

GLENN G G MAITLAND

LAST HARVEST



Last Harvest

A Work of Star Trek Fan Fiction.

Glenn G G Maitland

Last Harvest by: Glenn Maitland

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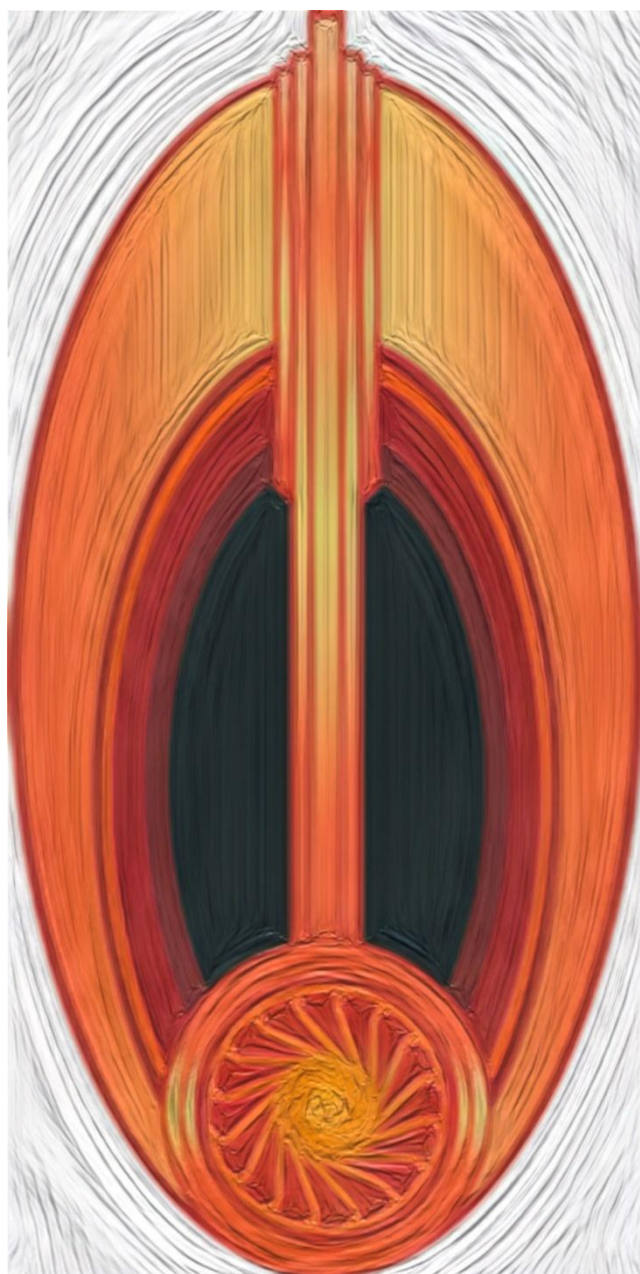
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Content Warning:

This story contains depictions of violence and criminal assault
which may be triggering for some readers.
Reader discretion is advised.



My Path.

*I walk my path
In light I'll see
Truth in beauty
All around me.*

*Through shadows deep
Towards night I'm thrust
My path in faith
From light to dusk.*

*Though blind and cold
Light I may not see
In darkness I'll trust the path
The Prophets have said for me.*

Nursery rhyme, "My Path" taken from: Hymns & Chants to
Light the Path.



Last Harvest:

The intense heat of the day was fading as the sun sank low on the horizon over the kava pastures standing tall and orange in the fields. Joci Sovul stretched his aching back and turned to face the setting sun. He'd toiled all season long on the lower steppes of the great Kendra Plains to establish and nurture his own modest field of kava in the rocky transitional fields which had for generations sat unused at the foot of Bajor's most fertile lands. The first winds of the approaching evening began stirring and while the air was still warm, Joci shivered as the air passed through his roughhewn barn wear to kiss the sweaty flesh of his back. He drew a long, deep breath and closed his eyes to taste the kava scented breeze in his lungs. It was a good day.

There had been more rain than expected back in the spring, which had greatly concerned the smaller kava farmers along the eastern steppes of the Kendra Plains. As things had turned out though, the entire province was looking at one of the best harvests in a generation. The Innovation and Exchange Program had provided the use of new drilling rigs to the major farms across the province. An odd surplus of rigs had meant even the smaller farms and independents had access to the revolutionary Cardassian implements, if they were interested. Joci had eagerly applied for consideration of his modest plot in the rocky fringes of the plains and was grateful when a flying, yellow platform appeared just before the planting season was to begin to survey and drill his fields.

Joci's D'jarra was to farm, just as his father's and his father's grandfather's had been. When Joci Sovul had been a youth his father, Joci Bron, had badly broken his hip and pelvis in a ploughing accident and had been forced to sell the family's small plot to one of the large industrial kava outfits to cover the expenses of his treatment and keep the family home. As a result of that accident there was no land for young Sovul to cultivate and claim as his own when he came of age. He toiled for eight seasons in

the fields that had been in his family for generations so that others could profit. When his mother went to walk with the Prophets two years earlier, he sold his family's home and managed to scrape enough together to buy his own tract of land on the fringes. This was his time to either succeed or fail.

His shoulders ached and his feet were numb from the hours of toiling in the rocky soil. As he turned away from the setting sun to look out over his orange crop of kava rustling in the winds, he smiled. His kava wasn't as high as that in the next field further up the slight ridge where the Kendra Plains properly began, but nearly every square inch of his land supported healthy, robust orange stalks. It would be a good harvest. The first good harvest in Joci Sovul's adult life.

In the distance he could see the clear demarcation between the fertile soils of the Kendra to the course and rocky earth of the neighboring Dahkur Province. It was as if the Prophets themselves had painted a line in the earth with a great brush to separate the rich black soils of the plains from the rough grey rocks and gravel of the hills and mountains.

He was just about to start loading his hand wagon with the moisture sensors, pruning shears and trenching pick he'd been using to break-up the dense rocky earth threatening to choke his kava stalks when a plume of fast approaching dust caught his attention. Joci blinked hard and brought his right hand up to shade his eyes as he tried to make out who, or what, was heading his way. He squinted and shook his head. The simple chain connecting the two pieces of the traditional d'ja pagh he wore on his right lobe rattled slightly. Frustrated, Joci turned and stooped to scoop his father's old field-glasses from their weathered leather case and quickly brought them up to his face.

Using his thumb to bring the glasses into focus he found the approaching plume and let a deep sigh escape his chest. A youth, on a gawdy red Prowler-Trike was blasting along the rocky flats at an irresponsible speed kicking up gravel, rock and dust in his wake

Idiot child. Thought Joci to himself as he watched the young man navigate a particularly jagged rock in his path and nearly tip over.

Oddly relieved to see that it was just a boy coming to disturb the late afternoon, Joci lifted his glasses to the horizon. Above the distant Dahkur Hills hung a great ring in the sky. At just over half a kilometer in diameter it was visible during the day. It looked like a ghostly, looming moon, out of place in the pale blue sky. Minister Ald Tammer, the representative of Kendra Province, had explained years ago that the Cardassians had put a station in orbit of Bajor to manage trade and the distribution of goods between the capital, Dahkur City, and their own distant home world.

It was a ghostly ring ever-present above the Dahkur Hills.

Teklan Sniew

The Communal Hall of the Teklan Sniew Monastery was always the bustling heart of the modest institution, but on this late afternoon in the high summer just days before the harvest and the annual Festival; the Hall was unusually busy. The Prylars had been gathered by the senior representatives from the Teklan Constabulary Force. Most of the monks mulled around in silence shaking their heads and raising and lowering their baggy brown hoods like confused omcar tortoises.

The Township's Constable and a single deputy stood at the head of a short table at the rear of the hall quietly speaking with an old Prylar wearing a tight-fitting cowl.

"Prylar-Senior Ajku, you're certain of the girl's identity?" asked the Constable while his young deputy silently scribed beside him on an old digital tablet.

"Yes of course, she's Nata Onar. She works with her mother at the Teklan bakery..." Aiku pulled at his simple brown robes nervously. He'd never experienced anything like this nightmare.

"If she's from town, what was she doing here inside the walls of Teklan Sniew?" asked Constable Urin Dol, intentionally cutting off the old monk.

In twenty-three years, Urin had only dealt with one homicide before this afternoon; a lover's quarrel which had turned violent when the husband learned of his wife's infidelity. That had been fifteen years earlier. While Urin had successfully closed the case, he'd had no desire to ever find himself embroiled in another murder investigation. Aside from the occasional case of "death by misadventure" and the rare self-murder events which sometimes followed poor harvests, there'd not been a true murder in Teklan Township in all that time. This *Nata Onar* had broken the murder-free streak Urin had prayed to the Prophets might last until his retirement in another eight years.

“...Onar volunteers here every afternoon after classes. She helps Prylar Lompa in the kitchens and has been taking calligraphy lessons with Prylar Noll in our library.” Aiku stopped pulling at his robes and craned his neck to see around the constable putting him to question.

“Prylar-Senior?” Seminarian-Prylar Jaxx Crebbollo lowered his hood and stood a respectful distance back from the two officers.

Urin took a step back and turned to face the young man who’d interrupted the interview with the Prylar-Senior.

“Constable Urin, this is Jaxx Crebbollo, a seminarian here. He’s to take his vows after harvest.” Aiku nodded towards the young man standing nervously beside the constable’s deputy.

“Prylar-Senior, I can’t find Rifu. He’s not in the rectory and his cell is empty.”

“Rifu?” asked Urin with a raised eyebrow.

“Rifu Trij, another seminarian. He only just recently came to us to begin his path towards service to the Prophets. Have any of the others seen Rifu, Jaxx?” asked Aiku.

“Prylar-Senior, Prylar Lompa says he saw Rifu leave on his trike just before...” The young man cleared his throat, suddenly unable to speak.

“I see. Thank-you, Crebbollo. Get yourself some water and don’t leave the hall until the Constable has had the opportunity to speak with you.”

The boy bowed slightly and excused himself without saying a word.

“This Rifu, he was what? To the girl?” asked Urin after instructing his deputy to find Prylar Lompa next.

“They were friends...both of the same age, similar interests.”

“*Friends?*” asked Urin, his left eyebrow raising slightly.

“Carnal relations are strictly forbidden to this order, constable.”

“You did say this Rifu was just a prylar-in-training, Prylar-Senior. Can you be certain of their relationship?”

“They were friends. Nothing more. Nata Onar is...*was* an honourable young woman. She was barely seventeen...” A tear rolled down Aiku’s left cheek and he stifled the sobs which were suddenly struggling to escape his chest.

Urin Dol quietly asked his deputy for the tablet to review the notes. All the prylars were in a state of shock. A few had broken down into quiet sobs upon learning of the discovery made just over an hour earlier in the Gratitude Hall.

“Who found the girl?”

“Ire Allor...she’s a sister from the convent at Teklan Niwen.”

“I’ll speak with the sister next then.”

Teklan T424

Two of the nine Lufeki cargo skiffs rested in the triangular operations yard formed by the three, long, low, Nissen huts the Cardassians had erected on the edge of Teklan Township. The skiffs were mated to heavy black undercarriages attached to their underbellies with magnetic plates and stembolts. The black carbonized tubes added nearly half a meter to the large platforms' height and they in turn housed an intricate arrangement of focused laser emitters. At the apex of the triangle formed by the three Nissen huts stood a tall observation tower manned by two uniformed Cardassian Troopers. Ostensibly they were on-station to keep an eye out for possible threats to the small installation. In reality, they were simply soaking in the last of the day's glorious heat. Bajor was a cold planet, especially in the northern hemisphere, save for these few weeks of wonderous heat at the end of the world's summer season.

"Can I get a flux socket sometime today?!" yelled Kurlen Lamar from beneath skiff 2281.

Yok Dorla, the site's chief engineer sighed and pushed himself up off the overturned fueling crate he'd been using as a stool. He turned silently from the sun to head into the open end of hut number two, where they'd established a workshop and repair center for their nine skiffs. Skiff 2281 was up on the lift and Lamar was standing beneath the battered yellow and brown platform surrounded by loose cables and the business end of the ion compression reactor's control rod.

"Where did Alla go?" asked Dorla as he deftly scooped the requested socket from a shadow board by the hut's primary bay door.

"He needed a restroom break...socket!"

Dorla handed the tool off to Lamar who took it blindly and began frantically tightening something buried deep within the skiff's innards. Lamar's hands were covered in dark green compression lubricant, and he'd slopped some of the glorified

casing grease onto Dorla's clean, tan-coloured coveralls. Yok looked down at the stain and held his tongue. An engineer shouldn't be afraid to get dirty. After spending years toiling in motor pools and engine rooms though, Yok took his earned place as chief engineer seriously and had an unspoken pride in his pristine uniform which identified him as an engineer of the Third Corps of the Ninth Order. The uniform declared him to be an engineer. The fact it was usually immaculate signaled that he was an important engineer.

A sharp -CLACK!- and a soft "ping" from the skiff's diagnostic panel high above brought a satisfied grunt from Kurlen Lamar who happily wiggled out from under the skiff, socket in hand. "Done! Finally."

"Uh huh...now all you have to do is put the stupid thing back together," said Yok dryly. The green stain on his sleeve was bothering him.

"That *ghevon* Alla can put this heap back together! I'm going to go burn this uniform and take an hour-long hot bath to get this grease out of my pores, ha!" Kurlen stepped out from beneath the lift and spread his arms wide to show his superior the mess he'd made of himself.

Dorla quickly surveyed the younger man and could clearly see he wasn't exaggerating. "The compression chamber is properly repaired?"

"Of course it is! It would have been quicker to just replace..."

"We don't have the parts. You know that. Every one of these skiffs needs to be fully operational in short order. You're certain it's fixed?"

Lamar lowered his arms and let the smile die on his lips. "I assure you, sir, skiff 2281 is now fully operational. On the honour of the Third of the Ninth, I swear it."

Dorla looked past his mechanic at the suspended yellow skiff and grunted. Somehow, they'd managed to keep all nine of their skiffs up and running for the last three years straight. No

other unit deployed to the planet's surface could say that. His team was young, but they were dedicated and moreover, efficient.

"Very well, on Your Honour. Draw a new uniform from stores once you're clean, but first, get Bemett in here to put this back together. Glinn Gomlir is expecting a full status report this afternoon and I do not want to make him wait for a single skiff."

"Yes sir, of course." Kurlen came to attention and bowed his head slightly.

Dorla waited for the mechanic to leave the hut on his way to the low stone building the Tetrarch of Teklan Township had gifted the visiting Cardassians to utilize as a barracks nearly nine years earlier. Then he approached the skiff and ran his hand along the black undercarriage until the frayed edge of a peeling orange decal poked him. They'd decorated the black tubes with bright orange stickers meant to resemble kava stalks. Once all the skiffs were 100% operational the next task would be removing the cumbersome agricultural accessories and reinstalling the gun mounts and ordinance rails.



Pitch, Roll and Wreck

Trij winced and cried out as the sharp pieces of gravel and flinty pieces of rocky shoal blasted up against his exposed cheeks and nose from the trike's stabilizing vents. He'd not given himself the time to trim the vector veins to angle the disturbed debris out and away from his narrow seat atop the Prowler. Neither had he properly primed the magnetic transition regulator for the overpowered trike's ion thruster. Both these oversights flew in the face of basic operating procedures and would be cause for the Dahkur Provincial Licensing and Transportation Authority to revoke his operator's permit.

None of that mattered to the youth barely managing to remain mated to the firm, narrow seat of the bright red trike as it rocketed out across the wastes. All that mattered was getting as far away from Teklan Sniew as quickly as possible. *Grab and go.* That was as far as Trij's thoughts had managed to get...*grab and go...* It was all he could think to do.

He barely managed to weave around a large rock jutting up from the ground which would have ended his mad dash across the desert in devastating fashion. The trike's primary resonance conduit sent heat warnings to the single round gauge mounted low between the handlebars. Trij saw the warning but couldn't quite focus on what it meant. He'd never gone so fast on the Prowler before and in the back of his panicked mind he knew he'd never want to go so fast ever again.

The trike's pulse index was dangerously high. Absently, Trij realized the power conduit would be shunted by the secondary phase deflector and the engine would die to save the trike from tearing itself apart. Just as he was about to adjust the transition regulator, a large stone bounced up from the hot vents spewing flotsam at the boy from between his legs and struck him squarely on the chin. The pain was exquisite and reflexively Trij slammed his eyes closed and recoiled.

The red trike pitched violently to the left.

The boy tried to recover control by pushing the yoke hard over and sent the front end of the trike into a sharp roll...the left rear ion strut nearly dug into the rocky surface, then pulled up and away and the right rear ion strut instead bit into the shale. Then there was an explosion of sounds. Searing heat and a flash of blinding light. The sensation of weightlessness and then, in an instant, nothing.

In the distance, unseen by Rifu Trij, a solitary figure broke from a stand of orange kava and ran towards the raining cloud of dirt and rock.

Ne' hol Nor

“Kel Derek, what’s the status update on the primary docking port?”

Kotan Derek, the chief overseer assigned to the contingent of engineers from the Ninth Order, looked up from his cluttered desk to find Gul Padar standing in his doorway. Kotan had just finished reviewing the latest station update.

Rising silently from his hard chair, Kotan cleared his throat and concentrated on moderating his tone. Padar was a preening idiot, but he was also the Gul in charge of *Ne' hol Nor*. “The primary docking port is online and fully functional, Gul Padar.”

Padar watched the tall, younger man’s dark eyes closely. He believed the eyes were the windows to a man’s soul and would always betray his true nature, if he was attempting to hide it. Derek was overqualified for the position to which he’d been assigned. Padar knew the young man was not only an engineer of exceptional ability, but also an architect and expert in zero-gravity spaceframes. *Ne' hol Nor* was a glorified docking ring – preassembled and shipped to Bajor behind four tugs like a household appliance. Having a man as qualified as Derek supervise the flicking of light switches and fitting of O-rings was like having a plasma physicist being responsible for replacing lighting elements. Still, Derek was a lowly Kel and Padar was a Gul and duty was duty.

“So, we’re prepared to receive our incoming support vessels?”

Kotan drew a silent breath. The old man was going bald and the small frons in the center of his forehead looked as though it was melting as the muscle and sinew beneath the mottled skin was running to fat with age. He didn’t dislike Padar for any personal reason he could readily cite; he just resented the buffoon pestering him with inane banalities.

“The specified modifications have been made, Gul Padar. The docking port could handle anything up to three times the size of a *Groumall* Type-One freighter.”

Padar smiled at hearing the confidence in the young Kel’s voice. “Excellent, Kotan, simply excellent.”

Derek hadn’t been told why he’d been tasked with modifying the station’s standard docking ring. He’d been given a clear list of tolerances he was to meet and a timeline in which he was to have his men complete the work. The smile on the old Gul’s face was jarring. For just a second there was a glint in Padar’s dead brown eyes and Kotan couldn’t help himself from being curious...

“I believe my men have completed these modifications ahead of the projected deadline, Gul Padar.”

The smile dropped away from Padar’s face as quickly as it had appeared. The older man grunted and offered a stiff nod. He wanted to get back to his own office overlooking Ops and begin working on his triumphant report back to the Central Command. Padar turned slightly to leave the young Kel to his updates and maintenance tasks. He had one foot out the door, but Kotan wasn’t going to let him go.

“Gul Padar...surely you can now let me know what these *support vessels* are, precisely? After all, I’ve delivered everything you’ve asked for and ensured every man here from the Third has performed above and beyond any reasonable level of service.” Kotan closed his mouth when he saw the Gul quickly move back around and through the narrow hatch into the small and cramped office.

