He rarely left things to chance, and he wanted to make sure that if Lang wasn't killed in the attack itself, she wouldn't escape execution.

Outside of his injuries, which were considerable but ultimately acceptable, the only unlikely variable was Garak. He had hoped that Garak would've gotten aboard the pod with Lang, so he could be rid of them both. Elim was too dangerous a man to keep alive, there was too much of his father Enabran Tain, and Urlak's mentor, in him. But Garak's impertinence had given Urlak a new idea.

Covered by a loud hack, Urlak detonated the pods. Wishing that he had witnessed Lang's death himself, he tossed the detonator down the hall, pulling the communicator from another pocket. He activated it.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Talking to your co-conspirator?" The pleasantness tone in Garak's voice chilled Urlak to the marrow. "Turn around slowly Legate and please don't make any sudden moves."

Urlak did as he was asked, holding the communicator aloft. Garak, with a roaring fire as backdrop, stood calmly, a wicked looking disruptor in his hand.

"Legate!" The garbled voice on the line called. "Are you still there?" Garak motioned for the communicator, and Urlak handed it to him slowly.

"Hands were I can see them Legate," Garak's eyes never left Urlak as he took the communicator and whispered into it. "Legate Urlak is busy. If you wish to speak to him, you will have to wait...better yet why don't you transport down so we can all chat."

"Who is this?"

Garak cut the line. He frowned. "Legate Urlak, I really thought you had turned a new leaf. That you were ready to embrace change."

Urlak laughed despite the pain in his lungs. "Change? I'm not an enemy of change. In fact, I believe our people have gotten too far away from made us great. I want to change that. Unlike you!"

"Aspersions are really beneath Legate."

"It's too late."

"Yes, it is too late for you," Garak said, not understanding. "I found Dorcas's body, felled not by fire or smoke inhalation, but a disruptor blast squarely in the chest."

"And why do you think I am responsible?" Urlak huffed. "Dorcas has worked for my family for years."

"Yes, he's a man with many secrets-from Reged Urlak, to Kail, to you...its Obsidian Order standard operating procedure to eliminate such liabilities."

"Yet Tain let both you and Mila live."

"Tain was an exception to the rule."

"He was my mentor."

"He was my father."

"Lang is dead," Urlak gloated, knowing that the news would stun Garak. For a brief second Garak flinched, and it was all the opening the Legate needed. He lunged at Garak, clumsily grabbing for the communicator, the two men dancing toward the inferno.

Wresting the communicator from him, Urlak spat into it, "Activate transport..." before Garak cuffed him, knocking both the Legate and the communicator to the floor. There was flash of silver and then the cold barrel of the disruptor dug into this time.

Legate glared at Garak, unwilling to wilt in the face of death. A transporter beam claimed them both before Garak could carry out his sentence.

(Unidentified Ship)

Garak fell like a sack of *Tammeron* grain. The efficient Agent Ghemor had incapacitated him with the butt of a disruptor rifle as soon as he and Urlak materialized inside the small, dark ship, an interceptor of Corvallen manufacture.

Illiana turned away from the downed Garak to move to the instrument panel. The ship was equipped with a Romulan cloaking device, and she had had to deactivate it to beam Urlak aboard. The plan had been to escape with the Legate into the Crolsa system where he could then reestablish his control over the insurgent movement now that Gul En'Roel had been dispatched.

"Beam me back," Urlak ordered. Illiana turned around in her seat, her finger poised over the cloak activation button.

"Are you insane?"

"No my dear, merely prescient, and I see a greater opportunity born of Mr. Garak's intrusion. No, beam me back aboard the *Iloja* and make haste to get out of here quickly."

Knowing that Urlak was not a man who liked subordinates to question his orders, Illiana merely turned back to her controls and quickly beamed Urlak back to the doomed ship. The fact that Deep Space Nine's weapons now lay dormant, that somehow they had disabled the techno-phagic device she had implanted no longer mattered.