The solid red patterned door slid out from between the bulkheads and sealed the Gul and the young Kel in the little room. Padar ground his teeth and mulled the request over quickly. Kotan was a genius and there was no doubt that things aboard *Ne’ hol Nor* had only gone as smoothly and quickly as they had because of Derek’s efforts.

“Very well, Kotan. Under pain of death, you are to share this with no one. Do you understand?” Padar stepped forward

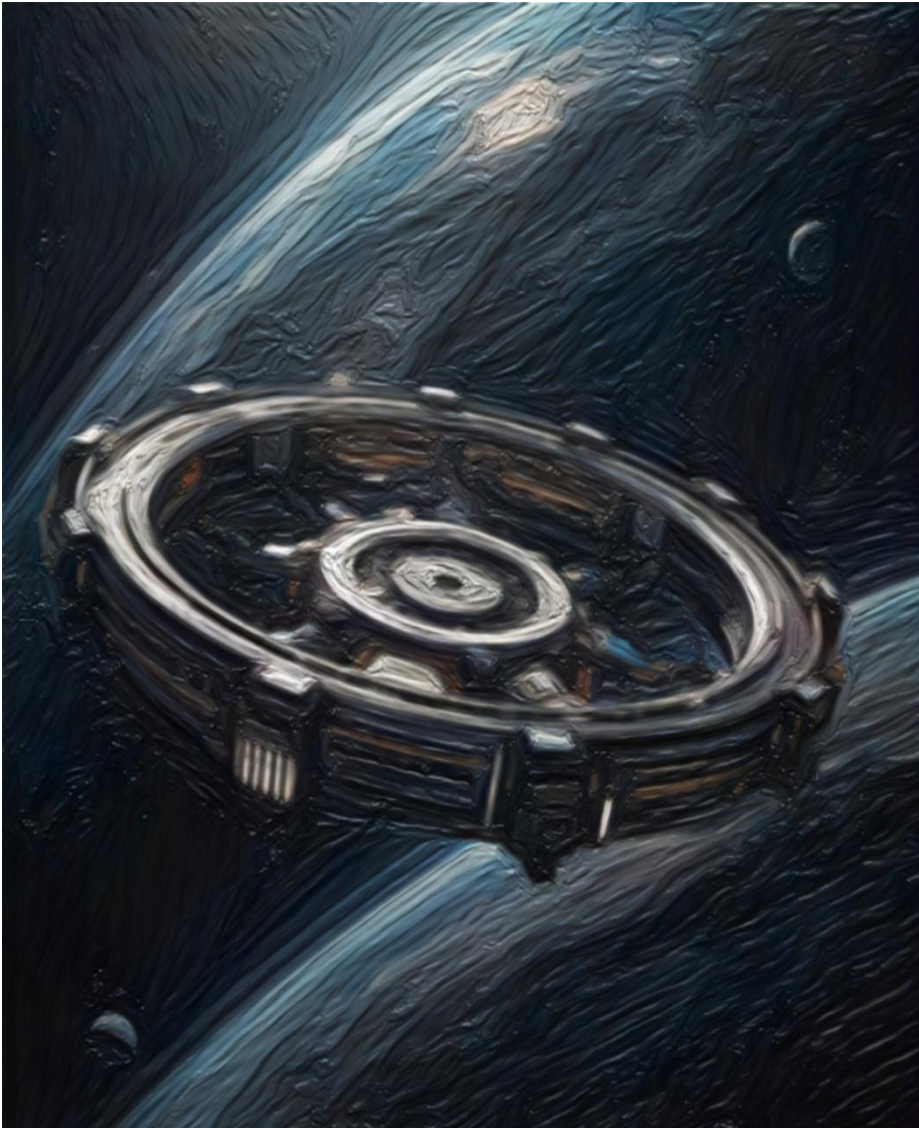
again and was now as close to Kotan as he could get with the cluttered desk between them.

"I understand, Gul Padar..."

"In just over seventy hours' time the *Prelic* and the *Oroc Raallac* will be arriving here with the Legion once assembled at Alpha 441." Another broad, toothy smile appeared on Padar's face.

"The *Oroc Raallac*? Is that...are those new transports?" Kotan shook his head slightly. The names of what he presumed were ships, meant nothing to him, though he wondered if these were the massive Colony ships he'd heard whispers about.

"Transports? Ha! No, no...*Galor-class* heavy battle cruisers, my dear Kotan. The largest, most powerful ships ever built. Two of only a handful." Padar watched the younger man closely to see if he understood the import of this confidential news. The tall young man just quietly blinked his dark eyes and calmly waited to hear if there was more information to take in.



Gratitude Hall

Urin Dol stepped out of the side entrance to the Communal Hall into the shady confines of the monastery's primary courtyard. The sun had sunk low on the horizon, and the air was growing cool and crisp. Close on his heels was young Sev Daro, his most junior deputy and the man he'd assigned to scribe the long list of interviews. They'd just finished speaking with Prylar Lompa, the cook, about this unaccounted for Rifu Trij. The boy was spotted speeding away from Teklan Sniew atop a red Prowler-Trike.

Shouldn't be hard to find a boy on an old out-of-date trike. Thought Urin to himself as he worked his way through the interview.

Sev had silently taken everything down in shorthand on the digital tablet they'd drawn from the Precinct before setting off in response to the panicked call for help earlier that afternoon. The device had a simple voice to digital scribe program as well as an enormous memory server for the live voice and video recorder functions, but Urin demanded all his deputies *do the work* of policing and not rely solely on technology.

Lompa had been an emotional mess. The fat man claimed to have looked upon the girl as something akin to a daughter. The interview had taken longer than Urin would have liked, but he needed as much information on this Trij boy as he could get. It was early stages to be sure, but murder needed a motive and the preliminary survey of the victim lent credence to Dol's initial feelings when he'd heard about Rifu Trij from the Prylar-Senior.

The heat from the day's sun could still be felt radiating off the stone walls of the Communal Hall and up from the cobbled stone courtyard, but the evening winds were beginning to stir, and the air was blessedly cool. Urin took a second to pull a long cool breath into his lungs. The monks had all been gathered in the Hall as Urin had requested and that many bodies milling about in an enclosed space with no environmental controls had created a

rather musty and unpleasant atmosphere. Dol was silently grateful to be outside and away from the blubbering, sweating men.

“Over there, sir,” said Sev in his clear, fine, young voice.

Urin blinked and exhaled. He’d not noticed the green-robed figure sitting perfectly still on the other side of the courtyard from where they were standing by the Communal Hall. Sister Ire Allor, the nun from Teklan Niwen hadn’t been in the Communal Hall with the monks. Urin and Sev had stepped outside to fetch her as Prylar Lompa had shared that she was overcome with emotion.

Dol drew another breath of air, then began trekking towards the small woman seated on a low stone bench beside an empty clay planter. He was somewhat annoyed she’d not remained in the Hall, but given what she’d discovered, Urin was prepared to be forgiving. As he and Sev approached the woman dressed in the green robes and orange habit of the Teklan Niwen sisters, another brown-uniformed deputy appeared at the entrance to the Gratitude Hall directly opposite the Communal Hall.

Ruha Sac had an identical digital tablet in his left hand as the one Sev Daro carried. Over his right shoulder hung a bright blue case which housed the force’s crime scene management equipment. Ruha walked past the small nun without so much as a glance and moved to head off Urin Dol midway across the courtyard.

“Sac, what’ve you got?” said Urin quietly as his Senior Deputy drew near.

“I’ve sealed the doors to the Gratitude Hall, boss. The scene’s been recorded, eye level and by drone...the uh, the girl’s been processed *in situ*. It’s all backed up in both primary and permanent memory.” Ruha Sac half lifted his tablet towards the constable but then lowered his arm. The tablet’s display screens were turned off. Ruha didn’t want anyone catching a glimpse of the horror who didn’t absolutely need to see it.

“What about her?” asked Urin surveying the strained look on his friend’s face and then glancing past Ruha to where the sister sat like a small, petrified bird.

“Ah...she kind of showed up at the door as I was bringing the drone in.”

“She didn’t get back inside?!” questioned Urin a little louder than he’d have liked.

“Thank the Prophets, no. She knocked at the door like she was coming to visit a next-door neighbor. I secured the drone, covered the...the victim, and asked her to just take a seat until we got to her. I guess she’s been sitting there for about half an hour now.” Sac had a sad look wash across his face, and he turned to look back at the little green form, still sitting perfectly still on the bench.

“I see. You’ve *secured* the Hall, as in locked?”

“Yes, Dol...but I’m having trouble uploading everything to the servers.”

Post T424

Nearly a decade earlier, when the initial contact teams had negotiated ongoing assistance and trade stations in and around Bajor's major agricultural and political centers, the Tetrarch of Teklan Township had offered up a low stone building on the edge of his township for the Cardassians' use. The low stone building had once been a storage structure for dry goods. In recent decades it had been converted into a makeshift banquet hall and ale garden used for special occasions and secular festivals. The building had sat empty for years when the Council of Ministers finally agreed that it would be in Bajor's best interests to host a few small Cardassian encampments on-world.

When the first wave of grey-uniformed engineers arrived in Teklan and were presented with the stone building, a long-forgotten Glinn remarked that Klingon targs were given better lodging than what was on offer. A few months into the new arrangement, and the Nissen huts had been erected; the building, which for all intents and purposes was little more than a warehouse by that time, was outfitted as a practical, if spartan barracks. Communications and monitoring equipment was gradually installed as well as a buried Ion Variance Fusion Reactor for the small installation's power needs. A second level was constructed where a secure two-way subspace interface was located just outside of the compound commander's personal suite.

"What in blazes are you doing Bemett?!" called Lamar up to his partner from the bottom of the skeletal staircase leading up to Glinn Gomlir's suite.

Bemett Alla, who'd only come back to the barracks to use the facilities, was busy fiddling with the controls on the secure interface. "Hold on!"

Kurlen wriggled his nose and snorted derisively. He'd been left to deal with the skiff on his own because Alla had needed the head—now here he was playing with the computer. Still covered in

grease, Lamar began climbing the stairs to see what exactly his partner was up to.

Alla stood back from the black-and-white interface on the terminal and watched as the system's telemetry rolled across the secondary status screen. What looked like a sine wave gesticulated gracefully in a pleasing green colour. Kurlen was just climbing to the landing as the green wave wiggled and synced with the orange wave vacillating across the terminal's primary viewscreen.

"I was about to head back to the shop when we got a coded signal from Post D0001...I don't know where Emix is." Bemett, dressed in his own grey jumpsuit smiled in satisfaction as he gazed at the two screens with satisfaction.

"What is this?" asked Kurlen as he rounded the top of the stairs and moved towards his wayward partner standing before the computer.

"They're testing the subspace dampening transducers. We're in sync with every post between here and the capital." Bemett turned and looked at the shorter man standing in the filthy uniform.

"So soon? Won't that raise suspicions?" Kurlen moved past his friend and studied the amplitude settings. The plan was to eventually jam every Bajoran signal on the planet in preparation for the operation, but that was still days away.

"It's not our place to question orders, Kurlen...but this must mean things are happening even quicker than they initially told us, yes?"

Kurlen stepped aside so as not to block Alla's view of the terminal, but kept his own eyes fixed on the undulating waves. "I guess...where's Emix? He should be manning this terminal, it's his watch."

"Heh...there was somebody else in one of the stalls in the latrine. Sounded like he was wrestling a *flayer*, must have been Emix. Batbird stew doesn't agree with his delicate stomach, ha!"

The orange and green waves suddenly went flat and both screens were blank. A second later and a coded message

appeared on the primary screen with the insignia of the Ninth Order, Third Corps proudly displayed. Alla leaned forward and acknowledged the transmission, then the terminal went dark.

Before Lamar could say anything, Emix was at the bottom of the stairs. "What are you two doing up there?!" he called with some alarm in his voice.

"Doing your job, you lazy *mitz*! Next time defecate before your shift starts! Ha-ha!" shouted Bemett in response.

Emix began pacing up the stairs from the common barracks below. His expression was a mix of anger and embarrassment.

"Was that it?" asked Kurlen, still gazing at the dark terminal.

"I guess...-*sniff, sniff*...you could use a bath," smiled Alla.

"Hmmpf, yes, well there's a skiff waiting for you to reassemble out in hut two."

Shock

Sac had tried three more times to upload the data collected at the crime scene with Constable Urin watching. All three times the tablet failed to connect to the central server. In fact, when Urin asked to see young Daro's tablet to check if it was just Sac's equipment that was failing, he discovered that neither of the tablets were even detecting a network signal. All three men stood in the middle of the courtyard and consulted their personal commsats. All three found their devices to be useless. No network detected.

One more complication. Thought Urin as he slid his palm sized commsat back in his uniform pocket.

Ruha Sac suggested that they hard-link his crime scene tablet to Daro's device, which only had the day's interviews in memory. This way they could backup the crime scene data to a second tablet and at least have an independent copy should something happen. It wasn't standard practice, but preserving evidence was critical. Urin consented to the copy.

Digging into his blue case, Ruha quickly produced the necessary patch-cable and with Daro's assistance, linked the two tablets and made a copy of all his files to Daro's tablet. Once that was done, Urin ordered Deputy Ruha back to the Precinct with the evidence and told Deputy Daro to go let the prylars know they could return to their duties with the provision that none of them were to leave Teklan Sniew or attempt to access the Gratitude Hall.

The deputies separated and headed in different directions. Urin took the tablet from Daro before he headed back into the Communal Hall to dismiss the throng of anxious monks. The sister was still seated silently at the far end of the courtyard.

Urin Dol drew another long breath of late afternoon air into his lungs and slowly walked towards the bench where the old nun had rooted herself. Without a word, he gently lowered himself down beside her and leaned back against the bench's gently angled back.

They sat in silence for a long time. A slight, elderly nun in a faded blue robe, modestly held in place by a brass ring fitted against the woman's sternum which held an impossibly long, intertwined sash.

The sash was of the same material as the robe, only it had been cut into fine strips and painstakingly woven into a broad belt which cinched at the nun's waist. The brass ring was woven to the end of this belt section of the sash. Urin noted the braids wrapped around the woman's middle three times before the belt ran up her back and over her left shoulder. It then passed through the ring and back up over her right shoulder, then along the back of her neck only to plunge down her left side again, where it was neatly tied off to that same worn, brass ring.

As the last of the direct sunlight faded and died away Urin turned to quietly assess the woman seated to his left. Her eyes were open, but droopy. Her skin looked thin as paper. The orange cowl which formed the old nun's habit was as faded as the blue robe she wore. It was a tight-knit wool. All the sisters wore woolen habits and even as a boy, Urin Dol had wondered how they could stand the restrictive head coverings in the blazing heat of summer. She hadn't moved. He focused briefly on her d'ja pagh, which boasted three strands of intricately beaded decoration. Ire Allor wasn't just a nun; she was the equivalent of a Mylar.

"Sister Ire, I'm sorry, but you really need to speak to me now, please." Urin kept his voice low, but firm. His own path may have grown somewhat cloudy over the years, but he remained a pious man.

Ire Allor's nostrils flared slightly. She slowly blinked as if gently stirring from a long slumber. Silently she turned her head to look at the large, brown-uniformed constable sitting beside her. His once black hair was tinged with grey around the temples and his d'ja pagh was a simple piece of tin clipped to a thin black chain attached to a plain black clasp...a laborer's d'ja pagh.

She cleared her throat and hesitated for just a moment.

"Is...? Onar, will she be, alright?"

Urin could see the old woman's mind still struggling to comprehend what she'd seen. Her eyes were the palest green and seemed dim, clouded even. She was clearly in shock. Gently, Dol took the woman's cold, boney hands in his own and held them between his warm meaty palms.

"No, Sister Ire. No, I'm afraid to say she won't be."



Denorios Belt

“Gul Lasot, incoming transmission from *Ne’ hol Nor*,” reported the young trooper manning the *Boheek*’s communications pit behind Gul Lasot’s command chair.

Lasot bristled in his chair and ran his hand down his neatly trimmed beard, taking a second to temper his words. “Tell me it isn’t Gul Padar, again.”

“I’m afraid so, sir. The transmission is properly coded and tagged for relay to the Central Command.” Amim Moro, Gil Second Class, verified the triumvirate of encrypted pass codes attached to the encrypted transmission to verify its authenticity.

The *Boheek* was an older *Terok*-class cruiser which had been repaired more times than anyone of the one hundred and nine Cardassians aboard could collectively recall. Her forward torpedo tube had been fowled during her deployment to the disputed asteroid fields beyond Tohvun III six years earlier. A rogue Tzenkethi blockade runner had dared open fire on the freighter convoy the *Boheek* was tasked with escorting. The Tzenkethi were obliterated at the cost of one-third the convoy and the *Boheek* permanently damaged.

The ship was retasked from the Second to the Ninth Order and retrofitted to serve as both a cargo vessel, armed troop transport and most recently, subspace relay post and ECM platform.

The Denorios Belt had always been a tricky patch of space to navigate with its recurring and often unpredictable plasma storms. Following a largely unexplained catastrophe in the adjacent Umoth Nebula eight years earlier, the entire region was now constantly engulfed by plasma storms. There was no nebula anymore to speak of. Just a massive area of never ending, intense plasma storms. Both the Cardassians and Bajorans had simply taken to calling the area, the Badlands.

As a result of the intense plasma storms, it was difficult for the portable, terrestrial subspace transceivers the Third Corps had

deployed on Bajor's surface to get clear transmissions to Cardassia Prime without a relay point to strengthen them. The *Boheek* served as such a relay, as well as the lynchpin of a three-ship task force of tactical listening posts.

"That's his fifth transmission in the last seven hours. What can the man be sharing with Central Command – the frequency of his restroom visits?" Lasot caught himself and refrained from continuing. Padar was an idiot, but he was also second in command of the Ninth Order. Not a man to upset if one was hoping for a transfer someday.

Lasot had attended the Engineering Academy on Cardassia Prime and by so doing, earned a commission in the Ninth Order. As an orphan with no sponsor other than a Government School Master who'd taken an unwholesome interest in him as a boy; to get educated and gain a commission was quite a feat. Lasot's passion was not engineering though. At least not the kind the Ninth Order often found itself tasked with. His desire was to work with and maintain heavy machinery. The Mechanized Divisions of the Seventh Order offered him everything he could ever hope for...if only he could get a transfer.

"Encryption has been verified in triplicate, Gul Lasot. Shall I relay the transmission to Central Command?" asked Moro from his pit.

Lasot shifted again in his seat. The stiff brown webbing of his vacusealed pressure suit rustled and cracked against itself. He loathed the horrible space suits everyone aboard the old ship were forced to wear. In the Seventh Order, Guls worked on the ground, high atop mechanized monsters of power and destruction. They breathed fresh air and wore the far more comfortable flayer leather tunics and body armor...

He sighed his resignation and let his head fall forward slightly. He was wearing the regulation open-helmet and braced his head with the hard rounded guard of the helmet's right side in his hand.

"Yes, yes by all means if it's verified, send it along."

The Gil reported a successful relay and then the bridge fell silent. Lasot cradled his head and stared absently at the status panel built into the right arm of his command chair.

A yellow light flickered. A red light illuminated.

"Tactical?" Lasot called half-heartedly.

"Sir, it's the freighter *Carba Vul* out of Jeraddo. They're loaded with grains from Rakantha routed for Bajor VIII." Responded the trooper seated just ahead and to the left of Lasot.

Bajor had three operational ships (all freighters) large enough and capable of significant power generation to be rated as tactical concerns for the Cardassians. The *Caba Vul* was one of them.

"Relative position? Did they detect the transmission?" Lasot looked up to see for himself, the main viewer was always in tactical mode.

House Call

“Well Joci Sovul, that is one fortunate young man,” said Dr. Orvo as he stepped out of the low clay building’s separate bed chamber and headed directly to the sink in Joci’s modest kitchen to wash his hands.

“He’ll be alright then?” asked Sovul from his seat at the kitchen table.

Dr. Orvo let the water run for a moment before methodically scrubbing his hands in the farmer’s sink. He always washed up after an examination with cold water and the isoflat-disinfectant soap he was never without. On the off-chance he’d come into contact with a patient’s blood through a routine exam, the cold water would retard his own circulation and allow the soap time to cleanse any tiny open sores, cuts or abrasions he might have on his own hands.

“I said he was fortunate, Joci. I didn’t say he’d be alright.” Orvo kept his attention on his scrubbing.

Joci wriggled his nose and sighed. Looking past the doctor, dressed in the green linens of his profession, to the small window above the kitchen sink, Joci could see that full darkness had fallen across the steppes of the Kendra Plains. Collecting the boy and dragging him back to his modest home had taken hours.

The water stopped running and the short, thin doctor turned from the sink holding his hands up in front of him as if they were some wondrous thing he wished to show the world. “Have you a towel, Joci?”

“Sorry, Doctor, yes...” Joci pulled himself up from his seat at the table and moved to find a clean towel for the doctor he’d called for immediately upon getting the unconscious, broken boy into the bed.

Orvo dried his hands slowly and looked around the little house. A small table with two chairs. An old stove and a single sink. A small altar set above the hearth of the empty fireplace, replete with three old candles. He’d known Joci’s father when both

of them had been young men. Joci Bron had been a good farmer up until his accident. Orvo had cared for him right up until the Prophets called him home. To the end, Joci Bron had been a good man.

“He’s got four broken ribs. His right arm is set, but I’ll have to check it in a week or so. Two broken legs...he’s lucky he didn’t end up like your father.” Orvo folded the towel and placed it next to the sink.

“Will you take him back to Mulkul Township, to the hospital?” asked Joci.

“No, I don’t think moving him would be wise. Besides, I brought my quad. Broken bones and bumpy rides are not a wise combination. He did this by crashing a trike?” Orvo readjusted his green tunic and looked over to the spot where he’d laid his examination bag.

“A Prowler, yes. Idiot child was going far too fast.”

“A Prowler? Out on the desert? The Prophets wept. I thought they’d banned those things, trikes?” Orvo deftly glided away from the sink and retrieved his kit, then turned and set his open bag upon Joci’s kitchen table.

“They did. Too unstable...I suppose he got it second-hand,” said Sovul as he reluctantly moved to the chest of drawers beside his sitting area’s well-worn sofa bench where he kept his purse.

“Normally I’d ask for fifty lita for the house call and another hundred and twenty for the exam and treatment, Joci...” Orvo made a visual survey of his equipment to be sure he’d not forgotten anything. Absently he checked his commsat, no signal. He couldn’t call for a transport if he wanted to.

“Yes, Doctor, of course.” Sovul pulled open the top drawer and found his purse right where it he’d left it. He doubted he had two hundred lita, but he forced his dumb fingers to begin shuffling through the notes and coins just the same.

Orvo could sense the young farmer’s anxiety. “Of course, this lucky, but somewhat reckless child landed on your doorstep uninvited. As the Prophets teach us, no one is so blessed as he

who helps without obligation. Let's say, ten lita for my fuel costs and we shall call things even."

Sovul's head perked up as a shameful relief swept over him. "Th...thank-you, Dr. Orvo. Thank you."

Orvo took the bills and smiled. He knew how hard Joci Sovul was trying to walk the path the Prophet's had laid before him. This injured boy was no doubt part of that path. Orvo Lessuc wasn't going to make anyone's journey any harder.

"Not at all. Keep him warm. Change the dressings on his head and abdomen every six hours. If he doesn't wake in the next day or so, call me. As I say, I shall be back to check on him in a week. Be well, Sovul."

"Thank you again, Dr. Orvo. Thank you"

Orvo mounted his quad and disappeared into the night. Joci checked on the broken boy once before dimming the lights in his home and falling into a deep sleep on his sofa bench.

Precinct

Urin Dol walked into the Precinct with a half-eaten jumja stick in his right hand. He'd managed perhaps three hours of sleep after returning from Teklan Sniew in the small hours of the morning. Interviewing the old nun had taken far longer than he'd thought. The corpsmen from the Teklan Lynch house had been late attending the crime scene to collect the remains as well. The somber pair of attendants apologized and explained that the original request for dispatch had been missed during the odd commsat network failure.

On the face of it, the Teklan Precinct looked like any stone building along the main road. The original building had been erected close to two centuries earlier; however, over the years significant renovations had been made behind the preserved stonework seen from the street. The Precinct was two stories tall. A general reception desk along with a reports station and waiting area were located on the ground floor, along with an open-grilled holding pen. The Constable's office, communications/dispatch desk and a small bullpen of workstations for the deputies' use was on the second level.

There were three sub-levels. The first supported two secure holding cells and four individual cells along with a delousing stall and an identification station. The level immediately below the cells boasted a modest kitchen and a general stores facility. The lowest level, accessible only by a direct lift which by-passed the upper two sub-levels, housed the emergency generator room and armory.

Stepping into the Precinct, jumja stick in hand, Urin was a little surprised to see Sev Daro frantically manning the public transceiver station. Dol didn't interrupt the young deputy, he simply nodded as he walked past reception to head upstairs.

"Is something happening?" Dol asked as he stepped up to the bullpen where Precinct Chief, Quas Micah was seated reviewing the morning's reports.

“Breakfast of champions, I see,” said Quas as he looked up from his desk’s integrated monitor.

Quas had been the Teklan Constable for five terms before opting to step down as he approached retirement. Urin Dol had been one of Quas’ junior deputies nearly three decades earlier. When Dol had expressed an interest in running for the elected post of Constable, Quas had quickly expressed his hearty endorsement of the younger man.

Dol pursed his lips and quickly surveyed the small bullpen. Micah was alone. Urin tossed the half-eaten jumja stick in a garbage can and smiled.

“I didn’t have time for a proper breakfast. Sorry I’m late.”

Quas grunted and shook his head. “You look like you slept in your uniform.”

Dol rooted around on one of the unused desks for a tissue to wipe the sticky jumja from his right hand. He ran his left palm down the front of his brown tunic as a reflex. “It’s clean...”

“Uh huh, well, it hasn’t been pressed in years by the looks of it,” said Quas as he logged off the network and secured the communal terminal per regulations.

Dol wiped his hands clean and then approached the older man. “Is something happening? Daro looks like he’s working three lines at once down there.”

Micah pushed back from the desk and sighed. His own brown uniform was wrinkled and thread-bare at the elbows. As Quas rarely left the Precinct anymore, he saw little reason to invest his time in breaking in a stiff new, itchy brown tunic.

“We’ve been getting calls all morning about the outage. Apparently, the night watch spent seven hours straight listening to the citizenry complain.”

“I see...so, it wasn’t just us then?” Urin brought his hand to his face and gently rubbed his eyes at either side of his nose.

“No indeed, looks like the entire Township. Possibly the whole region went down.” Micah narrowed his eyes and carefully studied his young friend. Not only was Dol wearing an old,

unpressed uniform – which was completely out of character, he'd also failed to comb back his thick dark hair.

"Uhh, I'll need to send along an apology to the team from the Lynch house. I snapped at them last night, er, earlier this morning... They said they were late because they didn't get the initial request to report. I sort of thought they were making excuses." Dol dropped his hand, looked down at his old friend and offered a wan smile.

"Uh huh...so, was it bad, then?" In his own time as Teklan Constable, Quas had never had to deal with an out-and-out homicide. This was Dol's second.

Urin sighed and pulled a chair over from a neighboring workstation. He sat heavily across from the man who'd once been his mentor. The lines around Micah's eyes were deep and his jowls were starting to sag. His head of bright, nearly kava-coloured hair, had long faded a nearly pure white. It was a stark reminder to Urin every time he looked at his friend: time waits for no man.

"Do you remember the Lidar Mine Disaster?" asked Dol as he leaned back in the padded office chair and tried to relax.

"Lidar? How old do you think I am, Urin? The Lidar collapse happened a year before I was even born." Micah kept his voice low and friendly. The time for him to swoop in and save the day was long past, but he could be a sounding board for his friend, or any of the dozen other deputies who served Teklan Township.

"Well, that nun last night...the one who found the girl, she remembers it. She told me she'd just taken her vows and had been there when the rescue efforts were underway..."

"By the Prophets, how old is this woman?" remarked Micah.

"You didn't review the notes? I was sure I turned in the tablet..." A worried look clouded Dol's face suddenly. He'd come back to the Precinct after finishing at the monastery, but had he returned the tablet with the witness statements?

"Be calm, Dol. Both tablets were right where they were supposed to be this morning. Ruha's kit and the tablet young Daro had signed out. I uploaded everything about an hour ago."

Dol exhaled his relief. “The night watch didn’t process it all?”

“After the outage they wanted to be sure the network was stable. They didn’t want to take the chance of losing the crime scene report and notes,” said Micah, grateful to see the Constable’s relief, then quickly added: “Ruha left word that you created a backup copy of the CSR on Daro’s tablet too. I waited for confirmation of a successful upload before clearing that. So, this ancient nun...”

“Right, Sister Ire Allor, she was with the Order Augustinian back then...charged with caring for the dead and wounded. She told me not a man was pulled out of Lidar alive. They came up like dirty, *ragdolls*. She said they were black, from the ore and dirt...their arms and legs and heads flopping around like ragdolls too well played with...”

“Alright, horrible granted, but what has that to do with...?”

“She repeated that story twice. I thought maybe she was in shock and just wasn’t understanding what I was asking her.” Urin signed, recalling the thin, weak voice Sister Ire had spoken with. Fragile. He dropped his eyes to the floor, her words echoing in his recent memory.

“Given the situation and her age, certainly, shock would be a concern. I’m not understanding what that has to do with the situation at Teklan Sniew.” Micah was growing increasingly concerned for Dol.

“I clarified that I needed her to tell me about Nata Onar, you see? Gently, of course.” Urin brought his head up again and locked eyes with the Precinct Chief. Micah had grown old, but his kind brown eyes remained bright and strong. As strong and bright as they had been the first time Dol had been introduced to the man as a fresh recruit from the Provincial Training Academy.

“Of course, of course...go on...”

“She looked at me then as if I’d been speaking a different language. She told me, that while she’d seen so many bodies pulled from the ground, they’d just been strange black dolls to her. When she found Onar...when she saw the girl sprawled there,

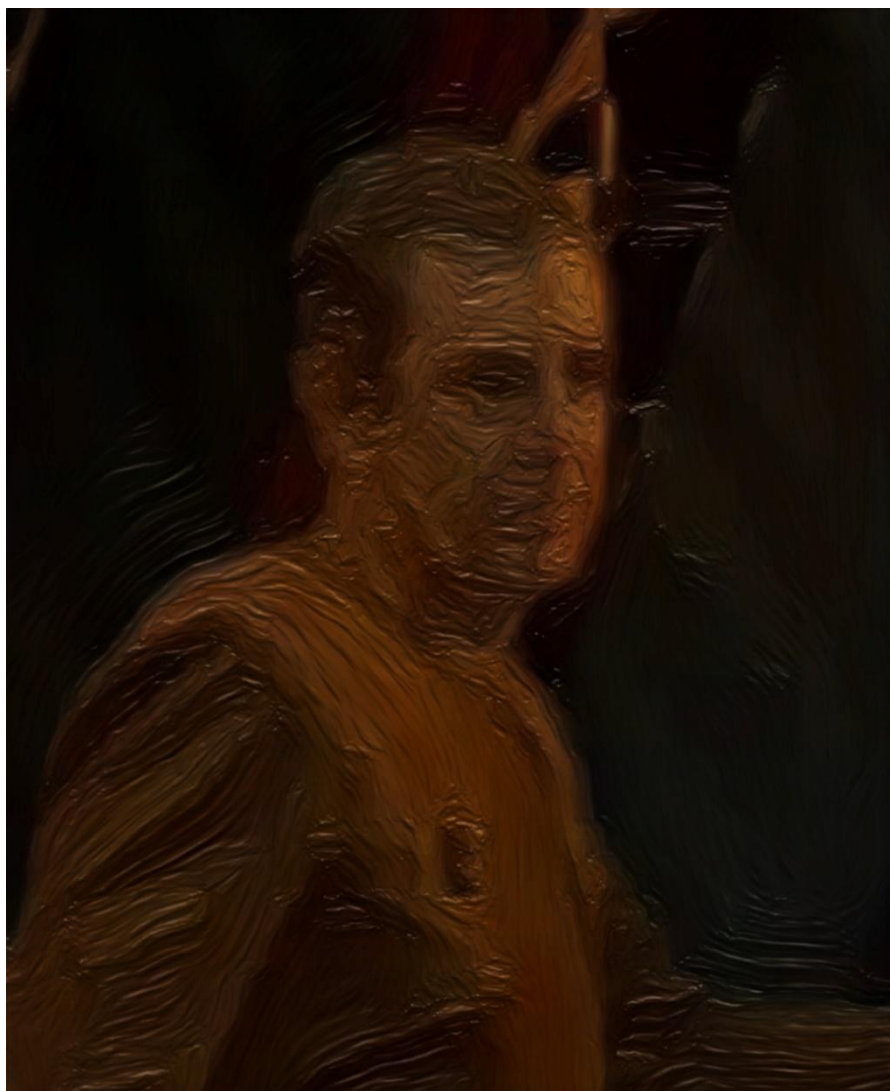
arms and legs flailed everywhere... It was the blood that shocked her. All those dead dolls. She'd personally handled more than a dozen of them, cold and wet from the darkness, but they were so dirty and black, she'd never noticed the blood. Not like she saw in the Gratitude Hall yesterday, anyway."

Urin fell silent then and just sat for a long time.

Quas sat watching his friend for a moment. There was nothing he could offer the younger man in the way of comfort. The trauma was not his. It was an old woman's. It was a trauma she'd shared with Dol, because it was his duty to have her share it and now, he had to live with that sharing and somehow compartmentalize it with his own exposure to the horrors of Teklan Sniew. It was his duty to discover who'd ended Nata Onar's life and bring that person to justice.

Dol sighed once again and seemed to be gathering himself mentally. Micah knew the Constable would never have opened up as he just had if there'd been anyone else around. Without a word the old man rose from his desk and casually made his way to the break station where he poured two steaming cups of deka tea.

A grown man starting his day with nothing but a jumja stick, ridiculous, thought Quas Micah to himself as he brought his Constable a cup of tea.



Rondac III

Pretan Doro, Jagul and administrative head of the Second Order stood proudly at the precipice of the loading ramp reaching down to the rocky desert at the gates of Retek City. The massive colony ship *Rina Trusurj* loomed large against the backdrop of the embattled Cardassian city's stoney walls and crumbling towers. Her yellow hull plates glowed in the light of Rondac III's blazing red sun. The *Rina Trusuri* was the first of a planned new class of mass transports intended to ferry Cardassian colonists from Cardassia Prime across the quadrant once the great expansion began in full. Her construction had eaten up the last of the funds secured by Legate R'aka through the Ferengi. She was lightly armed, but she could transport nearly an entire Legion's worth of troops at a time.

Rondac III was the last stop on Jagal Doro's route to collect the original units that comprised the Second Order's Third Legion assembled at Alpha 441 nearly a decade earlier. The force then had been assembled in preparation of a sweeping move to expand the Cardassian Empire. They were to seize populated worlds along the Federation border and begin rebuilding Cardassian might through expansion and resource procurement. That plan had failed owing to the incompetence of one traitorous Dalin, and had cost the Empire time, one of the irreplaceable prototype *Galor*-class battle cruisers and very nearly another civil war.

The troops had been pulled off Alpha 441 and redeployed within Cardassian space to theaters in need of intervention. The man who'd fowled things so horribly had been found guilty of his treason, publicly tried before the Legion and executed. A coup had narrowly been averted. Now, though, Jagul Doro had the honour of reassembling the Legion and finally putting into action the plan that had so disastrously been ruined all those years earlier.

"Men of the Fourth Battalion, you have done great service here in Retek City. Your dedication and labours are duly

recognized and to a man you will be awarded the Ovak Medal of Service to the Colonies of the Cardassian Empire!” Doro spoke into a microphone affixed to a lectern which had been set up at the top of the ramp for this address.

A triumphant cheer exploded from the gathered battalion standing at attention in the shadow of the massive *Rina Trusuri*. Over eight hundred troopers had turned out in full battle gear to be addressed by their Jagul. Orders to pack and prepare to evac their barracks in Retek City had been transmitted less than a week before. To a man, there wasn’t a Cardassian soldier in formation who didn’t want to see an end to his time on Rondac III.

When the Fourth had been initially deployed, Retek City had been a lawless ghetto floundering in starvation, criminality and murder. Children died in the streets regularly. No one cared. Brothels and black markets were the primary industries within the city walls. A detention facility and secure Hall of Justice sat in the center of the city, but their modest detachment of troopers from the lesser Orders rarely ventured beyond their secure walls for fear of misadventure. It was nearly inconceivable that Legate R’aka himself had ever visited the planet to preside over the trial and execution of the traitor of Alpha 441.

In short order the city was brought to heel. In just over eight years some twenty-eight thousand official executions had been carried out. The competing street gangs and organized crime syndicates which had festered and rooted within the city for decades were ground into dust. In the end, all that remained was a dirty, crumbling city on a dirty crumbling world long since stripped of its useful resources.

“As you board this imperiously mighty craft to be transported to a waiting battle cruiser to rejoin your brethren of the recalled Third Legion, be proud of what you’ve accomplished here! Your service has only just begun. Cardassia’s glory is only now beginning to flourish. Forward, to victory. Forward, for Cardassia!”

“FOR CARDASSIA!” Eight hundred plus strong voices roared back at Jagul Doro.

Divisional Dals broke ranks, stepped out of formation and began shouting orders to their units and squads. The collection of dark uniformed troopers undulated and shifted like a well drilled colony of giant viper ants.

“For Cardassia,” said Jagul Doro to himself as he stepped back from the mic and watched as the final Battalion of the Third Legion began marching up the ramp.

Mourning Prayers

The prylars were gathered in four neat rows before the polished nya wood altar in the old temple at the heart of Teklan Sniew. The forenoon prayers were a sad and solemn affair that morning. Prylar-Senior Aiku had requested a special volume from the library ahead of the first observance of the day and Prylar Noll had dutifully obliged by laying the book: *Hymns & Chants to Light the Path* at the pulpit. A single yellow candle flickered atop the altar. A single candle, for a single child.

“Brothers, rise.” Aiku hadn’t slept. He doubted if any of his brothers had.

In unison the prylars, old and young, fit and fat, rose to their feet and stood silently facing the candle and waited for their Prylar-Senior to guide them.

“Chant Two Twenty-One, *Hymn for the Lost: In the Light of the Prophets...*” Aiku drew back his baggy brown hood and drew a long breath.

The prylars stood silently, all still cloistered within the dark folds of their own robes, waiting.

Then Aiku began chanting low the passages from the Third Century Prophecy of Vedek Trac. The tale was a familiar one to the monks. The story of a child charged with shepherding a flock through the night only to lose a stray and wander into the night himself, seeking that which was lost...only to be lost himself.

Prylars Mule, Keira and young Jaxx then began chanting the pleading cries of the child in the darkness. Apart from the missing seminarian, Rifu, these were Teklan Sniew’s youngest members. *Sopranos*.

Aiku continued chanting the story of the wayward shepherd boy and the night in his fragile tenor as the sopranos continued chanting the boy’s cries for guidance and forgiveness. Then the others joined in. The older brothers, baritones imbued their own chants of the spirits of the night, the distant voices of the Prophets – soft and barely whispered... Then Prylars Lompa and Objesc

leant their deep, dry *bass* filled voices and chanted the ominous calls of the Pah Wraiths...