She had watched the exploding life pods, one of which contained that traitor Natima Lang. And Illiana had gotten revenge on Kira Nerys as a bonus, framing her, the Bajorans, and Starfleet for the attack on the *Iloja* and the assassination of Natima Lang.

As far as she was concerned the mission had been accomplished. And Illiana was sure that Urlak's plans for the insensate Elim Garak would only further their aims even more. She chuckled half the way to Cardassian space.

EPILOGUE FALL OUT

CHAPTER TWELVE

USS Defiant (Captain's Ready Room)

And I didn't think things could get worse, Commander Jeffrey Thorpe thought as the grim face of Adm. Monica Covey filled the tiny screen on the desktop monitor.

The woman's voice and demeanor were devoid of emotion. "Captain Singleton, Commanders Dar and Thorpe," she began, giving a curt nod to all the officers in the room. They responded in kind.

"Premier Natima Lang is dead, the victim of assassination." Thorpe's heart leaped into his throat. Oh God, it's worser than I imagined. The raven haired Admiral didn't wait for questions. "Her ship, the *Iloja* was destroyed less than two hours ago. Only twenty four survivors, out of a total crew complement of eighty persons."

"What happened?" The hard eyed Captain Singleton asked.

"There was some type of malfunction with the station's weapons's array. The station fired on the *Iloja*, destroying it."

"Oh my God," Thorpe couldn't hold it back any longer. "How is that possible?" He looked to Covey, and then Singleton and Dar for answers, but none were forthcoming.

"Admiral," The stony faced Dar replied. "May I speak with Colonel Kira?"

"The Colonel is currently in the Infirmary," Covey answered. "It appears that she was complicit in the attacks." Dar's placid veneer cracked at the announcement.

"Complicit in what manner?"

"Perhaps you could tell me that Commander Dar?" Covey's voice took on a faint accusatory tone.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Dar asked, his face darkening.

"We are certain that Colonel Kira had accomplices and all of the station's senior officers, with the exception of Dr. Bashir have been placed into custody until the investigation into Premier Lang's assassination is complete. Therefore I am ordering Captain Singleton to assume command of the *Defiant* immediately. Commander Thorpe will serve as his First Officer." Covey shifted slightly to look at Jeffrey. "Commander Thorpe I want you to brief your seniormost officers and select the most capable to bring *Defiant* back to this station in one piece. Commander Dar, Lt. Nog, and Lt. Daneeka

will spend the remainder of the journey in the Brig. The other *Defiant* crewmembers are restricted to quarters. Covey out."

The screen winked off. Dar leaned back in his seat, a loud sigh escaping his lips. Singleton's smile was predacious. He stood slowly, squaring his shoulders. "Commander Thorpe, please accompany Commander Dar to the Brig, stopping only to pick up Lt. Daneeka along the way. After they are secured, you are to then take Lt. Nog into custody. If any resists...." He let the statement hang.

"Captain Singleton," Thorpe began. He really didn't want to do this. He had just lost a ship, dozens of crewmen, and Commander Dar had been so gracious and helpful in arranging the ragtag fleet of escape pods and shuttlecraft into an organized caravan. It just didn't feel right.

"You have your orders Commander," Singleton's tone brooked no debate. Thorpe then looked to Dar, willing the Romulan to speak in his defense. The Commander merely shrugged, standing up stiffly. He walked around his desk, no longer acknowledging Singleton to stand beside Thorpe. Thorne got out of his seat.

"Commander Dar, you know this ship better than I do," Thorpe tried to be congenial. Dar walked through the door without saying anything. Before Geoffrey crossed the threshold he glanced back to see a smirking Captain Singleton sliding into the vacated captain's chair.

Dar walked to the door leading to the ship's main corridor. He stood by patiently as Thorpe went over to Lt. Daneeka at the tactical console. He bent down and whispered in her ear. The woman ground her teeth, shooting her head in Dar's direction. His somber expression confirmed what Thorpe had told her.

Muttering a string of curses, the woman pushed off from the instrument panel and shot to her feet, the sudden movement disrupting the quiet efficiency of the bridge. The crew looked to Daneeka and she pointed to Dar.

"Commander Thorpe has something he would like to tell you." The Romulan wasn't going to make it easy. Jeffrey tugged on his red collar as dozens of eyes and things that performed the same function focused on him.

"Well, uh," he began, his mouth suddenly dry. "Commander Dar is...Captain Singleton is in command." He paused to steady his voice. "Commander Dar, Lt. Daneeka, and Lt. Nog will be placed into custody, while all other *Defiant* crewmembers will be restricted to quarters until further notice."

The shock, anger, and protests began immediately. Dar stood back and allowed the discontent to boil. "Listen, this isn't my fault," Thorpe, flustered and a bit angry at both Singleton and Dar, finally said. "I have my orders and so do each of you."

"That's right," Singleton said, standing in the doorway of the ready room. The familiar swish of an opening door was drowned by the raised voices. "Don't make this any harder than it is. Carry out your assignment Mr. Thorpe." The fuss abated almost instantly, the crew sullenly turning back to their consoles, none meeting Singleton's rapacious stare.

Jeffrey gently took Daneeka's elbow in his hand. She jerked away from him and walked around the empty captain's chair to stand beside Commander Dar. "We'll do it your way then," Thorpe replied.

Things can always get worst, Jeffrey thought. How many times did life have to contort him into doing things he didn't want to do for him to accept that?

He struggled for an answer he knew would never come as he escorted both Commander Dar and Lt. Daneeka to lockup.

USS Defiant (Engineering)

"Are you settled in?" Thorpe tried to make nice. Lt. Commander Uhnari, her leg heavily bandaged, turned slowly around from the console display. Seeing her shattered leg reminded him of his own injury. After some near miraculous work by Dr. Amoros, he retained some motor function in his right arm and hand, and sedatives had dulled the pain. But more extensive surgery would be required to restore all feeling. For the moment, his right arm was almost a completely useless appendage, a weight pulling on his shoulder and no more.

"This isn't right," she replied. Thorpe placed his good hand against the slick instrument panel and leaned close to her.

"I know it isn't, but this is what Captain Singleton wanted. Adm. Covey put him in charge, and made me his Exec. I heard it myself."

"That doesn't make it right."

"What do you expect me to do?" Thorpe shrugged. "I just want to get back to DS9, so that our wounded can get some proper medical attention, and then find I'll deal with everything else."

"Captain Glover would've told Covey and Singleton exactly what they could do with their orders."

"Well I'm not Captain Glover!" Jeffrey exploded, the raw Aquiel had hit was just too raw. The woman recoiled in her seat, her ridged burrow knitting in shock. "I'm sorry," Thorpe said, as softly as he could. He looked around the

small, cramped engineering room. The scant engineering crew pulled from *Aegis* kept attending to their duties, seemingly oblivious to his outburst. He was thankful for that.

"It's okay," Aquiel's voice matched his in softness. "And I should be the one apologizing. What I said, it wasn't right. You're only following orders."

"No," he waved away her apology. "You had every right to say that...if that's what you believed. I mean, I'm not Glover, I'm just a replacement. And on my first mission at the helm I lost the ship." His lip curled up in the imitation of a smile. "First the *Nightingale* and then *Aegis*, perhaps I'm cursed."

Uhnari's eyes clouded with confusion. "*Nightingale*?"

"Long story...I'll tell it to you when we get to DS9."

Aquiel merely nodded, but she was looking away from him, her gaze far off. "I wonder how Ivan will react when he gets the news?" She murmured, more to herself than him.

"Ivan?" The Haliian's head jerked and she blinked several times before responding, her eyes squinting as she focused on him.

"Ivan...Commander Cherenkov."

"Ah...*Aegis* Exec," Thorpe finished for her.

"Yes." The woman's face hardened. "I need to get back to work." Thorpe's heart was pricked by the icicles now present in the woman's voice. His back tightened, and he stiffly moved his hand from the wall.