The chanting continued for a full hour. The child was lost. The evil of the Pah Wraiths fed upon the innocence of the fallen child who'd abandoned his flock foolishly to blindly seek a wayward stray. The Prophets' lament at the child's foolishness and the child's own voice echoing the fear and regret of the unknown and ill-considered. Finally, Aiku's old, thin voice, barely a tenor, gave closure to the dirge. Even in tragedy the light of the Prophets must be sought. The child was gone. The path harsh.

After the morning service the brothers quietly exited the temple and went about their usual tasks. Aiku remained to gather his vestments. Out of the corner of his eye he could see young Jaxx waiting by the door to speak.

"Seminarian, is there something you require of me?" asked Aiku as he carefully closed the old book he'd requested from the library.

"Prylar-Senior, sister Ire has been taken back to Teklan Niwen as you asked. She asked me to pass on her thanks for the provision of the cell last night..." Crebbollo fumbled with his hood and tugged it off his head of thick brown hair so that the Prylar-Senior might see his face.

"Of course, of course. Though I doubt the sister got anymore rest than the rest of us last night." Aiku stepped out from the tight pulpit and carefully approached the single candle and bowed reverently. The candle would be allowed to burn itself out.

"The Prioress-Superior asked that I share the convent's deepest sympathies with the Nata family and all who loved her here at Teklan Sniew."

"Sister Lind is as kind as she is pious." Aiku rounded the altar and slowly walked towards the young man standing at the door. He knew Jaxx Crebbollo possessed a strong pagh, but in his heart he knew the boy would never become a prylar.

"She says that Teklan Niwen can host the Harvest Service, given the...the situation here, Prylar-Senior. If you so wish, of course. I've worked it out, moving the Service that is. We could

move everything we'd need to the Principal Chapel at the convent in time to keep with our timelines. It'd be a little smaller than the Gratitude Hall, but it could work..."

"Could it now?" asked Aiku with a raised eyebrow. He was two meters away from the boy now and he could see the sweat beading on his forehead.

A prylar, no...but a ranjen? Perhaps, thought Aiku as he passed the boy.

"It's just an option, Prylar-Senior, of course." Jaxx swallowed hard to keep from rambling. Prylar Aiku passed by and exited the temple without slowing.

"I shall consider it, young Jaxx. In the meantime, find Horna Loll, the porter. He'll need help to...clean up the Gratitude Hall. You'll need the modular phase scanner to emulsify the worst of it." Aiku's voice cracked as he spoke.



Fury

“Captain Syrk, incoming transmission from Starfleet Command – coded blue urgent,” reported Lieutenant Rin from her post at the *USS Fury*’s primary communications station.

Syrk, promoted to the rank of captain and given command of the *Constellation*-class starship shortly after her eventful shakedown cruise eight years earlier, looked up from the status report he’d been scrutinizing. Without a word, the lean, dark-haired Vulcan handed the PADD he’d been studying to the young yeoman attending him. He coolly looked to his left, towards the science station and his first officer, Commander Shon Valar, a short Bolian.

“Code blue dispatches are usually for the diplomatic corps, Captain,” offered Valar in a high clear voice.

“Indeed. Take the Conn, Commander Valar.” Syrk rose gracefully from his command chair and moved in a fluid motion back around to where Rin was awaiting her orders. “Lieutenant, I shall take the transmission in the Ready Room.”

“Aye, sir.” Rin keyed the necessary routing codes into her terminal and quietly signaled the waiting party to standby.

Captain Syrk moved past Rin at communications and Grosa at the mission board without another word. He was a cold, strict commanding officer who expected professionalism from his people. The younger members of *Fury*’s crew often remarked the captain looked like a piece of Vulcan marble dressed in an immaculate maroon tunic...when the captain was well out of earshot, of course. Thankfully, Syrk was also incredibly fair and forgiving when it came to his crew, most of whom were very young officers at the start of their careers. For a Vulcan he could even be considered, empathetic.

The captain stepped through a single hatchway nestled between the mission control board and the bridge’s engineering monitors. The red hued door hushed shut behind him as he secured himself in *Fury*’s small Ready Room.

“All right people, all stations stand by for updates. Helm, maintain course and speed.” Commander Valar took the command chair and waited for what might come next. The captain had been with *Fury* since she launched. Syrk was a fine captain, but he’d never attended the Academy. It was Valar who held the crew to regs.

Gomlir

The morning sun was still just rising above the mountains on the far horizon when Glinn Gomlir trod into the center of the triangular compound at the heart of T424. He stood quietly in the growing light staring at one of the yellow and brown skiffs cloistered safely from prying eyes. The chill of the dark Bajoran night still hung in the air. The alien sun wouldn't warm the atmosphere to a tolerable temperature until close to midmorning. Standing in the courtyard, Gomlir imagined he must look like a dark brooding demigod to the young troopers manning the watch tower only a few hundred meters away.

He wore his brown padded flayer leather flight pants tight around his slim hips as always. His black tactical belt with the polished steel clasps and molded-plasticized black holster hung loosely down his right leg. The holster had been empty since he first set foot on Bajor's surface, other than recognized security personnel, no Cardassian was permitted to carry a weapon while a guest of the Bajoran people. Still, Gomlir wouldn't give up his gun belt. It was a crucial part of the image he worked constantly to maintain.

The young men keeping watch in the single tower at the apex of the Nissen huts had lived in the presence of Glinn Gomlir for nearly three months and had still not gotten past the almost adolescent adulation they felt for the "ace". Their duty was to keep watch for outside interlopers – any wayward Bajoran farmer or do-gooder who might get too close to the flight pads and hangars. Both men knew no Bajoran in his right mind would dare approach the compound and they coyly tried to steal glimpses of the tall hero standing just a few hundred meters away from them.

Gomlir ran his right hand along the heavy black undercarriage affixed to one of the three skiffs resting in the compound. His long, delicate fingers twitched slightly as the cold from the metal radiated into his strong right hand.

These ridiculous cages must come off today... thought Gomlir to himself. As he willed himself to bare the cold and calm his racing mind.

The two sentries above were watching him. He was used to the attention, but this morning he could do without too many eyes falling on him. A shiver ran up his spine, and he drew his hand back and looked towards the guard tower with a scowl. The boys manning the tower would turn away hurriedly, ashamed to have been caught gawking. Gomlir flexed his right hand into a fist and slowly made for the barracks where he knew his engineers would be having their morning meal.

In the cool morning light, the Glinn cast no shadow. His tight leather flight pants hugged his impossibly narrow hips as his empty holster bounced and slapped against his right thigh as he paced coldly along the barren earth of the compound. The only sound was the crunching dust and gravel beneath Gomlir's tall black boots which glinted and flashed in the morning light whenever they poked out from beneath the flared bottoms of the brown flight pants. The tall and thin Cardassian cut a heroic profile in the clear morning air. The pants, the gun belt...not a jet-black hair out of place atop his perfectly proportioned head...all that was missing was Gomlir's signature flight jacket.

"Good morning, engineers," purred Gomlir as he stepped into the mess where Yok Dorla and his grey suited grease maras were hunched over bowls of hot gruel.

"-cough- Glinn Gomlir! Sir..." Dorla nearly coughed up a hot mouthful of morning broth.

All three men clambered to their feet as the tall, fair-skinned Glinn from the Second Order strode into the mess hall. The hero of Draygo IV, walked amongst them once more.

"I've been here for months now, Dorla. I should think you'd have gotten used to my presence by now," Gomlir sneered more than smiled at the engineers as they awkwardly tried to decide between continuing to stand or return to their breakfasts.

“Ah, yes of course, Glinn Gomlir...I...we just...” Yok motioned for his engineers to resume eating as he watched the lithe warrior help himself to a bowl of gruel.

“Mara cat’s away and the voles thought they’d get a chance to play? Something like that, Dorla?” asked Gomlir as he spooned a half serving of pasty black broth into a bowl for himself.

“No, sir, of course not. I just...I was expecting you to inspect the...”

“The skiffs look fine, Dorla. Can I presume you’ve addressed the performance issues in 2281?” Gomlir replaced the ladle next to the green pot of hot gruel. He intended to eat the slop upstairs in his suite and then shower and rest.

“Yes, sir. All rigs solid.” Yok noticed the Glinn was wearing the same clothes as yesterday and that his thermal, long-sleeved undershirt looked particularly soiled, which was somewhat out of place for Gomlir.

“Bravo Zulu, men. Let’s get those cages off today and replace the mounts. We’re forty-eight hours out.” He didn’t wait for a response. Gomlir set off for the stairs and his private suite above.



ATL

Urin put his tea mug down on a stack of old incident files he'd been meaning to move to the inactive archive for the last two weeks. Micah had filled him in on what he'd managed to pull together in the two hours he'd been in filing the CSR and downloading copies of Urin's interview files from the monastery...

Rifu Trij, seventeen, from the Lossata Mining settlement on the north slope of Mount Taafem in the Dahkur Hills. Mother died shortly after childbirth. Father crushed in a mining accident when the child was three. Raised by the sisters of Moira Niwen and left the Niwen's Home for Foundlings and Orphans at age twelve. Attempted to gain work at Lossata but was turned away...there was a period of close to a year where there was no information available... Trij showed up at the gates of Teklan Sniew at thirteen, claiming to have been given a vision by the Prophets that he should become a prylar. Too young to be taken in, the monks found him a home in the school neighboring the monastery where he lived with the schoolmaster and studied for four years...

Urin consulted his notes and began organizing his interviews in a rough chronological order. "Quas, we'll need to get the word out on this boy..."

"Ruha left an hour ago with two men who stayed back from the night watch. Attempt to locate either Rifu Trij, or a red Prowler-Trike is already in the works, Constable," called Micah over his shoulder at his desk.

Urin half smiled and sighed. He'd noticed the large transport was missing from the motor pool.

"Why was she in the Gratitude Hall at all? According to the notes, this old nun...had to unlock the Hall to gain entry." Micah turned to look back at the Constable.

"The girl was decorating for the Harvest Service, why?"

"Just seems odd that she'd lock herself in."

“She was attacked and killed...the assailant obviously wasn't in there when she was found, so whoever did it likely locked the doors after...” Understanding suddenly lit Urin's face.

“Of course. To lock the doors from the outside, somebody would have needed the key the old nun then used to open the Hall in the first place,” said Quas seriously.

Sickles and Whetstones

Joci had been sore and tired from his work in the field the previous day, but the usual, restful sleep he'd normally enjoy as reward for a full day laboring under the hot sun, hadn't come. He'd tossed and squirmed uncomfortably on the old sofa bench in the front room while a stranger lay unconscious in his bed. He'd gotten up three times in the darkness to check on the wounded boy he'd brought back from the desert. He'd changed the young man's dressings once, as Dr. Orvo had instructed. He'd checked the boy's temperature and listened to his chest rise and fall. The thought of waking only to find the adolescent had died in the night plagued him.

As the first light of morning broke on the far horizon, Joci lay wide awake on his sofa bench. Still wearing the dirty work clothes he'd sweated and worked in the day before; he dreaded the day ahead. The harvest could come any day now. Today he was supposed to take moisture readings from across his fields. If the readings fell within a prescribed range, the harvest must begin. Kava was lucrative. It was also fickle. Once ripe, a farmer had a small window in which to cleave the thick orange stalks from their roots before rot, rapid decline and ruin set in.

A plate of left over hasperat was in the cold box. Joci pulled himself up and shuffled towards his modest kitchen to eat. He paused briefly as he passed the open bedroom door. Sovul leaned in to the dark, musty room and listened quietly. The smell of the wounded boy hung heavy in the air. He'd been in less than an hour earlier but hadn't noticed the smell. The boy's sweat and natural odor. The scent of the antiseptic bandages and antibiotic salves Orvo had applied...

The breathing sounded more regular than it had through the night. It was steady. Shallow still, but the painful rattle seemed to have settled.

Joci ate two rolls of hasperat while standing over the sink.

He chewed as quietly as he could and glanced down at the floor beside the open bedroom door. He and Dr. Orvo had cut away the brown tattered rags the boy had been wearing to set his bones and check for unseen wounds. The pile of rags was unremarkable. The boy had torn up most of his clothes badly upon crashing into and along the sharp stoney ground. Looking at the small pile, Joci thought they might once have been robes not unlike the ones you might see beggar wearing in some of the larger Townships.

Was the boy a beggar? wondered Sovul as he took another bite of the cold hasperat roll in his hand. A beggar wouldn't be riding around on an old Prowler-Trike. Then again, perhaps the boy was thief and had stolen the now ruined trike from someone's home out beyond the Dahkur wastes. It occurred to Joci that if the boy had been older and not riding a fire red Prowler, his ratty pile of brown rags might have made him look like some sort of prylar. As he chewed and speculated where his new friend may have come from, the light grew brighter. He was losing the morning.

He didn't want to leave the boy alone, but he had to get out to the fields. There was nobody to watch over him – everyone one would be preparing to harvest their own kava.

The hasperat was spicy. Even cold it had a bite that made Joci feel warm in the pit of his stomach. He drew a deep breath and then belched. Good hasperat always made Sovul belch. There was nothing for it, Joci decided.

Reluctantly, he pulled on his boots and went to retrieve his dielectric meter. He hoped the Prophets might give him another day or two before the kava had to come in so that he might be available to the boy. He pulled the front door to his cabin closed and tried to ignore the aches and pains he felt in his weary limbs. If the boy woke it wasn't like he was going to go anywhere on two broken legs.

Sovul walked to his small barn and began loading his handcart with the meter and some other tools he might need to dig up the required samples. In the corner of the barn, he eyed his scythes. If the kava was ready, he'd return and work the sickles

against his whetstone for at least an hour to be sure they were as sharp as possible to cleave the tough stalks. Even if the kava wasn't ready, he'd likely spend the afternoon at the whetstone. Unlike his neighbors, Joci would have to bring his harvest in alone and by hand...

Joci was about to set out to take his moisture readings when the whetstone suddenly reminded him that he'd not left the boy with so much as a drop of water should he wake... He left his cart sitting in front of his barn and headed back inside.

The sun had nearly climbed clear of the horizon by the time Sovul finally set out towards his modest kava field on the stony edge of the Kendra Plains.

Notification

Deputy Ruha was standing by the entrance to the Nata Bakery solemnly watching a mother and father breakdown in fits of sobbing screams. Tiku Zoz, the deputy who'd had command of the night watch, was in the line of fire. Nata Glesat, the girl's mother sank to her knees and buried herself in the blue robes of sister Krisu's habit. The Teklan Niwen convent had a stable of sisters specially trained in victim support. In instances where the Precinct had to deliver ill news to the citizens of Teklan Township every effort was made to ensure one of the sisters accompanied the deputies. Nata Aako, the girl's father, still covered in flour and dough from his place at the rear of the bakery, simply stood wailing as he stared dumbfounded at big Tiku.

Ruha hated seeing people destroyed like this. *No, not like this...* he thought to himself. Their daughter hadn't been crushed by a transport in the street. She hadn't suffered some medical distress and failed to pull through. She'd been horribly murdered. The images of the crime scene were still fresh in Ruha's mind. The few words he managed to push past his lips had devastated these two simple people who'd done nothing to deserve this pain.

Sister Krisu had swept forward once Ruha had stopped talking. Zoz too had moved forward to offer comfort to the older couple who'd just had their world shattered.

Sac had wanted to say something comforting, but what comfort could he give? He was terrified to say anything more than "...your daughter was found dead yesterday afternoon. We believe she was attacked..." Would telling these shattered parents of the blood and violence surrounding the broken body in the Gratitude Hall do any good whatsoever? Could he trust himself not to overshare what he'd personally witnessed?

As Glesat wailed and old Aako finally collapsed into young Tiku's strong arms, Ruha realized that hot tears were streaming down his own face.

-TWEET, TWEET-

Ruha sniffed hard and instinctively wiped his rough brown sleeve across his eyes. His commsat was ringing. He quickly pulled the small personal communications unit from his belt and thumbed the subtle actuator. Nodding silently at Zoz, Ruha backed out of the bakery and onto the pleasant, covered veranda fronting the small shop.

“-*cough*- Ruha, go.” The morning air felt good. The atmosphere inside the Bakery was oppressive, hot and leaden with grief.

“Ruha, Urin here at the Precinct. I need you to head over to this bakery and...” Urin, still sitting at his desk, paused. Something seemed *off* about Ruha’s voice.

“We’re...Zoz and I are here now, Constable. They aren’t taking it well.” Ruha took a long breath and looked around. It was still early and there were only a few people about setting up shop for the day. *Of course they’re not taking it well, idiot!* thought Ruha to himself.

“I see...did you call over to Teklan Niwen?”

“They sent a sister over at first light. The first thing that old nun did this morning when she got back from the monastery was to inform the sisters the Nata family would need them. Zoz volunteered to stay back.” Ruha turned and peaked into the bakery through the large display window. Zoz had the old man sitting on a stool and the young sister was now seated on the floor next to the girl’s mother.

“Are you alright, Sac?” asked Urin, sincerely concerned for his deputy.

“It’s ugly, Dol...it’s so damned ugly.” Ruha bristled. He was done crying. Whoever had caused this carnage was still out there somewhere and needed to be found.

“Any chance you can head back to Teklan Sniew and check a few things for me?” Urin had sister Ire’s testimony up on his computer screen.

“Once we get, once we get these folks to a place where they can accompany us to the Lynch house to positively identify

the girl, I'll have Zoz get them back home. Then I can get back up there. What do you need?"

Urin explained that he needed clarification from the Prylar-Senior, or perhaps the porter about how many copies of the key needed to access the Gratitude Hall were floating around. Ruha sounded hollow and not at all like the young, strong stallion of a man Urin knew him to be. Even so, Sac quickly realized what Dol was asking about.

"If the old nun had to unlock the Hall to find the girl, someone must have first left the Hall and locked those doors behind them...I see. Will do."

Before ending the call Urin confirmed that Ruha had passed along the bulletin about the missing boy and the Prowler to the handful of deputies spreading across Teklan Township that morning. Nobody was saying that Rifu Trij was their suspect...yet.

Course Correction

-WoooWheee-

Commander Valar looked down at the lefthand control panel on the command chair's arm. The yellow diode next to the internal comms switch was flashing. Before the audible alert could sound a second time the *Fury's* First Officer snapped the white toggle to open the internal channel.

"Valar, here."

"Commander, from Captain Syrk. All stop and make our course one-six-seven by nine-six-mark-five. Engage at Warp Seven, then join me in the Ready Room, please. Copy?"

"Copy, sir." Valar snapped the channel closed and looked up to see Lieutenant Poste at the helm with his hand resting on the polished silver relay, waiting for his orders. "Helm, all stop."

Poste gripped the relay firmly and pulled the handle smoothly back to the STOP position. The throttle lever was a design throwback to vessels from long ago. The young lieutenant found what limited hands-on control he had over the massive *Constellation*-class starship to be extremely satisfying.

In the black nothingness of the vacuum of space between the outpost at Tesnia and the independent Tarkalea System there was a sudden flash of brilliant white light. A tear into subspace made visible for a fraction of a second while the bulk of the *USS Fury* suddenly appeared in the nothingness. The *Constellation*-class star cruiser slowed rapidly in her advance to the still distant planet of Tarkalea XII. Her breaking thrusters and reverse impulse engines flared at the command of the young, red-haired lieutenant at her helm. The ship had been coasting along at four times the speed of light one moment and now, less than twelve seconds after being given the command to come to a full stop, she slowed to an imperceptible speed as her forward momentum was culled.