"Of course Commander," he said as formally as he could muster. It was obvious that he had struck a nerve, intruded into territory that he didn't belong in. *So, Aquiel and Commander Cherenkov must be involved*, he thought quickly, trying to dismiss the thought almost as soon as it blossomed in his mind. *Don't jump to conclusions*, he told himself. *You're making assumptions*, he scolded. But something inside him told Jeffrey that he wasn't.

"Commander," he said again, putting as much steel in his voice as possible. "I trust that you will work with me to keep things as serene as possible. The new orders have ruffled a lot of feathers, and the last thing either our crew or the *Defiant's* need is another crisis, particularly one self-inflicted."

"I will do my best Commander," the woman replied, though her voice sounded far away, her mind obviously on other matters. *Cherenkov*, the gremlin on his shoulder whispered into his ear.

"Thank you." *Move on*, he ordered his tired legs. After a second's pause, Jeffrey's legs responded. Now he found himself in his own world as he left Engineering, wandering the cramped, desolate corridors of the *Defiant*, imagining each crew quarters he passed was filled with sequestered *Defiant* crewmen, hurt and angry at Adm. Covey's orders.

But could he really blame the Admiral, especially if what she said was true? He had never met Colonel Kira, but he had seen enough holovids and news reports to know that the woman had been indispensable to the Federation war effort in defeating the Dominion. She was a hero in his eyes.

Before that she had helped drive the Cardassians from Bajor, but everything he had read or heard about the woman since Captain Sisko took command of Deep Space Nine indicated that Kira had moved beyond her hatred of Cardassians. In fact, she had helped foment a Cardassian rebellion against the Dominion in the later stages of the war. It just didn't make sense, any of it. But if Kira was involved in Lang's assassination, he had to admit to himself that other Deep Space Nine crew members could've been also been complicit.

Commander Dar, despite his long service record, was a Romulan after all, the gremlin chattered. Jeffrey stopped, blushing though no Betazoids or other telepaths were on board to listen in on his thoughts. He was still ashamed of the biased thought.

The Romulans, despite their reputation for duplicity had been steadfast allies during the war. But Thorpe also knew he couldn't deny Praetor Hiren's recent apology for the Tal Shiar's secret role in funding the defunct True Way extremist group. It had seemed to evaporate under the heat of the rhetoric being thrown by President Santiago and Adm. Satie as they battled for the presidency.

He leaned against the wall to steady himself, the variables, backstabbing, and mind games swirling through his brain threatening to overwhelm. Jeffrey closed his eyes, tried to find his center, but he seemed as jumbled on the inside as the galaxy around him.

"Commander Thorpe, are you all right?" Thorpe snapped to attention. A concerned Commander Uhnari was standing in front of him. She placed a steadying hand on his left shoulder, her touch hotter than it he had any right to allow it to be.

"I'm...I'm fine Lieutenant Commander."

"Please, call me Aquiel. And I'm sorry about being so cold just a few minutes ago. It's just..."

"You don't owe me an apology or explanation."

"I feel that I do. Commander Cherenkov and I..."

"It's okay. You don't."

"But..."

"That's an order." He said more harshly than he meant to, the force of the demand recoiling the Chief Engineer. Now, his awkwardness visited her.

"Are you sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine. It might be best if you attend to your duties. Apology logged and noted."

“Okay.” She turned and went back into Engineering without looking back. And Jeffrey let her. As far as he was concerned, it was one less trap to avoid...or at least that’s what he told himself.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Deep Space Nine Six Days Later...

Dr. Julian Bashir's mind was on Colonel Kira. The surgery he had performed on her five days ago had been more successful than he had anticipated. He had removed a second Ceti parasite from the Colonel's cerebral cortex, the creature currently in stasis, pending further study.

Unfortunately Starfleet Medical had already ordered him to turn over the eel and the remains of the mysterious bio-weapon used to subvert the station's defenses to the *Starship Cochise* when it arrived in several days. The weapon had been eerily similar, if not in design, then intent, to a weapon used by a Changeling to take over the *Defiant's* systems a couple years before the Dominion War.

Admiral Covey had ordered him to keep the speculation under wraps until it could be confirmed by Starfleet Tactical. He hated passing off the mystery to someone else, and not being able to solve it himself. It wasn't the only thing he disliked, glancing around the table.

The station's new staff personnel were presently sitting across from him in the Ward Room, everyone awaiting the arrival of Admiral Covey, her temporary assignment as station commander due to Kira's infirmity made permanent three days ago.

Bashir was glad that the Colonel was still in suspended animation, barring the re-knitting of her damaged brain matter by the nanites he had injected into her blood stream. And he planned to keep her as uniformed as possible as soon as she woke up.

Knowing the feisty Bajoran as well as he did, he knew she would fight the removal of Commander Dar, Lt. Daneeka, and Lt. Nog pending an inquiry and there being replaced by Commander Thorpe, Lt. Faltyne, and Lt. Commander Uhnari respectively. Lt. Commander Curbeam was also coming on as Strategic Operations Officer.

Each had encountered terrible loss the last several days, Thorpe and Uhnari losing one third of their crew during the suicide attack on the *Aegis*, and Faltyne had suffered months of abuse at the hands of the Crimson Shadow after the destruction of his own ship, the *Phoenix*.

Amazingly, Faltyne's sturdy Andorian constitution had kicked into overdrive once Bashir had been able to mend his myriad of injuries and he had been given a free week of meals courtesy of the Andorian restaurant on the Promenade. Dr. Amoros had been instrumental in arranging that deal. The large Grisellan had denied repeated request by Bashir to learn how he had been able to haggle the thrifty and formidable owner of the *Blue Note*

restaurant, a grizzled Andorian named Threk. But his ursine colleague had merely answered him with a fang toothed smile.

The tension was thick in the room. The new officers huddled together, facing off against the old guard. The veteran officers were still grieving for Lt. Easun. By the time Lt. Okala and Ezri had reached the Computer Core they had been arrived too late to save Lt. Easun. The man, a burned, bloodied husk, had died on the operating table, using his last ounce of breath to implicate a Cardassian agent as the culprit behind the attack.

Julian's face grew hot as his thoughts turned to some questioning the dead man's honesty, while others even speculating that Easun was responsible for rigging the computer with the bioneural technology that took over the station's weapons array. But what angered him even more was the accusations being bandied about that his old friend Garak hadn't died on the *Iloja*, but had been the person who escaped in the ship that sensors picked up decloaking and activating a transporter before the cruiser exploded.

Julian vehemently defended his friend to whoever brought up the absurd notion in his presence but he knew it was a losing battle.

There was a very poisonous environment hanging over Federation and Bajoran relations at the moment, each side blaming the other for the security lapses that resulted in Premier Lang's assassination. And Nitala'Rax's disappearance had thrown the Dominion on the list of suspects.

Bashir couldn't help but feel that the world seemed somewhat safer during the war than during the peace. He reached under the table and found Ezri's hand. He wrapped his own cool fingers around her warm flesh, giving her a gentle squeeze.

She rewarded him with a smile. "Something on your mind Julian?" His relationship with Dax was the only thing that seemed permanent anymore.

"I'll tell you later." Her brow knit with concern, before her eyes widened in surprise and she winked at him. Bashir knew Ezri was putting on a good front for his sake. He knew that her sessions with the distraught Lt. Okala had drained a lot out of her. She had recommended that the woman take a leave of absence and seek more intensive psychotherapy. Okala had taken Easun's death extremely hard. Instead, the young woman had retreated into the monastery at Dakeen, seeking guidance from the Prophets instead of science. And Bashir couldn't really blame her. Science, or the misappropriation of it had gotten them all into this pit, perhaps the Prophets, chief among them Captain Sisko, whom Kasidy declared had informed her that he resided with them at the close of the war, would answer the woman's plea and return from his perch and make things right like he used to do.