Lt. Poste kept his hand on the throttle and watched his panel closely. The inertial dampeners were peaking as they strained to keep everyone sheltered within *Fury's* thick skin from

being splayed against the bulkheads like overripe tomatoes. Immediately in front of Poste was the picometer log. As soon as the readings displayed read zero forward momentum the young helmsmen secured the retro-thrusters and announced to Commander Valar...

"Reading ALL STOP, Commander."

"Very good helm, come about to one-six-seven by nine-six-mark-five and make your speed Warp Seven."

"Aye, sir... one-six-seven by nine-six-mark-five..."

Poste programmed the ship's new heading into his panel and the directional thrusters on *Fury's* forward starboard saucer flared to life while two of the retro-thrusters on her aft port side stardrive assembly fired in sequence. The heavy saucer dipped slightly as the ship's bulky nose spun around until the ship was aligned with the entered coordinates.

Beside Poste sat Lieutenant Commander Bogga, the Denobulan Third Officer stationed at *Fury's* Ops panel. While the young human beside him navigated *Fury* towards her new destination, Bogga consulted the astral compass embedded between his terminal and the helm. "Commander, our new course will bring us back past Tesnia and puts us on a nearly direct track for...Bajor."

Valar looked over at Bogga and offered a silent nod.

"Coordinates set, Commander," reported Poste.

"Very good, lieutenant. Proceed at Warp Seven."

"Warp Seven, aye sir." Poste double-checked his instruments to be certain they were aligned correctly then gripped the silver throttle once again and gently pushed it forward in its track until the input confirmed a desired speed of Warp Seven.

The thick, heavy saucer of the brilliant white starship began to run away from the four long nacelles rooted to its hind quarter as a warp bubble formed around the vessel and began the work of pulling the stout cruiser back into subspace. For just a second it appeared as though *Fury* was being pulled like taffy between two unseen points in nothingness. Then another brilliant white flash exploded, and the starship was gone.

Seconds passed and it wasn't until Poste reported that they had reached Warp Seven that Commander Valar pulled himself out of the command chair. "Mr. Bogga, you have the bridge."

"Aye sir, I have the bridge," confirmed Bogga from his Ops station.

Valar paced quickly from the center of the bridge to the sealed Ready Room door and waited for the captain to trigger the hatch to grant him access.

"Captain?..." said Valar as he entered the Ready Room and the red-hued door hushed closed behind him.



Legwork

“Constable Urin, sir?”

Urin looked up from his desk and the preliminary notes he’d gathered the night before to see Deputy Sev was standing anxiously in his doorway.

“Yes Sev, what is it?” The boy looked sweaty and excited.

“Urin, I just got a call from a rancher on the far end of the township. He’s found a wrecked Prowler-Trike on his property!” Daro had taken the name and address of the caller and then flown up the stairs in an excited frenzy. On the Precinct’s ground floor, the central commsat lightboard was exploding.

Urin pushed himself back from his desk and rubbed his chin. His young deputy was bursting. With Ruha Sac doing follow up at the monastery and the handful of deputies held over from the night watch, Urin was strapped for manpower. Between manning the Precinct and going to meet with the forensic pathologist at the Lynch house to discuss what exactly had happened to young Nata Onar, Urin didn’t have a man to spare. Now there was a possible lead on the missing Rifu boy.

“Quas, think you can manage answering some calls from concerned citizens for a few hours?” called Urin from his chair, ignoring the young deputy standing in front of him.

“Ugh! Fine!” replied Micah from his own desk in the bullpen.

“Did this rancher say anything about seeing the boy?” asked Urin as he rose from his chair to pull on his well-worn duty belt.

“No, he didn’t...but he’s definitely got a wrecked Prowler!” Sev was already wearing his own commsat on his next to new duty belt, still stiff from its packaging.

Urin stowed his own Precinct issued white commsat unit in the holster affixed to his belt. His personal commsat would stay safely stowed in his top desk drawer. “Listen carefully, Sev...”

“Sir?”

“Draw a Precinct commsat and a tablet. Leave your personal commsat here. Head out to that ranch and document everything. Ask around about this Rifu. You have an image of the boy?”

“Yes sir, we pulled one from Central Registry.”

“Good. Document everything, Sev. You’re going to have to do this on your own. I have to get over to the Lynch house. If you come across anything that needs immediate attention *Prophets forbid*, you are to call me before doing anything. Clear?” Urin tightened his belt and moved around from behind his desk. He’d be drawing a tablet as well.

Sev stepped aside to let the Constable pass. “Yes sir, perfectly clear. Do I take the cruiser?”

Quas Micah snickered when he heard the junior deputy ask if he should take the Precinct’s single brown and white hovercar. Urin froze and grit his teeth.

“Take one of the quads, Sev. I’ll need the car.” Urin knew the younger man meant no harm and truthfully it was more Micah’s silly reaction that was agitating him than Sev’s assumption that Dol, the elected Constable, was going to go anywhere on a quad.

“Yes sir, of course!” Sev spun and trotted past Urin and back downstairs to draw the equipment he’d need to gather evidence and record whatever interviews he very well may have to conduct.

“Heh...you sure you don’t want to ride today?” asked Micah with a broad smile once the younger man had bounced back downstairs.

“Oh, be quiet! You’ve got calls to answer,” snapped Urin, mostly kidding.

Prep Work

The undercarriages bolted to the bottom of each of the nine skiffs were unwieldy pieces of *ad hoc* farm equipment. The laser drills affixed to these black cages were awkward and heavy to maneuver. The small group of engineers who'd been dutifully maintaining the skiffs since their arrival from the Central Munitions Depot on Cardassia Prime, worked as a single unit unfastening and stowing the heavy cages and low-powered laser assemblies as proficiently as possible. Once all nine skiffs were relieved of their agricultural accoutrements, work would begin on installing the gun mounts which would turn the skiffs into formidable flying gun platforms for the coming wave of troopers to pacify the witless Bajorans.

Skiff 2283 was on the lift. Bemett and Kurlen had managed to drop eight of the ten stembolts holding the undercarriage in place but were struggling with the final two attachment points.

"Key the release sequence again!" growled Kurlen as he kept one hand on the cold black undercarriage and the other on the controls of the ship's small anti-grav unit. Once the heavy laser assemblies were unlocked from the skiffs the anti-grav unit would keep the undercarriages from slamming to the ground and getting damaged or causing harm to any of the men working under the lift.

"I've keyed the sequence three times, it's not working!" yelled Bemett from where he hung off a stepladder to the aft of the skiff.

Each stembolt was equipped with a programmable lock. Once sealed, nothing short of a cutting phaser could sever the rather expensive bolts. Only a correctly entered combination code could trigger the bolts to release their locks and disengage from whatever structure they'd been affixed too.

"We're falling behind! There's another six of these to get to before tonight."

“Thank you, Kurlen...I’m aware of that,” said Bemett as he punched in the code for a fourth time with no luck.

“Should I get a phaser rifle from one of the troopers?” asked Kurlen, keeping his eyes on the readouts from the anti-grav unit while he closely monitored the feel of the hanging undercarriage as it vibrated ever so slightly beneath his hand.

“Hmmm no, no better not...” Bemett exhaled and stepped off his short ladder. The code was correct, and the bolt’s lock had power... “It might be the polarity’s been knocked off frequency. These things have been all over this damned Province. I’ll try the magnetic field inverter, hold on...”

The cold black tube continued to hum beneath Kurlen’s palm. The anti-grav unit was essentially just a small tractor emitter and while powerful, it wasn’t meant for continuous use. To shunt its power and rest the unit when the heavy undercarriage hung perilously by just two anchor points would be dangerous. To keep the unit running too long risked burning the emitter out completely though, and there was no replacement. If the cold metal grew suddenly warm beneath Kurlen’s hand he’d have no choice but to shut down and risk damaging the skiff. A sudden temperature change would be the only warning before an emitter failure.

“Anytime, Bemett!” called Kurlen without looking away from the unit’s small status panel.

“I...blast! I can’t find the cursed thing! Did you use it and not put it back on the shadow board?” Bemett responded from his place by the tool chests and equipment racks.

Rendezvous

Commander Valar stood silently waiting for his Vulcan captain to speak. The Ready Room was tight, at least it would be if there was anything other than a plain metal desk and a single chair tagged against the exterior bulkhead. Captain Syrk was not interested in superfluous furnishings. While many captains saw to it their Ready Rooms on other *Constellations* and *Excelsior*-class vessels were equipped with chairs, or sofas, or even small conference tables to allow for conversation spaces where delicate or confidential matters might be discussed; Captain Syrk saw no need for such luxuries. The room was grey. The carpet was grey. The metal desk, grey. Only the captain's black workstation and hanging IDIC tapestry desk behind the offered any respite from the drab atmosphere which greeted anyone who stepped off the bridge.

Syrk sat rigidly upright in his chair. His maroon tunic was snugly fastened and immaculate. With a steady hand, Syrk extended a slender white finger towards his black workstation and turned off the terminal. Then he fixed his cold eyes upon his First Officer who stood nearly at full attention in front of him.

"Commander, we are to proceed for the next three hours towards the Bajoran border. We will be rendezvousing with the transport *Anderson* at beacon B2424 in system O-223."

Valar drew a breath and tried to visualize just where on the star charts *Fury* was racing. "System O-223, Captain? Class-H planetoids...there's nothing there."

"You are correct. System O-223 consists of five planetoids, one of which supports a small moon. There are no lifeforms known to exist on any of these planets; however, as you are aware there is a Starfleet navigational beacon situated here which signals the demarcation point between recognized Federation space in the Delta Sector and Bajoran territory." Syrk arched his left eyebrow as he finished.

“Yes, sir. We’re to rendezvous with a transport at this beacon, for what purpose?” Valar had learned not to take his captain’s cold demeanor as arrogance, the man was Vulcan, through and through.

“The *SS Anderson*, NAR-758154. A modified *Sydney*-class transport employed by the Federation’s Diplomatic Corps. She has top-priority business in Bajoran space. We are to provide her an escort to the very edge of Federation space. Starfleet Command has rescinded our mission to Tarkalea XII and made this sortie Priority One.” Syrk waited for the short Bolian in the slightly wrinkled tunic to process what was being said.

“Is Command expecting some sort of trouble?” There weren’t many Fleet assets where they were heading, but Valar couldn’t see any obvious cause for concern.

“What I am about to share is classified. I am authorized to share this with you alone. You are not to repeat this to anyone, do you understand?”

“I do, sir.” Valar took a deep breath and shifted his weight slightly. Absently, he wondered if it would very much offend to his captain’s sensibilities to have a simple chair brought up from the mess.

“The *USS Kepler*, NCC-624 was to provide the *Anderson* this escort, but recent tactical information has raised the very real possibility of Cardassian warships operating within Bajoran space.”

“Cardassians?”

“Correct. Starfleet feels that while a science vessel from the *Oberth* fleet already in the area studying the plasma storms of the Umoth Nebula was initially appropriate for escort duties; a cruiser of greater tactical abilities is now required given this new concern.”

“I see...and we’re to escort this freighter to the border, but no further?”

“This is correct. The Bajorans have been very clear that they will not entertain any Federation diplomatic missions if armed

Starfleet vessels transgress their space. We are to be on hand should a situation arise.”

“This *Anderson* carries an ambassador then?”

“Ambassador Henri Renard himself. Obviously, this is a high-profile assignment. To that end you will be transferring over to the *Anderson* and will serve as a silent observer. Alert me when we detect the *Anderson*’s transponder. For the next few hours, I shall remain here in meditation. You have the bridge, Mr. Valar. Dismissed.”

There was no point in looking to discuss things further. Valar knew his captain’s mind. Without a word he turned, stepped through the hatch in the bulkhead and returned to the bridge to take up his post at command.



Colony Ship

The *Rina Trusuri* was underway and coasting at her optimal cruising speed of Warp Three. Glinn Galra, the man in operational command of the Fourth Battalion of the Second Order, stood pensively gazing at an in-flight status terminal. A simplified graphic depicting the Colony Ship's relative position against a static star chart populated by sequenced status updates of no particular interest. Their speed was a constant Warp Three. Their estimated time of arrival was six hours away. The Colony Ship's engines and environmental systems were functioning at optimal efficiency.

There were seven passenger decks in the huge vessel. Four were divided into dozens of dormitory style chambers where cots and basic storage bays for personal effects were all crammed with troopers from across Cardassian space. The uppermost decks boasted open areas where long tables and simple nutrition stations were located to the aft. Forty rows of uncomfortable seats crammed together in four columns stretched away from these mess areas towards the forward bulkheads. Decks eight, nine, and ten were designated as equipment transport bays, luggage holds, stores and crew access to the ship's engineering sections to the aft.

Troopers from every division, battalion and regiment comprising nearly the entire Second Order were aboard. They were crammed like Katulu cows into the massive civilian transport.

"Glinn Galra, sir?"

Galra startled and defensively spun towards the young voice which had shaken him out of whatever daydream the benign in-flight display had lulled him into.

"Yes!" he snarled, automatically raising his hands in anticipation of some attack.

"Apologies, sir. Jagul Doro requests all divisional commanders to gather fore on the observation deck for a briefing. If you'll follow me, I'll show you the way."

Galra grunted and worked to calm his nerves. He didn't like surprises. He'd been with the Fourth of the Second since the initial standdown at Alpha 441, serving as a simple trooper. Now, nearly eight years later he was the divisional commander and the "Butcher of Retek". *Butcher...* thought Galra to himself as he took in the sight of the child who'd managed to sidle up next to him.

The boy couldn't be older than eighteen. He was dressed in an old surplus brown plasticized pressure suit which was at least a size too big.

The child in a man's uniform led Galra along the narrow aisle between the rows of listless, uncomfortable soldiers dressed in everything from modern rubberized battle tunics to the older uncomfortable brown pressure suits and even the chainmail black coveralls of the mechanized divisions. There were no seating assignments. Men intermingled freely, finding a resting place wherever they could.

At the head of the massive passenger cabin the young trooper awkwardly spun round and stepped to the side of the aisle to both face and clear the way for Galra. "Right through here, sir."

Galra watched the child fumble an amber pass card from his loose-fitting suit and key the plain metal door in the bulkhead open. Without saying a word, Haec Galra stepped past the child, through the bulkhead and into a tight corridor no more than three meters long. A chrome-coloured spiral staircase was mounted to the naked deck plates of the dark grey corridor and Galra proceeded to mount the narrow, smooth steps. The metal door slid silently back into place behind him, and the noise and stench of the overcrowded passenger decks faded.

In nine steps Galra pulled himself up and away from the dark hallway to emerge onto an open deck, free of bulkheads and fronted by a wall of vertical viewports looking out over the *Rina Trusuri's* ample bow. More than two dozen other glinns and dalins were milling about the large empty room murmuring in hushed conversations. Galra joined the group. Before he could start making inquiries of his own the sound of a pressurized door

opening caused everyone to turn away from the viewports as Jagul Doro entered the room from a smaller chamber aft.

“Gentlemen, welcome aboard. Most of you have been with us for the last few weeks, but Glinn Galra of the Fourth Battalion and his men have only just joined us. Welcome, Galra.” Doro offered Galra a slight nod and then strode directly into the center of the collected officers and waited for them to spread themselves out into circle around him.

The Jagul was wearing a new style battle tunic...only it wasn't of the usual rubberized variety. Doro's tunic was clearly armor wrapped in flayer leather, more fashion statement than battle garb. The glittering silver decoration of the man's rank was expertly tailored along the outer righthand breast plate. When it caught the light from the overhead elements, it flashed like an ice gem.

“In a little more than five hours we shall make our rendezvous with the *Galor*-class battle cruisers *Prelic* and *Oroc Raallac*. My bosun will provide each of you with your boarding assignments. Suffice to say our near Legion strength collection of loyal Cardassian troopers will be equally divided between the two ships...uh, yes, Glinn Trila?”

“Sir, you mentioned that the Third Legion was being reformed, are we being staged to await full replenishment somewhere?” asked a bald, older man dressed in an older style vacu-sealed suit. His simple Glinn's cluster was affixed to the small divot in the center of his armor's chest plate.

Galra recognized Sapor Trila immediately. They'd been assigned to the same regiment during the weeks long build up on Alpha 441. Galra made eye contact with Trila but remained silent. He understood what Sapor was really asking. *Are we going to be marooned on some rock once again waiting for an order that might never come?*

“The Third Legion is reformed, Glinn Trila. Apart from the Second Division, which has already been installed and has done exhaustive reconnaissance and preparatory work ahead of the coming action. You loyal warriors constitute the command

structure of the entire Legion.” Doro narrowed his beady eyes and slowly looked around the room. He chose not to mention the contingent of Obsidian Order operatives working alongside the Second Division.

“Am I correct in assuming our target is Bajor?” asked Dalin Rell of the Cota Regiment.

“Yes, Rell. We move to seize Bajor for the glory of Cardassia. Gul Emlill Jegal, operational head of the Second Order is aboard the *Oroc Raallac* awaiting your arrival.”

“Then we are to stage on one of the Bajoran moons to coordinate...” started a younger Glinn unfamiliar to Galra.

Doro cut the young man off. “Your forces will be split between the two cruisers. Gul Jegal will be in command of the operation and the *Oroc Raallac* will dock at *Ne’ hol Nor*, our orbital platform above Bajor’s Capital Province. The *Prelic* will enter orbit and begin transporting troopers to pre-identified incursion points in and around the planet’s capital. There will be no staging. Action, gentlemen. Immediate, swift, effective action.”

Action...because we can’t afford to stage a proper invasion and have nothing but repaired, recycled and antique hardware left, thought Galra to himself.

“Most of you were there at Alpha 441. What was stolen from us can never be returned. Now is our time to strike. Legate R’aka has leveraged everything we have for this final mission. Everything.”

The men stood uneasily and glanced from one to another. Jagul Doro sat on the High Command at Legate R’aka’s side. They all suspected the state of the military had greatly eroded since Alpha 441. Several of the older men in the room grit their teeth. The young Glinn, the commander of the Second Order’s Third Mechanized Regiment opened his mouth to say something, but Dalin Rell grunted and the younger man, who’d not been at Alpha 441 quickly closed his mouth again.

“We’ve had a presence on Bajor for over a decade. We’ve gleaned all there is to know about their meagre defenses, their pitiful paramilitary forces and their backwards government. We’ve

strategically staged operations depots in and around the center of the Bajoran government. Our Second Division have worked to prepare everything you will need in advance of our conquest. Armed gun platforms have been made ready by engineers from the Ninth Order, and we are ready to black out all planetary communications to press our advantage.”

Galra grit his own teeth. All or nothing didn’t disturb him as much as the thought of what his role in the coming action was expected to be.

“Galra and the Fourth will lead the first wave into Bajor’s capital along with Glinn Erot’s Sixth Battalion. Between them they’ve pacified both Retek City and the Moh’ UI Heights...” purred Doro.

Galra looked across the room at Glinn Erot. He’d never met the man, but he knew his reputation well.

“Bajoran military resistance? A space force of any kind?” asked Dalin Rell.

“We have three *Terok*-class cruisers in the Denorios Belt monitoring the Bajoran space fleet, tiny as it is. Gul Jegal will attend to them. As far as on-the-ground resistance, we expect very little. We shall move swiftly and secure the capital and key targets of interest. Once fortified we can occupy at will. Immediate resupply and reinforcements will flow from *Ne’ hol Nor*. Heavy reinforcements will be dispatched from Cardassian space, once the initial wave has begun. Now, go and prepare your men. The bosun will find each of you in turn with your specific assignments. Dismissed.”

The throng of men dispersed and shuffled down the staircase and towards two lifts abutting the rear bulkhead of the observation deck on either side of the pressurized door Doro had emerged from. Galra silently moved to rejoin his men below, he wondered if he’d be able to awaken *the butcher* within himself for this one last sortie. For Cardassia, he would try.