"Can't wait." Before he could reply, the doors to the Ward Room slid open, and Adm. Covey marched in, followed by a similarly stern Bajoran man,

and Trade Provost Mintof Urlak. Before any of the officers could stand, Covey said:

"Please remain seated." The woman easily took to the seat at the head of the table as if she had been the station commander for years and not only a few days. Urlak settled into an empty seat beside her. The Bajoran remained standing. The brown-skinned man raked over the group with a hard gaze, his demeanor immediately unsettling the doctor.

Covey glanced up at the man. "This is Colonel Jatarn Yaro. He will be the new Bajoran liaison." Jatarn nodded sharply but said nothing. The admiral then looked around the table. "I'm sure everyone has gotten acquainted so I will forgo the introductions." The admiral then regarded Urlak. "The Trade Provost has asked to attend our meeting while he is awaiting transport back to Cardassia Prime. Minister?"

The wizened Cardassian cleared his throat before he spoke. "Firstly I would like to extend my personal appreciation to your crew." His voice was rich, textured, and cultured, oddly reminiscent of Garak's Julian thought. "Your quick response has lessened the sting of our loss and reaffirmed our commitment to honor our alliances with the Federation and the Bajoran government.

Acting Premier Remec has informed me that he will put every resource currently in his disposal to finding Elim Garak and bringing him to justice. Our Security Forces are certain that Garak is only a small part of a much larger conspiracy. Premier Remec wants you to know that we will do our part."

"How do you know that Garak didn't die in the explosion of the *Iloja*?" Bashir said, sadly wishing that his friend had actually perished rather be guilty of killing Natima Lang. "There's been no conclusive evidence that he did survive, or that he had a hand in Premier Lang's assassination."

Urlak regarded him with a sad, pitying expression. The old man's wan smile infuriated the doctor. "Doctor Bashir, Elim Garak was a trained member of the Obsidian Order, an assassin countless times over. And the dying testimony of *Defiant* Tactical Officer Lt. Easun testifies to the fact that Cardassian agents were involved. I am certain that Colonel Kira will confirm that once she recovers. Garak is the likely choice. I am aware that you and he were comrades, but never be deceived by surface appearances where men like Garak are concerned."

"And how did you know about my relationship with Garak?"

"Doctor, that's irrelevant," Admiral Covey cut him off. "Gentlemen," she paused to nod at both Urlak and Jatarn. "You have my full assurances that the Federation will do everything within its power to get to the bottom of this. The whole relief effort is riding on this. Lang's assassination, with even the hint of Federation *and* Bajoran involvement is the perfect recruiting tool for the insurgency."

"The Bajoran government is similarly committed," Jatarn offered.

"Excellent," Urlak intoned. "This foul attempt to sever our bonds will backfire. It will only make us stronger."

I pray so, Bashir thought, throwing more hope upon the ash heap of them left on the altar of war, a war that was without end.

Jaros II
(Starfleet Stockade)
May 2376
One Week Later...

Terrence Glover hadn't been this happy to see his father since he had been a child. But instead of the frenzied, grappling love that a child held for their progenitors, Glover's anticipation was much more feverish: it burned and twisted in his gut, coating the back of his throat with bile.

He had received snatches of information, a lot of conjecture, speculation, and rumors, but he had learned nothing conclusive about the assassination of Premier Lang. He had tried to get the guards to contact Commander Uhnari on the *Aegis*, but his request had been denied.

And the access to news and information had been stringently curtailed, as was everything else in the military prison. Glover had been separated from his officers save Lt. Donar, the others spread to one of the fore corners of the planet, and conjugal visits were forbidden.

He ached to see Jasmine, to try to stitch together the tattered rag their marriage had become. But his requests had fallen on deaf ears. Cameras, guards, and speakers were everywhere in the facility, monitoring their every thought and even biosignal. Nothing was taken to chance.

The Bolian guard standing at the transparent forcefield to the visiting room even gave his father a thorough scan, one hand on the butt of his phaser the whole time. Glover thought about informing the overzealous guard that he was treating a Vice Admiral like a common miscreant, but he knew his father could defend himself.

The Captain rose slowly as the forcefield deactivated with a crackle. His father, tall and magisterial, his bald head sparkling under the ceiling lamps walked through. Glover smiled, though he was a bit perplexed that his father was out of uniform.

Samson Glover was dressed in dark green tunic with matching pants and boots. Terrence grasped his father's arm firmly, his father going one step further, navigating around the table to wrap his son in a strong hug.

"It's been too long Terrence," Adm. Glover's voice choked. "Too long."

"I know," Terrence found his own voice a little squeaky.

"How's Jasmine?"

"Fine." He wanted to say more. Terrence knew that how much his father loved Jasmine and how he had arranged for them to meet and been a champion for their marriage since day one. Glover preferred to solve his marriage problems himself, but Jasmine was too important to him to sacrifice what they had on the pyre of his ego. But unfortunately he couldn't reveal any of this while they were being watched.

Instead he said, "You're not going by to see her?"

"Don't have time," Samson broke the embrace, leaning back to gaze at Terrence with pride. "Deitra would be so proud of you son."

"Yeah, mother was a big fan of the prison system," Glover tried to joke, but it even sounded unfunny to him.

"She would be proud that her son was willing to stand by his principles no matter where it landed him. And I'm proud of you too." Terrence couldn't respond, the lump in his throat too big. It had been too long since he had seen his father.

Samson had raised him, dragging him from starbase to starbase while his mother Deitra traveled the stars, on her elusive quest to become a starship captain. She died before that could happen, lost with all hands on the *Tombaugh* fourteen years ago.

Silence pooled around them for a few minutes, until Glover couldn't stand it any longer. "You said that you didn't have time, why? Where are you going? Has something happened?"

"You could say that," Samson chuckled, but his gaze was now stony. "I'm going to see Sheldon, take some time off."

"Now? Of all times?"

"I don't have much of a choice," the Admiral admitted, his shoulders slumping.

"What do you mean?"

"Son, I've been removed from my position as Head of Starfleet Security. I decided to resign instead of accepting a vestigial job at Logisitics."

"What?" Glover stepped back, shock choking his thoughts.

"I've resigned."

"My God!"

"There's been a lot of things that have happened since you were incarcerated. I know how the prison system is with regards to information. Mainly because I helped set it up. I felt that the enemies of the Federation don't need a steady supply of up-to-date information."

"What's happened?" Glover asked, steering his father away from errant musing.

"Premier Lang has been assassinated."

"I heard about that."

"So, even my modifications weren't perfect." Samson looked into the camera peering down at them. "Warden Thasate and my likely successor might not be as forgiving as me," he said, his voice surely being transmitted through one of the room's hidden speakers.

"And there's more?" Glover prodded.

"Yes, there has been a lot of recriminations and hind covering. A lot of heads have rolled, me and Adm. Shanthi being chief among them."

"Adm. Shanthi has been removed as well?" Terrence couldn't believe it.

"No, not removed, reassigned: A safe, non-controversial job at Starfleet Administration. Rear Admiral Covey has been placed in charge of the Cardassian peacekeeping mission."

Glover nodded. If there was one person that could replace Thuosana Shanthi it would be Covey. She had risen quickly through the ranks and already had experience on Cardassia Prime, building up the Cardassian Security Forces. Trivially, she had preceded Terrence as Executive Officer of the *Starship Cuffe*.

"I can't say that Covey is necessarily a bad choice," Glover admitted, "but what about Security?"

"Het'al'al'ak hasn't found his yesman yet, so that position is still vacant, though my guess is Vice Admiral Shron from Andor," Samson rumbled. "It's no longer my concern anyway."

"Perhaps it's for the best," Terrence tried to be cheerful. "The job was only going to get more stressful as Santiago's advisors looked for more scapegoats to cover up for his faltering campaign."

"Didn't realize you were such a pundit," Samson joked.

"The presidential race is about the only bit of information they allow us to watch almost completely unedited," Terrence said. "Of course it's the kind of mindless drivel that sends most of the prisoners back to their cells."

"I can relate."

"So, off to see Uncle Sheldon?"

"Yes, he's still on Kurl, wrapping his studies into the lost Kurlan civilization. Perhaps I can be of assistance, in some or fashion."