Postmortem

Urin guided the Precinct's ancient hovercar to a silent stop in the lot behind the Teklan Township Lynch house. Two funerary lifts were parked side-by-side just beneath a low awning mounted to the side of the building's rear wall. Other than the two black hearses the lot was deserted. Urin had hoped he might come across the Precinct's large, armored transport before Ruha had set off to the monastery, but no such luck.

Dol double checked his tablet and his commsat before climbing out of the car and locking the doors. He'd passed the new green Vesper hovercar sitting on the street in front of the Lynch house on his way in. Doctor Prav Dekour was already inside and waiting.

Stepping out of the morning sun into the cool dark interior of the building was like wadding into a cold spring. A shiver ran up Dol's spine as the artificially cool air caused his skin to pucker and the dim light left him temporarily blind as his eyes worked to adjust to the miserly elements mounted high above in the cement ceiling. The heavy exterior door closed with a definite thud and its magnetic bolt energized and slammed into place. A quick walk down a tight hallway, then down a short flight of steps, led Urin Dol into the Lynch house's main preparation room. Dr. Prav was waiting quietly at the foot of the shiny metal embalming table.

"Dr. Prav, I hope I haven't kept you waiting too long." Urin nodded at the older man dressed in white and wearing a long black smock. He immediately set about prepping his tablet to record what was to follow.

"Not at all, Constable Urin. Your deputies were here just ten minutes ago with the deceased's father." Prav cleared his throat. He'd been the Teklan Township's forensic pathologist for nearly twenty-five years.

Urin checked his tablet once it was set up on a shelf at eye level across from the table and began recording: "Constable Urin Dol, Teklan Township. Attending forensic examination of victim:

Nata Onar. Case number: J-23-A-0012. Doctor Prav Dekour is the attending forensic pathologist. We are recording.”

Dr. Prav cleared his throat a second time and moved smoothly to a control panel mounted on the far wall. He activated a green diode and from several points above the examination table several cameras came to life. “Dr. Prav Dekour duly appointed forensic examiner for Teklan Township, recording. This is case number: ME-02-01-0556. Subject’s identity confirmed by one Nata Aako, as being Nata Onar, a seventeen-year-old female. Nata Aako is the subject’s biological father. Present as witness to my examination is Teklan Township Constable, Urin Dol. We are recording.”

Urin’s tablet was set to record both the constable and the doctor as the examination was conducted, but it was angled so that only the heads and shoulders of the two men were captured. The procedure itself would be documented by Dr. Prav’s overhead cameras which would offer a clinical view of the procedure from above, complete with enhanced audio recording capabilities to capture all that was passed between to the two men during the serious and solemn operation.

Prav donned a sterile mask and secured it over his mouth and nose before lowering a transparent visor mounted to a headband he’d been wearing to protect his eyes from any wayward *splash-back*. Once he was comfortable with his mask and visor, the doctor pulled on a pair examination gloves.

Silently, Urin Dol tied a green rubber examination smock over his brown uniform, then donned his own mask and visor. He stepped towards his accustomed place by the table and watched as the doctor methodically examined the tray of instruments which had been prepared for the examination. Dol had known Dr. Prav professionally nearly his entire career with the Teklan Township Constabulary. In all those years he’d never failed to be impressed with the steady, ordered and meticulous way in which the doctor went about his work.

“To begin the preliminary examination of the subject, I will now remove the clothing in accordance with established protocols.

Note: the subject is dressed in a light wool, ankle-length dress...blue with what appear to be...yellow flowers patterned throughout the material. The garment thus described is heavily soiled in what appears to be blood and other bodily secretions. Once removed all garments will be submitted to the Constable's care for evidentiary preservation. The subject was not found to be wearing shoes of any kind..."

Urin confirmed what the doctor was doing and professionally added his own notation for the benefit of both his own and the doctor's official records, then fell silent as Prav began the careful work of cutting away the girl's ruined dress. For nearly two minutes the only sound in the room was the gnawing of scissors through sticky, stiff, material. The dress was of the type that closed at the back by way of a few simple ties. Common for young women. Once Prav had cut the front of the dress open from neck to hem, he replaced his scissors on the side table and gently pulled back the garment to reveal...

A guttural noise exploded from Urin as he doubled over.

"The Prophets Wept!" exclaimed Dr. Prav as he instinctively shot back from the exam table.

Harvest Time

Joci trudged up the slightly graded path to the front door of his modest home. The sun was not yet at its midday position, but the heat had already swelled to the point where the back of Joci's roughhewn plough shirt was soaked through with sweat. He'd taken over a dozen moisture readings. The kava was ready to be brought in.

It was a big job. The Cardassians with their laser rigs had enabled him to plant kava seeds deep into every rocky inch of his meagre land – and that had been a blessing straight from the Prophets. Now though, after a warm, favorable growing season, he had a monumental task ahead of himself. His kava wasn't as high as that growing on the plains above, but his stalks were thick. The harvest could ensure his continued survival...only, there was just him. There was no Cardassian technology available to bring the harvest in. There were only his sickles and scythes. Only his muscle and strength...and only a week at most to get the work done.

He pushed his way into his little cabin and pulled the rough shirt over his head. Sleeping on the uncomfortable sofa bench had been anything but restful. Dropping his dirty shirt on the floor he paced directly into his kitchen to gulp down two cups of cool water. The air inside was heavy and stale. After his second cup, Sovul placed his glass in the sink and drew a clean one from his cupboard. He filled this new glass with water and then walked into the bedroom.

The smell of the boy's sweat, mingling with the medicinal stench of the salve-soaked dressings covering most of his body was nearly over-powering. Sovul wrinkled his nose but moved directly to the bed to check on his uninvited guest.

The young man was breathing in short raspy breaths. He'd not moved since last night. With a rough hand Joci Sovul quickly checked to see if the boy had wet himself. His hand came away

dry. The unconscious youth was hot to the touch, perhaps not feverish, but...

Joci groped through his chest of drawers and drew a clean wash rag from amongst his stockings and undergarments. He folded the rag over on itself and dipped it into the cup of water before gently wetting the boy's parched lips. It took close to two hours, but Sovul managed to get the stricken child to take a little more than half a cup of water. How he'd manage to bring in the kava and nurse this broken boy was a vexing mystery Sovul struggled to solve.

Beyond the cabin and the modest kava field, lay the broken remains of the Prowler.



Escort

“Commander Valar, we have a contact dead ahead at one-point-eight by point-two-three. Distance: one-point-eight light years.”

Valar leaned forward in the command chair and quickly consulted the chronometer mounted above the main viewscreen on *Fury's* bridge. They'd been on course for close to three and quarter hours. Valar drew a breath and leaned back again before asking Lieutenant Commander Bogga to clarify this sudden contact half a parsec outside of system O-223.

“Reading a Federation transponder signal, sir...comes up: NAR-758154,” reported Bogga from his seat at the Ops terminal.

“Shall I hail them, sir?” asked the young ensign stationed at the Communications station to Commander Valar's left.

“Stand by comms,” Valar said as he toggled the intercom switch on his command chair. “Captain Syrk, to the bridge.”

No sooner had Valar released the transmit button than the door to *Fury's* Ready Room hushed open and her tall, dark-haired Vulcan captain stepped out onto the bridge.

“Report, Mr. Valar,” said Captain Syrk in a cold, emotionless voice.

“Federation contact sir, nearly directly ahead. Transponder signals NAR-758154.” Commander Valar pushed himself out of Syrk's command chair and stepped aside as the tall, thin Vulcan assumed command of the bridge.

“Distance?” Syrk directed his question directly at the Denobulan manning the Ops terminal.

Bogga smiled in the somewhat disconcerting way many Denobulan's did with his elastic face and brilliant white teeth gleaming. “Contact now at a distance of point-nine light years, Captain.”

“Close to within a hundred thousand kilometers and drop to impulse speed. Match course with contact and close to within safe transport range.”

Bogga's smile faded. His big, bushy brown eyebrows furled and pinched together as he tried to make sense of the order. "Aye, sir."

Captain Syrk consulted the general status panel built into the lefthand arm of his command chair, before rotating to the right to face Commander Valar. "Mr. Valar, report to transporter room two."

Valar could feel all eyes on him. "Aye, sir."

Syrk watched as his First Officer turned and boarded the main turbolift without uttering another word. He was aware that everyone on the bridge was keenly focused on the Valar and were no doubt curious as to what was transpiring before them.

"Mr. Bogga, as of now you will assume the duties of Executive Officer, understood?" asked Captain Syrk as he allowed his command chair to slowly rotate back towards its neutral orientation facing the main viewer and the Ops and Helm stations.

"Uh, yes sir, of course." Bogga blinked and quickly returned his attention to his panel.

"Mr. Poste, once we are within transport range and Mr. Valar is away, you will take up position behind that ship and match course and speed so as to maintain her off our bow, understood?" Syrk turned his attention to the young human manning the helm.

"We're going to escort them somewhere, sir?" asked Lieutenant Poste as he began throttling back *Fury's* engines as they drew to within transporter range.

"Your orders are to maintain a light year's distance between our two vessels and match her course and speed, understood?" Syrk wasn't angry with his crew, their curiosity was understandable.

"Aye, sir. Now closing within transport range," reported Lt. Poste as he kept a close eye on his instruments.

"The contact appears to be a *Sydney*-class long-range transport, sir. Federation markings..."

"That will be all, Mr. Bogga," remarked Syrk.

"Captain, receiving transport coordinates from contact vessel," reported Comms.

“Relay coordinates to transporter room two. Make no attempt to contact that vessel,” ordered Captain Syrk.

Ruins

-TWEET, TWEET-

Urin ran his left hand down the length of his face and pulled a lungful of cool air into his chest. Immediately Dol regretted taking the deep breath as his stomach churned and another wave nausea swept over him. He pressed his lips tightly together and staggered back towards the short flight of stairs which led up from the preparation room and back to the narrow corridor he'd navigated to gain entry to the Lynch house from the secure lot.

-TWEET. TWEET-

"If you're going to be ill, Constable, please use the basin to your left..." wheezed Dr. Prav, as he himself was recovering from the gruesome shock they'd both just shared.

"I'll be...I'll be fine, Doctor..."

-TWEET, TWEET-

Dol pulled the white commsat from his duty belt. He half expected it to be his wife, but the identification code was a Precinct contact exchange. Urin steadied himself, then moved back into frame of his tablet.

"Constable Urin Dol, pause official record at time index coordinated between Precinct tablet....BR-Z/009 and call log on Precinct commsat...uh, BR-Z/00...twelv...no, BR-Z/0011."

-TWEET, TWEET-

Dol looked over at Prav, standing dumb in his black rubber smock and foggy visor. The body was laying between them, but Urin willed himself to look past the mess. Prav nodded slowly, then croaked: "Dr. Prav Dekour, pause official record."

Urin thumbed the commsat the instant the doctor had spoken and answered the call...

"Constable Urin, sir?... It's Deputy Daro, uh I just finished talking with that rancher..."

The call was quick. The rancher was an old man who'd heard the Precinct were interested in finding an old Prowler-Trike and he'd called in the rusted out yellow trike his son had ridden

into the ground twenty years earlier. All Sev found was a shell of a trike which couldn't possibly have been linked to the monastery, or the missing boy. The only thing of remote interest was the original user's manual was discovered to be still intact in the stowage bin beneath the bare metal seat which decades earlier had been upholstered in a cheap green leather.

"Yeah...alright Sev, wrap up there and get back to the Precinct as soon as you can. You can work the calls with Quas until I get back. Be careful, yeah?" Urin thumbed the white commsat and terminated the call.

Both men stood quietly for a moment after the constable had replaced his white commsat to its holster on his duty belt. Urin didn't know if the doctor's stomach had twisted in revulsion as violently as his own had when Nata Onar's naked form had been revealed, but the doctor looked as pale and ill as Urin felt. Dol adjusted his visor and stepped back to his usual place by the table and Dr. Prav cleared his throat.

Nata Onar's corpse lay on the table, exposed. Urin felt his left hand twitch and his knees were still weak, but he had a job to do. He nodded at the doctor that they should resume their grim task. He noticed Prav's right eye twitching slightly. Recording resumed.

"-cough-...Preliminary visual examination reveals several deep contusions lining both the left and right abdominal area...-cough- The subject's...chest also exhibits signs of blunt-force injuries, possibly consistent with a fist, or fists..." Prav coolly pointed out each swollen bruise along the girl's broken form as he spoke for the benefit of clarity, knowing his blue gloved hands would be captured by the cameras recording every second of the examination from their recessed alcoves above.

Urin stood silent. He'd worked out long ago where to stand and observe such examinations so that his own tablet could capture both himself and the pathologist in frame as the procedure played out.

"The contusions so far observed, appear to be pre-mortem...there was no readily observable trauma to the subject's

head or scalp. There don't appear to be any noticeable defensive wounds on any of the subject's extremities...-cough-... The...the subject's reproductive organs appear to have been...the...the likely cause of death would be a massive loss of blood from at least three deep lacerations to the subject's lower torso. The depth, length and clean perforations of these incisions, suggests an extremely sharp blade was used..."

The examination continued for another hour and half. Prav was hyper-focused on meticulously noting everything in exacting detail. It wasn't until the doctor began dissecting the girl's body that Urin Dol realized that cold and meticulous Dr. Prav Dekour, was crying steady tears behind his visor.

SS Anderson

He materialized in a prim transport chamber atop a central cargo pad flanked by three individual pads arranged above an unseen pattern buffer. The air he inhaled was crisp, almost cold. A short young human woman dressed in a white and blue Diplomatic Corps uniform smiled at him from behind a narrow control panel across the small room from where Commander Valar had appeared.

"Welcome aboard the *Anderson*, Commander," the transporter operator said in a sing-song voice.

Valar smiled and nodded. The young brunette looked barely old enough to write the Academy's entrance exams, let alone be entrusted with running a transporter room. He took two confident steps down from the slightly elevated platform towards the girl who still had a spray of freckles across the bridge of her nose. Before he could open his mouth though, the flush mounted door in the sparkling white bulkhead to the right of the operations terminal hushed open and a tall, fair-haired man stepped into the room.

"Commander Shon Valar?" asked the tall man dressed similarly to the girl running the *Anderson's* transporter.

"Yes...I'm Commander Valar, First Officer *USS Fury*." Shon was somewhat unnerved at hearing the stranger use his first name. Captain Syrk and most of the officers and crew aboard *Fury* simply referred to his rank and surname.

"I'm Captain Beck Notrand, FDC. Welcome aboard, sir."

The tall human extended his right hand in friendship. Shon offered a smile and took the stranger's muscular pink hand in his own blue hand and shook it in the human fashion.

"There's no need to be apprehensive, Commander. We're all on the same side here," purred Captain Notrand.

"Of course, Captain...not at all, uh permission to come aboard?" Valar stammered.

“Granted sir. I must share though; I am not human. I’m a Betazoid. My apologies for reading you just now. With Bolians I find it sometimes difficult to restrain my telepathic abilities. I do promise that from this moment on I shall be respectful of your privacy in this regard.”

Shon released the man’s hand and cleared his throat. He’d never been comfortable around telepaths. The irony of his being assigned as First Officer to a Vulcan captain was a constant source of anxiety for him. Betazoids were a step beyond Vulcans though. Betazoids were empathic as well as telepathic. For a Bolian who struggled with what many might regard as a natural nervous anxiousness, the prospect of working alongside a Betazoid was very nearly panic inducing.

“Lori-El, make safe the transporter and secure to quarters,” said the captain to the young woman, who was already powering down the transporter pad. “The Ambassador has requested a quick introduction, Commander. If you’ll step this way...”

Valar offered another quick nod towards the girl who was busily policing her terminal, then stepped through the single doorway the tall captain had just appeared from and into a narrow service corridor. The deck and bulkheads were all gleaming white, polished duranium. Shon noticed a slightly grippy layer of powder-coated grit coating the deck. The granular surface was invisible to the eye, but quite noticeable underfoot. A line of long singular lighting elements ran along the two and half meter high corridor ceilings. Each element was held in place by blue duranium frames.

“Lifts are to the left, Commander.” Notrand stood just behind the short Bolian and offered direction in the neutral, professional tone of a well-practiced tour guide.

“Of course...” Valar turned and began walking along the narrow, white corridor and very quickly spotted a blue access door set into the white bulkhead ahead of him.

The lift was tight. Notrand was a full two meters tall, and Shon judged the well-built man to be nearly Klingon in proportion.

A third person in the lift would make for a rather uncomfortable ride.

“Deck Two,” ordered Notrand at a standard command panel within the lift’s car.

The sound of cables tensing, and a safety lock disengaging was noticeable. Valar startled slightly.

“The *Anderson* is a small ship, Commander. We only have one turbolift. Our service and logistics decks employ traditional elevators to conserve power.” The captain offered the nervous Bolian in the maroon tunic a reassuring smile.



Junket

Kotan opened his left eye and lolled his head towards his cabin's central interface. A red indicator was flashing. There was no audio cue, but in the darkness Kotan could hear the faint clicking of the indicator's circuit opening and closing, opening and closing. Slowly, the weary Cardassian overseer rose from his comfortable bunk and shuffled to the interface.

"Derek," he barked almost simultaneously with the push of the intercom's trigger switch.

"Kel Derek, from Ops. You are required to attend the secondary docking port to greet an on-coming dignitary. These orders come from Gul Padar."

The channel clicked closed and the red light stopped flashing. Kotan rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. He wasn't supposed to be on duty for another six hours. He staggered into the head in darkness to clean up and begin dressing.

Ne' hol Nor was just a giant ring in space. The station was quartered around four docking ports. The main reactor, gravitational and inertial dampening control and deflector generators were all clustered between the primary docking port (the port Derek and his team had specially modified) and the cargo port. Station Ops, environmental mechanics, computing core and backup systems were located between the cargo port and the emergency port. Roughly half the ring was given over to necessities such as computer cores, redundant sensor generators and the like.

Between the emergency port and the secondary port – directly opposite to station Ops, were the four decks of habitation cells. The station's mess hall, galley and cargo bays were quartered away between the secondary port and the primary docking port. For Derek, it was a short walk from his quarters to the secondary port. As he slowly descended the plain metal staircase from his third level unit to the primary promenade on

level two, where he could access the secondary port, Kotan quietly cursed the pompous Padar for infringing upon his personal time.

Moments later, Kel Derek, dressed in a clean grey engineering uniform, stood gazing through the secondary port's observation window at the battered old yellow transport linked to the exterior of *Ne' hol Nor*. There was no sign of any dignitary...or anyone else for that matter. He was about to curse Padar once again, when the airlock suddenly triggered and rolled back to reveal an older, dark-skinned man dressed in black, waiting to board the station.

"Good evening, I assume you're here to meet me. My name is Ligan."

Meridiem

The car's cooling exchange system was cranked to maximum. The sun had climbed to its highest point in the day and there was no breeze to speak of. Dol sat moot behind the hovercar's control yoke and simply let the cool air spewing from the old vehicle's vents wash over him.

Neither the constable, nor the doctor had had much to say after the examination of Nata Onar was complete. Both men badly wanted to be away from the stench of death and the corruption of a once beautiful young person. Once Dr. Prav had declared his work completed and officially called for an end of recording, Urin had shut down his own tablet quickly and without a word, made his way out of the Lynch house as quickly as he could. Upon exiting the dim, cool, concrete vault, Dol very nearly vomited in the harsh light and intense heat of the day. He managed to recover himself enough to turn over the hovercar's engine and crank the up the cooling system.

Prav had been clinically exacting in his description of all that had been done to Nata Onar. The doctor's words had echoed off the cold concrete walls and seeped into both the medical recording equipment mounted in the ceiling as well as the official record Dol had set his tablet to collect. He'd heard the words in real time. They still bounced around inside his own head...

He looked past the operational cluster of gauges and instruments collected on the control deck behind the hovercar's yoke and stared at the secure door leading into the rear of the Lynch house. The heat made the air seem to shimmer in wavy lines that were and were not there. His stomach twisted once again, but he was feeling a little stronger now that the cool air was blasting in his face. He managed to will the nausea away. Inside, Dr. Prav would be scrubbing down and giving instructions to the Lynch house's chief mortician, Kestric L'Ompu.

Shock had given way to anger.

Urin drew a long, steady breath of cool air into his lungs and leaned back in his seat. There was serious work to be done. Taking another moment to focus his thoughts, Dol drew his commsat from its holster on his duty belt and inserted it into the dock on the cruiser's operation's panel. A small icon appeared on the commsat's screen to indicate the unit was linked to and charging from the onboard communications bundle. Dol called up the easy access menu on the old car's interface and waited for Micah to answer...

Fifteen seconds later and Quas Micah's old, wrinkled face appeared on the hovercar's small panel mounted screen.

"Finished with Prav then, Urin?" Quas was seated once again at his desk in the second floor bullpen.

"Yes. Any word from Ruha?" Urin glanced over his shoulder to see if there was anything interesting happening beyond the small back lot. There wasn't a sign of life anywhere.

"Ruha dropped Deputy Tiku and the transport off a little more than two hours ago. Zoz has gone home to get some sleep, he's got the watch again tonight. Ruha took a quad up to Teklan Sniew as ordered." Quas coughed into his fist and readjusted his own commsat to a better position on his desk so he could better see Dol on the screen.

"Sev's lead was a dead-end, apparently," said Dol flatly.

"I know, he just got back fifteen minutes ago. The rancher meant no harm. He thought we were looking for old Prowlers and just wanted us to come haul away a rusty wreck. Sev's got some manual or something from the heap's stowage bin, so he feels the trip wasn't completely wasted." The boy collected such trash.

Urin rubbed his eyes with his right hand and stifled a sudden urge to yell at his old friend to get something done.

"You, you alright, Dol? You don't look yourself." Micah watched as the younger man he'd once been responsible for training, squirmed uncomfortably in the front seat of the hovercar, looking like he wanted to breakdown in tears.

"-cough- I need an update from Ruha ASAP, Quas. I also want you and Sev to hunt down any leads you might get

concerning this missing...Rifu. I want him found and in custody, now." Urin could taste bile rising in his throat.

"So, we're sure this boy is the perpetrator?"

"We know the girl was assaulted and...whoever did this, Micah...it was intimate. That boy is our best suspect." A tear rolled down Urin's left cheek. He made no attempt to hide it.

"Alright...I'll contact Ruha and tell him to check in when he gets anything. The Central Magistrate furnished us with a blanket edict giving us clearance to search anywhere we deem necessary at Teklan Sniew. Ruha has a copy. He's going to go through the suspect's cell and belongings again, as well as make enquiries about that key..."

"How in the name of the Prophets did we get an edict so fast?" asked Urin. The anger which had been welling up was suddenly replaced by genuine surprise.

"When I filed the preliminaries this morning, I took the liberty of filling a request for Magisterial endorsement of a larger investigation...Vedek Michi Trulge was scheduled to deliver the Harvest Service at Teklan Sniew's Gratitude Hall, after all. Can't have a member of the Vedek Council wandering around potentially dangerous environs." Micah let the right side of his mouth curl up into a slight smile. He may be old, but there were still lessons he could pass on to the young constable.

"That's good work, Micah. Thank you. The Prylars seemed very willing to cooperate, but that edict should ensure Ruha doesn't run into any roadblocks. I'm going to head over to Teklan Niwen to follow up with the old nun...what?" Urin watched as the older man drew a breath and looked as though he needed to say something.

"Do that, Urin, but be prepared for some chaos. Vedek Michi and the Harvest Service have been officially moved over to Teklan Niwen in light of all that's gone on at the monastery."

"Wonderful...psst. Well, I'm guessing Sev's back to answering calls. I need you to hunt down everything you can on Rifu, clear?" Dol wasn't a fan of the bloated entourages many of the Vedeks now travelled with. The last thing he wanted to do now

was jump through diplomatic hoops with a Vedek's security force in the middle of a time sensitive investigation.

"Yeah, well, I spoke with the constable over at the Mount Taaferm Precinct in the Dahkur Hills. There's absolutely nothing there tying Rifu Trij to the area. No family. No friends. I sent updated ident documents and asked if they'd keep an eye out none-the-less."

"Yeah, alright. Did you give them a description of the trike?"

"Of course. They're a little busy too, though. Seems like we weren't the only ones to lose the communications net last night. It looks like all Dahkur Province may have gone quiet as well."

"Well, our problem is finding a murdering rapist. Better paid men than us can worry about spotty communications. I'm going to head over to see the nuns, then I'll make my way back."

Dol ended the call and dropped the hovercar into gear. Daylight was burning fast and there was a killer loose somewhere. The constable was glad to leave the Lynch house.

Ambassador Henri Renard

The elevator ride up to Deck Two of the *Anderson* was a quick one. When the tight car's doors opened Shon found himself looking down a long, wide, white hall. He stepped off the lift and into the resplendent space. He was standing along the ship's port side apparently and very near its stern quarter. The hall ahead of him ran out towards huge forward facing observation ports some hundred and fifty meters away. Captain Notrand remained in the car.

"I'll see you in a few hours, Commander Valar. Again, welcome aboard."

Shon turned and watched as the elevator doors hushed closed before he could say anything. He heard Notrand command the elevator to take him to the bridge from behind the pale blue doors.

"Commander Valar?"

Shon turned back around and found himself face-to-face with another woman in a blue and white uniform. She was obviously Deltan and unlike the young human who'd been operating the transporter, this crewman was a full-grown woman.

"Yes...?" managed Shon as he struggled to get his bearings.

"I'm Ura Jann, Undersecretary to Ambassador Renard. If you'll follow me, the Ambassador has requested to speak with you before we reach our destination." She smiled and her huge, doe-like eyes sparkled.

Shon felt a rush of blood flush his cheeks and steadied himself as the beautiful woman's Deltan aura washed over him. She gestured for him to follow her down the hall and he found himself dumbly staggering behind like an enchanted toddler. He managed a quick glimpse over his shoulder back towards the pale blue elevator door. A second, darker blue door was set into the white bulkhead further along from the elevator, which appeared to

be a turbolift. A third door was set into the starboard side of the bulkhead – but Valar couldn't determine where it might lead.

"This...this isn't like any transport I've ever been on." Shon managed as he turned forward just as the *Anderson* jumped to warp. The momentary display of flashing stars and plasma rushing by the huge view ports at the bow of the ship was incredible.

"The *Anderson* has been extensively modified for Ambassador Renard's use. This entire deck is meant for diplomatic activities. Standard *Sydney*-class ships use this deck for passenger needs. We've had the space to the starboard reconfigured to serve as the Ambassador's private suites. To port are eight suites meant to host visiting dignitaries and any support personnel they may require," said Jann in the same sort of tour guide manner Shon had noted in Captain Notrand.

The hall created by the solid white bulkheads running along the starboard, (behind which were apparently Renard's quarters) and those running along the port side of the ship, which were interspersed with double doors (no doubt leading to individual suites) was dazzling in its sterility. As they drew closer to the beautiful view ports at the bow of the ship, Shon noticed a pristine white conference table sitting in the middle of the reflective white floor.

"When needed, this space can be furnished with whatever trappings or regalia may be required to set various parties at ease. For now, things are rather bare," said Ura as she approached the table and ran the tips of her long fingers along its smooth surface. She turned and faced the blue Bolian Starfleet officer with a smile.

Shon stopped and looked from port to starboard. There was a double door set into the starboard bulkhead. He was thinking about what to say when those dark blue doors parted and a tall, dark-skinned man swept out into the white hall to stand in front of the massive view ports.

"Good afternoon, Commander Valar. I'm Henri Renard."

"Ambassador...it's an honour, sir," stammered Shon. Ambassador Renard's reputation was iconic throughout the

Federation and Valar found himself starstruck suddenly being face-to-face with the great man.

"Please don't take this the wrong way Commander, but your presence here complicates an already difficult situation," purred Renard as he walked to the head of the white conference table to stand across from the short Bolian. There were no chairs, or furniture of any kind to clutter the wide empty deck.

"I'm sorry, sir?"

"The Bajorans have been reluctant to continue entertaining Federation envoys. They've outright forbidden any Starfleet vessels from entering their space and while I've somewhat of a rapport with their Diplomatic Service; the sight of that red uniform may be enough to prompt them to break off talks all together."

Shon could think of nothing to say. Renard was a tall human, more than two meters in height and of an advanced age. Even though his skin was marked with age spots and his face creased with lines and wrinkles he projected a fierce vitality.

"I know you're here on orders, Commander. I bear you no ill will and want you to know I've nothing but respect for Starfleet and those who dedicate themselves to serve the Federation within the ranks; however, I must insist you remain in the background as a silent observer only. Understood?"

"Yes, sir. Understood, but if I may ask..." Shon closed his mouth mid-sentence as the tall human raised his right hand to motion for silence. He wore pristine blue and white robes and looked like some ancient king come-to-life from the pages of the old Bolian Fantasy novels he used to read as a youth.

"I've spent the last six years brokering behind the scenes talks between the Vulcans and the Andorians, Commander. Dealing with Sarek and a rotating cast of Andorian diplomats has been...taxing. Suffice to say I did this because, like yourself, I chose to dedicate myself to the Federation because I believe in what it stands for. I've accepted the Council's requirement to host an *observer* for these talks with the Bajorans. I've accepted the risk of having you here, but I must stress yours will not be a welcomed presence."

“Risk? May I ask then, what is it that I am expected to do?”

Renard smiled and Shon was shocked at the empathy in the offered grin.

“Officially, you’re expected to do nothing at all. Simply be present. It is the *Fury*, which will be sitting just beyond Bajoran space that your presence is intended signal.” Henri watched the short Bolian furl his brow. “Commander Valar, we suspect the Cardassians are invested heavily in Bajor and her politics at this time. Your presence, sir is...”

“I’m the proverbial flag,” interjected Shon with a note of understanding in his voice.

“Indeed. We travel at a cruising speed of warp 5.5 and will reach our destination tomorrow. Ura has arranged quarters for you across the way.” Henri nodded at the beautiful Deltan woman quietly standing behind Commander Valar.

“Thank you, sir.”

“Not at all. I’ll be dining in my quarters at twenty-thirty hours with Captain Notrand. I’d be pleased if you would join us then.” Henri smiled and strode back into his quarters without waiting for the Bolian’s response.



Gathering Storm

“Glinn Galra, an honour, sir.”

Galra looked up from the digital reader he'd been issued by the Jagul's bosun a little over an hour earlier. Galra's weary eyes met the flinty, cold gaze of Glinn Erot's own. A toothy, sharp and equally cold smile was stretched across the short man's face. Instinctively Galra rose from his seat at one of the dozens of simple mess hall tables where he'd been studying his orders and extended his left hand in friendship. Erot's long grey fingers clutched Galra's forearm like a vice and the two men shook one and other with two measured pumps.

“Glinn Erot, the honour is mine. Please, have a seat.” Galra released the shorter man's arm and graciously swept his arm towards the simple stool opposite the seat he'd occupied.

Erot nodded and grunted slightly. As he moved to seat himself, he casually tossed his own digital reader atop the plain metal tabletop. “It appears we will be working together on a number of fronts.”

Galra waited until Erot was seated before returning to his own stool. “Yes, I've been asked to divide my battalion between a number of landing points...”

“Yes, I'm not overly pleased with splitting up my men either. Many of them have fought long and hard together. They're like a family.” Erot placed both his hands on the table and made no attempt at subtlety as he took the measure of the man across from him. The “*Butcher*”.

“As you say...I've been asked to come up with six divisions of atmospheric certified pilots to occupy and suppress a number of outlying population centers around the capital province. You've similar orders?” Galra noted that Erot's reader had landed face down on the table. This conversation wasn't about logistics.

“Nine divisions, twelve troopers to each group. Apparently, we're to secure power distribution points at regulation stations throughout these population centers. The rest of my men are to

coordinate with elements of the Fourth within the Bajoran capital.” Erot had read and memorized his brief. He’d even worked out who among his men would be culled from the main body to secure these satellite positions while the Bajoran government was brought to heel.

“Yes, I’ve been ordered to coordinate with Dalin Rell as the Cota Regiment will be dispersing field supervisors amongst both our battalions,” said Galra in a forcibly subdued tone.

“Hmpf...seems even after all these years they still don’t trust us to do our jobs free of supervision.” The “Butcher of Retek” was a tall, darker, relatively plain looking man. Thought Erot as he held his fellow officer’s gaze.

“You were at Moh ‘Ul...how long?” Galra hadn’t yet decided whom he’d keep with him to suppress Dahkur City. Glinn Erot apparently had already made his decisions and was now sussing out the quality of his new comrade. Galra was obviously weary.

“Three years. We were on M’kemas III before that.”

“The Tzenkethi Incident?”

“Yes...all five years.”

Galra inhaled slowly and then placed his digital reader on the table gently before rubbing an itch just beneath his nose. The Fourth Battalion of the Second Order had spent its entire post Alpha 441 deployment on Rondac III. It had been hellish. M’kemas though; M’kemas had been a guerrilla nightmare.

Officially the Tzenkethi and Cardassian Empires were allied but break away Tzenkethi elements had waged a shadow war along the border going so far as to raid the depots on Kalevia to steal stockpiled Cardassian munitions for Tzentkethi use in their war with Tohvun II. The incursion into Cardassian space was offensive enough; the fact that fifty Cardassian troopers stationed at the depot had died during the raid very nearly threw Cardassia into war. The High Command’s response was to deploy the Sixth Battalion of the Second Order on a police action to curb future Tzentkethi misadventures. In effect, the Sixth had waged a war in silence and after years of quiet death, they had won.

“Are we going to work well together, Glinn Erot?” Galra cleared his throat and slowly, intentionally, brought both his large, scarred hands together on the table between himself and the shorter man who’d clearly come to take his measure.

Erot was quiet for a moment. Up until that point he’d not seen anything remarkable about the commander of the Fourth. Then as Galra coughed a guttural bark and drew his huge, dark-skinned hands together, something flickered in the man’s plain eyes. He’d had simply looked weary at first. He was tall and a shade darker than Erot – though not so dark as to be infelicitous, but not overly impressive. As his hands drew together though, Erot saw the light die in Galra’s dark eyes. Suddenly, he was sitting across from...a butcher of men.

“Yes, Glinn Galra. I believe we will work very well together.” Erot smiled.

Hasperat

Urin Dol took a second bite of hasperat from the comically oversized roll Micah had handed him from the enormous paper takeaway bag. They'd had young Sev fetch dinner from a market vendor down the street. All Urin's deputies had gathered at the Precinct. Most of the night watch had gone to work patrolling Teklan Township and manning the commsat panel on the ground floor. Upstairs in the bullpen, Urin and his day staff, along with Tiku Zoz, the deputy in charge of the night watch, gathered to share an evening meal and compare notes.

"While you all enjoy your hasperat, let's go over where we're at..." said Urin as he swallowed a spicy mouthful. He'd cancelled his dinner at home and his wife wasn't happy.

"Well, I confirmed with Horna Loll, the porter at Teklan Sniew, that there's only one key to the Gratitude Hall. He keeps the keys for the entire monastery in a monitored key watcher," reported Ruha Sac, who'd spent nearly the entire day speaking once again to the prylars and following up with supplementary investigations as ordered by Urin.

"If it's kept in a watcher, then the porter should be able to produce a printout of everyone who'd drawn it the day the girl was murdered," injected Quas around a mouthful of hasperat.

"Uh, huh. I had him run the reports and I took copies of his logs as well. Aside from the old nun who drew the key and found the girl, nobody had touched it yesterday."

Urin laid his dinner roll on his desk atop the insulated paper wrapper it had come in. "We're certain there's no other way in or out of the Hall?"

Ruha put his own meal down and propped up his tablet so the rest of the group could easily see its screen. A few quick commands and a detailed digital floorplan of the Gratitude Hall appeared for them all to scrutinize.

"I uploaded all this when I got back this afternoon. The drone scans I took last night were comprehensive, but I site

scanned everything today just to be sure. There's the primary entrance, the doors which require the porter's key. There is a storeroom below with a secured loading door. That storeroom showed no signs of activity when I investigated it today and like the main doors it requires a key from the porter's watcher as well..."

"Let me guess *-burp-* nobody had pulled it either?" asked Quas as he finished his dinner.

"Last time it was drawn was nearly four days before the girl was found. Horna had loaded several crates and twelve casks of springwine into the storeroom in preparation of the Harvest Service. It doesn't matter, there's no access to the Hall from the storeroom below anyway."

"What's that door, below the back end of the Hall?" Micah took another bite.

"Sealed more than thirty years ago. Access to the power net – they ran the primary node below the monastery when Teklan got wired into the central grid. The Ministry of Energy has exclusive access to that. Horna can't remember the last time it was opened."

"Hmmm...Sev, anything come in at all with regards to Rifu Trij?" asked Urin as he pushed himself back from where his hasperat roll sat. He didn't have an appetite.

"No sir, not really. A few calls from people wanting to know what's going on..." Daro felt all eyes suddenly on him and he stammered to clarify. "With the...the announcement that the Harvest Service has moved from the monastery to Teklan Niwen, I mean..."

Urin sighed and offered his youngest deputy a tired smile. "I asked Prylar Aiku to keep things as quiet as possible. It's understandable that people are confused about the change. Ruha, the school?"

"Oh!" Sev gesticulated suddenly.

"Yes, Daro?"

"I did get a call when I got back from the ranch from Hoek Mol. He runs the mechanical bays on the southside of Teklan

Township. Hoek says he sold Rifu Trij the Prowler nearly a year ago.”

Urin nodded quietly and waited for the young deputy to continue. When Sev Daro simply sat at his desk moot, Urin cleared his throat and tried not to sound too irritated: “Hoek Mol sold Rifu the trike...and?”

“And?” Daro repeated.

“Did he have anything useful to share, Daro? Does he know where Rifu might be? Has he seen the boy lately? Does he regularly bring the trike around for service calls? Anything?”

“No, Constable Urin. Sorry. He just sold the boy the trike. Says he hasn’t seen him since.”

Urin grunted and turned back to face Ruha. He motioned for his senior deputy proceed with his report from the school.

“The girl’s school, I managed to get over there after scanning the crime scene and going through the boy’s cell...”

“You got into the boy’s cell? Did we have a warrant for that?” asked Tiku Zoz in a sleepy voice. He’d managed only a few hours rest between night watches, having spent most of that morning assisting with the Nata family.

Ruha smiled and shrugged his shoulders. Across from him old Quas Micah was digging into the large paper bag looking for a second roll of hasperat. “When I was constable, deputies were expected to be proactive, Zoz...ah! You young fellahs don’t mind if I help myself to another roll?” asked Micah as he pulled another fat roll free.

“Did you get anything in Rifu’s cell?” asked Urin dryly. The mystery of how the girl got into the Hall without the key was gnawing at him.

“Bed roll, two clean robes and some candles. A copy of the *Book of Prophecies* from the Teklan Sniew library, but that’s it. Did you have any luck over at Teklan Niwen, constable?”

Urin looked from Micah, who was busy chewing a fresh mouthful of hasperat, to Sev and Zoz and then to Ruha who’d turned his tablet back towards himself and was reviewing his field notes. He could only shake his head. Sister Ire was still in shock

and had nothing further to add. The rest of the sisters were busy making ready for the Harvest Service.