"That's doubtful," Glover mumbled before he realized it. But he knew that his father was more than familiar with Uncle Sheldon's perfectionism.

"Well, I'll still give it the old Academy try," Samson grinned. Glover's heart thudded his chest. He knew his father was trying to be brave for him, like he had been his whole life, but Terrence knew his father was hurting. He could see it in the lines crisscrossing the man's face and in his slumping, tired posture.

It was the first time Terrence could honestly say that his father looked old to him. Even after his heart attack a few years ago, following his desperate fight against the Borg at Deep Space Five, Samson had been robust, hearty;

But not anymore. Being selected to head Starfleet Security was supposed to be the crowning achievement of his career, and it had been taken from him by craven politicians.

Glover wanted to do something, to put what influence he had gained during the war and in shutting down the True Way, but he was trapped here, voiceless, *useless*, until he was released, almost three long months in the future. By then it would be too late.

"It's all right son," Samson said, as if he could read Terrence's mind. "But what I have to tell you now...I think you might want to sit down." The softly spoken words hit Glover with the force of a cat-o-nine tails.

"What..."

"Sit down," Samson said gently.

"I prefer to stand."

"Sit!"

Glover jumped at the bellowed command, quickly finding a seat. Samson slid into the one opposite from him. Fighting the lump in his throat, Glover asked, "What is it?"

"It's *Aegis*."

"What...what about the *Aegis*?"

"It's...its gone son."

"Gone...where?"

"Destroyed by a suicide attack in the Crolsa system." Glover couldn't say anything, black eels swam before his eyes, his stomach heaved, and bile burning up to his throat. He pushed the bitter fluid back down, his eyes tearing with the effort. The hell that had visited his old friend Banti Awokou, destroying his ship, and had driven his old foil Donald Sandhurst from Cardassian space, had now claimed his ship.

"Seventy-five crewmen died." Samson said, filling a void of silence Glover couldn't. "It's fortunate that the senior staff survived."

Terrence blinked, his mind still unable to process what his father had just told him. Seventy-five people...gone. How was it possible? It had to be some kind of terrible joke? Just like his father pretending that he had left the Admiralty. It all had to be an illusion, a holodeck program, perhaps some kind of rehabilitation or reindoctrination experiment.

"Terrence...the *Aegis* has been destroyed." Samson pulled a padd from his pocket, handing the small device to Glover. "With the little cachet I had left, I was able to get this to you. It's the list of casualties. Commander Thorpe has already begun the process of personally sending condolences to each bereaved family."

"Thorpe?" Glover asked, the name escaping him.

"Commander Thorpe, your replacement. He commanded the mission to the Crolsa system."

"Thorpe...he did this?" Glover asked, taking the padd, but unable to look at the names listed on it. "It's his fault."

"It's the insurgents' fault Terrence."

"But, if I had been there..." Rising anger choked off the rest of his statement. His hand locked around the padd like a vise.

"Then you would've been overseeing the destruction of *Aegis*, instead of hearing about it from me."

"No," he declared. "I would've found a way. I always have."

"Not with *Cuffe*." Samson reminded him.

"But I didn't lose seventy-five people at one time either!"

"That might be true, but getting angry at Commander Thorpe isn't going to bring those people or *Aegis* back. Thorpe did the best job he could."

"I know." Glover agreed, even though he thought otherwise. His father had experienced the loss of a starbase thanks to the Borg, but he never known this kind of pain. Glover had experienced it twice, first with *Cuffe*, and now with *Aegis*, and to not even be on his own bridge when his ship was lost was monstrously wrong. But what was even worse was that he felt in his soul that had he been, *Aegis* would still be flying.

Terrence knew that he couldn't say those things to his father. Samson was dealing with his own burdens. He had to keep them too himself, put on his own mask, and cultivate his anger, use it to fuel his desire to get out of here to first see to the welfare of his fallen crew, and then to settle accounts with Starfleet Command for his father's disgrace and Jeffrey Thorpe for his own.