He didn't share the sordid details of Nata Onar's autopsy.

"After searching the boy's cell, I got over to the Anara Kiev Academy down the lane from Teklan Sniew...it's only ten minutes door-to-door."

Sac turned his tablet back around and a slideshow was silently playing. Several images of the Academy's courtyard appeared along with a half dozen young people and a middle-aged woman dressed in a yellow and blue robe, a teacher.

"Didn't get much from any of them. Nata Onar was a senior and only attended afternoon classes. No suitors, but friendly with all the other students. They don't know she's... She was in class yesterday afternoon. The other seniors say she stayed back to listen to Ace tell some stories, then left for Teklan Sniew as she regularly does."

"Ace?" asked Urin, still fixating on the mystery of the Gratitude Hall and the gruesome images haunting his mind's eye from the girl's autopsy earlier in the day.



Coma

The boy had taken another full glass of water in the late hours of the afternoon. Sovul had needed to carefully change the bedding from under the unconscious adolescent as he'd emptied his bladder freely. Dr. Orvo had said to call him in Mulkul Township if the boy didn't wake within a day. It hadn't quite been twenty-four hours, but Joci was eager to have the broken boy out of his home so he could focus on the harvest.

After changing the boy's wrappings and applying a makeshift diaper to guard against further excretions, Sovul considered placing another call to Orvo. The child was clearly comatose...

Joci was just about to dig into the chest at the foot of his bed to find a clean shirt when the boy moaned. It was a weak, pained sound. Like a wounded halfa-goat. Sovul froze and stared at the prone figure with a fierce intensity. He watched the bound and bandaged child's stomach rise and fall in rhythmically steady breaths. He listened to the air pass in and out of the boy's body.

"Are you awake, boy?" asked Sovul in a shaky voice, almost a whisper.

The stomach rose and fell again, and again. There was no other movement or sound coming from the child.

"Boy? Can you hear me?" Sovul's eyes swept over the body from the ten bruised and bloody toes jutting from the white plaster casts Dr. Orvo had put on (the right arm too was plastered and immobilized) to the scrawny left arm and up to the young man's face.

A quiet groan.

"Son, can you wake up? You've had a bad accident; can you hear me?"

Nothing.

Joci spent close to an hour hovering over the child, but it was clear he wasn't ready to awaken just yet. Eventually, Sovul collected a clean shirt and a fresh pair of pants from his chest and

left the bed chamber. He changed and prepared a plate of kava husks and lubnak oil for himself. The hardwired commsat mounted to the wall in his modest kitchen was now the focus of his attention. Orvo had been charitable, but the boy seemed to be recovering and to call the doctor to come collect him ahead of his promised visit in a week's time might cost more lita than Sovul could afford. He'd have to risk leaving the child unattended tomorrow. The kava had to be brought in.

Devising Order

Kel Derek took a step back from the dark-skinned man who'd stepped out of the airlock without so much as a travel case. He was of average height and aside from his darker than desirable complexion, the *very important* visitor was unremarkable in almost every way. The stranger offered Derek his left hand. Kotan instinctively took the older man's left forearm in his own hand and shook respectfully.

"Ligan? Did you say?" Kotan managed to ask as the man dressed in civilian clothing released his own firm grip on his forearm.

"That's correct. You're the lead engineer here, aren't you?" Ligan arched his right eyebrow and offered the young engineer in the grey jump suit a wry smile.

"Yes, sir...? Kel Derek..." There was something off-putting and familiar about the dark man. A shiver ran down Kotan's back as the older man smiled at him with gleaming white teeth before cutting him off...

"Kotan Derek, yes. Expert architect and specialist in the field of zero-gravity space frames and the like. May I ask, Kotan if I may, why were you not seconded to Imperial Design Bureau for the *Galor* project?...uh, shall we?" Ligan nodded to his right and began walking towards where he knew Ops would be without waiting for his escort.

"Wh...? Uh, I...I just heard about this *Galor* prototype earlier today..." huffed Kotan as he willed himself to move and catch up to the dark stranger.

"I see. Waste of talent having you here, really. In fact, the whole Ninth Order is a bit of a waste of talent as far as I can see, but let's do stay on task, yes?" Ligan turned to see the young man pulling alongside him.

"I, uh...I serve where I'm told..." There really was something tremendously familiar about this man who seemed to

know too much about everything and eerily felt comfortable sharing too much of his own opinions in public.

"Yes, well...the reinforced docking port, that was you?"

"I don't...I'm sorry, who are you?" Kotan had just matched the stranger's brisk gait when the dark man who called himself *Ligan* suddenly stopped short.

"I am sorry. I just assumed everyone here would have recognized me from the trial." Ligan cocked his head slightly to the left waiting for a reaction but got none.

"I...I don't, Mr. Ligan. Trial?" The station was on night mode and most of the other engineers and troopers were either sleeping or manning their posts further along the great ring.

"Hmmm yes, well you are with the Ninth Order, aren't you. Amongst the brave troopers of the Second Order, I'm something of an infamous celebrity. Perhaps we should start again?"

Derek shook his head. He could think of nothing to say. The dark man offered his left hand once again and held it out towards Kotan, waiting. After a wary second or two, Kotan shook hands again with this odd man.

"Kel Derek, I am Mr. Ligan operative of the Obsidian Order." Ligan watched as the younger, fair-skinned man let his mouth drop open.

"Obsidian Ord...?" stammered Kotan in shock.

"Yes, that's right. I'm afraid my identity is rather well known amongst those who once formed the Third Legion on Alpha 441 as I was rather publicly presented during an unpleasant military proceeding concerning that disgraceful failure. I do apologize for not introducing myself properly just now. I rather assumed all of you would know who I am and why I am here."

"Why is the Obsidian Order here?" Kotan managed.

"You've been told to expect the arrival of the Legion in short order, yes?"

Derek thought back to Gul Padar's babblings and grit his teeth. He nodded. Padar had set him up to deal with the Obsidian Order operative, clearly...*the fat, cowardly, useless...*

“Failure is not an option. I’m here in advance to prepare the way, as it were. Shall we?” Ligan didn’t offer the young engineer a smile this time. He’d told the man who and what he was. Upon hearing the words “Obsidian Order” Kel Kotan Derek, or any other Cardassian for that matter, was expected to acquiesce with instructions without protest.

Kotan nodded his understanding and promptly led the way along the dark station’s primary promenade towards Ops.

Nap

The beautiful Deltan woman had shown Valar into a suite along the portside cabins and had told him if he needed assistance of any kind, he could just use the wall mounted comms panel to call her. Shon found the offer oddly tantalizing. His footlocker from the *Fury* had been brought aboard somehow and was waiting for him.

Draping his tunic over the back of one of three large plush yellow chairs grouped together by the door, Shon set about exploring the room. The bulkheads had been padded and lined with pale blue fabric. Two arching view ports flooded the spacious quarters with the flickering plasma lightshow streaking past the hull as the *Anderson* shot through subspace. A lush charcoal coloured carpet ran bulkhead to bulkhead. The three chairs surrounded a low white table forming a comfortable sitting area.

He found a blank PADD resting atop a polished white metal desk nestled in front of the suite's comms panel and food replicator on the bulkhead backing the ship's bow. An adjoining head, to the aft, was fully stocked with all necessary toiletries and boasted the largest sonic shower stall Valar had ever seen. The cabin's bed, rooted along the exterior bulkhead just below the viewport closest to the head, was enormous. It was professionally made up with a plain blue bedspread.

Shon set an alarm on the cabin's comms panel and pulled his boots off before settling back on the blue bed to close his eyes for a short nap...just as his heavy blue eyelids were about to flutter shut, a thought exploded in his mind. He'd just been invited to dine with a full ambassador! Protocol demanded...

Shon pushed himself off the bed and shuffled towards the yellow chairs and leered at his tunic. It was a daily wear uniform. He'd simply pulled it from his closet that morning. The Delta broach and his commander's pin were...passable. The rank pin showed the scars of its collision with an engineering bulkhead months ago when *Fury* had weathered an ion storm over Denver's

World. The broach was dull in places. It'd been issued to him when he earned his first promotion to lieutenant twelve years ago. The tunic itself was clean, though a few loose threads had appeared under the left arm and its sleeves were starting to fray at the edges.

As a duty uniform, it was passable. As a formal uniform, it was a disgrace.

Shon lifted the tunic off the chair. It wasn't just the maroon jacket with its scuffed pin and old Delta...the trousers he'd pulled on that morning were nearly a size too large. Bolians valued comfort. As a day-to-day pair of pants, the slightly baggy black trousers were acceptable, but they were hardly passable as formal wear. Valar rubbed his old Delta with the fat pad of his blue thumb and turned slowly to find where his footlocker had been left.

Sweat began to bead across Shon's forehead. Two small drops collected and funneled down the median line of his cartilaginous ridge and fell comically from the tip of his nose. The urge to ball the maroon wrap up and toss it across the room was growing. Shon restrained himself. The thread worn uniform was bad enough...a wrinkled thread worn uniform would be worse.

He paced across the cabin and tried to visualize what he'd left in his footlocker. He'd not used the standard issue trunk since taking up his post on *Fury* years earlier. As an officer he had the luxury of an actual closet and didn't have to live out of a footlocker like an NCO or ensign. He gently dropped his unacceptable uniform to rest out of harm's way on the bed.

Bolians were known for being anxious. It was a trait that could, if left unchecked, leave an adult Bolian completely incapacitated. Shon had undergone intensive cognitive behavioral training (as all recruits did upon admission to Starfleet Academy) to help himself control his anxiety and ensure successful performance of his duties. Even the techniques he regularly used to remain focused were failing to stave off an impending panic attack.

Perhaps some undergarments... Maybe an away jumper? The desert jacket from the survey mission to Ceti Alpha IV?! thought Shon as he approached the trunk.

Truly, the exact contents of the locker were a mystery to him. He wiped the back of his right hand across his brow and stooped to release the two clasps holding the lid of his old footlocker shut. Within he discovered an old, ill-fitting jacket. A tube of standard socks and undergarments. Two pairs of slightly baggy pants, a second older tunic without any accoutrements at all...and a pair of brand-new uniform trousers (in his correct size) and a fresh, never-before worn tunic replete with a gleaming Delta and a commander's pin with a mirror-polish, all sealed in a clear plastic garment bag.

A wave of relief crashed over Shon. The new uniform was carefully packed with a small data PADD resting perfectly on the broad chest of the blazing red tunic. Valar lifted the PADD in a trembling hand and thumbed the device "on".

>Commander Valar, I took the liberty of having Yeoman Steele pack some sundries for your away mission. You represent not only the *Fury* and me, but Starfleet itself. Your regular deportment would not be apropos given the presence of Ambassador Renard. I have therefor requisitioned a new uniform on your behalf. May your journey be free of incident. – Captain Syrk.<

Good Night

The night was “full dark” as Micah would say, by the time Urin walked up Ulhmn Street to his home. The tall, skinny house he shared with his wife and their grown daughter, who was away attending University, was dark and lifeless. The Night Watch were well about their regular patrols throughout the deserted Teklan Township commercial center by the time the Constable and his day shift deputies filed out of the Precinct and the world was dark and calm.

Micah lived in a one room flat in a boarding house a block down from the Precinct on the main road and walked to and from work regularly. Ruha and Sev both shared Ruha’s old hover wagon to make the commute from the Precinct across Teklan Township to the Murah Heights subdivision at the far side of town. Dol himself had a reliable hovercar he sometimes used to commute the eight city blocks from his home near the top of Ulhmn Street down to the Precinct.

He’d opted to walk earlier that morning. He’d not slept well following the late night at the monastery and though he was late in rising, he chose to walk to work that day. Now, as he pushed the door to his home’s dark kitchen open, he regretted not bringing the car. His feet ached and he was so tired he felt as if he’d had too much spring wine. The thought of falling into bed beside Iprah was foremost on his mind.

“Dol? Is that you, Dol?”

Urin pushed the kitchen door closed behind him and instinctively activated the maglock. He turned to peer into the darkness beyond the small, comfortable kitchen which smelled of dried kava and snipsnus root to where he knew the staircase leading up to the bedrooms was.

“Yes Iprah, I’m home...” he called into the darkness.

“Did you eat?”

Dol’s eyes adjusted to the darkness within his home, and he could just make out the shadow of his wife standing at the top

of the stairs, backlit by the small nightlight they'd installed in the upstairs hallway more than twenty years ago when Isero had first been born. "Micah treated us all to hasperat. I'll be along in minute, love."

"Micah won't be happy until you're all as fat as he is. Did you find that girl?"

Dol closed his eyes and kicked his boots off. Images of the autopsy came to his mind's eye. He'd told Iprah a girl had gone missing. Why had he done that, he wondered?

"No...no, not yet. I have a lead to rundown tomorrow."

Rugan Droro

“Dalin Pillit, we have a contact on our long-range monitoring buoy.”

Pillit turned in his command seat on the bridge of the *Terok*-class cruiser *Rugan Droro* to face his second officer at the Science Post. “Report.”

“Small, likely a *scout*-class vessel approaching the border from Federation space. Moving at low warp speed.” Glinn Osge saved and copied the telemetry report he’d just received from their most distant buoy.

“Does this correlate with our expected arrivals schedule, Osge?” Pillit moved his left hand over the well-worn action-stations actuator built into his command panel.

“The Bajoran government is expecting a diplomatic envoy from the Federation at Bajor VIII. This contact appears to be on the appropriate heading and makes the correct speed for that rendezvous.” Osge cast their long-range buoy’s tactical readout to the main viewer.

The image was a simple one. The border between Bajoran and Federation space was delineated by a stark red line. A series of five yellow triangles depicted the rough locations of the *Rugan Droro*’s sensor buoys deployed along the border within the Denorios Belt and a clump of yellow squares denoted the fringes of the distant Umoth Nebula which burned and raged with plasma storms. The approaching contact was still on the Federation side of the border.

Pillit studied the screen for a moment in silence. Neither the *Jaskih* nor the *Boheek*, the *Rugan Droro*’s sister ships were denoted on the crude tactical display. All three vessels were *Terok*-class veterans of the Tzenkethi incident at Tohvun III years earlier. All three ships were little better than freighters; having suffered significant battle damage at Tohvun to make the cost of repairing their offensive systems restrictive. As a result, all three had been repurposed and re-tasked to the Ninth Order. Pillit had

a single torpedo at his command and no offensive phasers on which to draw, should the *Rugan Droro* find itself in an offensive situation.

The *Jaskih* was even worse off. Dalin Goltoc, whom Pillit had attended the Cardassian Engineering Academy with more than ten years earlier, commanded a ship whose only functional superfluous accessory consisted of a standard tractor beam. The *Jaskih*'s photon launcher had been removed and installed in another more capable vessel years ago and her phaser power coils had burnt out following a harrowing encounter with a Tzenkethi attack sloop when the *Jaskih* had been part of the Third Order's fleet.

These three old, broken warships had been retasked to the Ninth Order to bolster the infrastructure required to run and maintain operations on Bajor. Pillit and Goltoc were assigned to run their vessels as listening posts, reporting to Gul Lasot aboard the *Boheek*. The *Boheek*, which still had use of her offensive phasers, served as a communications relay post between the Central Command and the station in orbit of Bajor, where the Ninth Order had established their headquarters.

Pillit sighed. Even if the approaching contact was the flagship of Starfleet itself, there was really nothing he could do about it. Observe and report...that was the mantra the fierce engineers of the great Ninth Order were expected to live by.

"Communications...relay this to Gul Lasot, now," said Pillit in a slightly defeated tone.

From the pit behind the command chair where Pillit sat, a young trooper in an old, stained, brown vacu-sealed pressure suit did as he was ordered. Almost instantly a confirmation code was received from the *Boheek* somewhere out in the nothingness of the Denorios Belt. Two minutes later a coded transmission flashed across the young trooper's station's screen...

"Sir, the *Boheek* confirms our transmission and reports that they recently monitored the *Carba Vul* making her way towards Bajor VIII. Gul Lasot expresses his thanks and asks us to provide updates on our contact's disposition once it has crossed the border

into Bajoran space.” The trooper keyed the standard acknowledgement signal into his computer without looking up to see if his commander was paying attention.

“Very well...Osge, let me know when the contact crosses the border,” said Pillit without taking his eyes from the screen in front of him.

“Yes, sir...sir?” Osge’s voice ticked up an octave.

“What?” Pillit craned his neck around to look over at his second-in-command.

“I...for a second I thought...” Osge tapped his finger against his station’s monitor.

“You thought what?” asked Pillit, slightly annoyed.

“Uh...an echo, or a shadow of the contact further back...right on the edge of our buoy’s range.” Osge swept through his scopes a second time...nothing.

“...keep an eye on it, Osge. Let me know when that contact is in Bajoran space.”

Disembarkment

Kotan Derek stood dumbfounded in the middle of *Ne' hol Nor's* Operations Center. Aside from himself, the infamous Obsidian Order operative and four severely anxious operators in grey jumpsuits manning the station's critical control posts, the entire station was depopulated. Kotan was a Kel...a rank not even acknowledged amongst the troopers of the more serious Orders. He was, unapologetically, a brilliant engineer, but he was no soldier. He was certainly no military commander...

"Uh...Kel Derek, sir...Gul Padar signals all souls now aboard the transport *Kaarlok*. They're asking for permission to disembark." The young man sitting between the ring-station's umbilical support terminal and logistical monitoring station looked back over his shoulder at the only officer left aboard *Ne' hol Nor*.

Kotan cleared his throat and glanced over at Ligan, standing peacefully just a half meter away. The dark man had a placid smile on his face and seemed wholly absorbed in taking in the flickering status icons flashing across the elevated main condition board. As if feeling Kotan's eyes on him, Ligan turned to regard the young Kel, dressed in a nearly identical pair of grey engineering overalls as the even younger men scrambling to keep *Ne' hol Nor* functioning. His expression remained static, placid. His slight grin never shifted. He simply offered the good Kel a friendly nod.

"...very well, uh...release all moorings and clear Gul Padar to leave." Kotan felt detached from his own body. This was all so surreal.

In just a few hours since welcoming aboard the Obsidian Order operative, Kotan Derek and these four boys were all that was left of the Ninth Order Regiment responsible for running *Ne' hol Nor*. Ligan summoned Padar from his quarters and commanded him to order his men to immediately pack and vacate the station. Padar was incredulous at first, but Ligan whispered...*something* into the fat Gul's ear which seemed to put

the fear of death itself into the pompous man's heart. In ninety minutes, everyone aboard the ring-station had shuffled uncomfortably through the airlock and aboard the decrepit transport Ligan himself had only just arrived on.

"The *Kaarlok* is clear of the station...Kel Derek," reported the boy manning the station's main sensor panels.

Moments later the aged yellow transport set course for Cardassian space and jumped to warp.

"Well, now that that's done, we've work to do, yes?" Ligan turned and faced Kotan head on.

"Sir?" was all Kotan could manage.

"Please, Kel Derek, just *Ligan* will do. After all, I'm not a military man."

The young men manning Ops shifted and fidgeted at their stations. With the transport now safely away, their strict attention wasn't immediately demanded by the station's more critical systems. Each of the boys dressed in the grey jumpers of the Engineering Corps of the Ninth Order tried to steal subtle glances at the dark Obsidian Order man who'd just up-ended everything.

"As I understand it, without having to worry about docking procedures, two operators can safely monitor and maintain this station in orbit, yes?"

Kotan furled his brow and blinked quickly. He managed to nod.

"Yes, good. Now, two of you young men will remain on duty here and two of you will come with Kel Derek and I..." Ligan turned to address the four boys standing mute within Ops.

"Mr. Ligan wha...what is it we're doing?" Kotan managed.

Ligan pointed at two of the boys staring at him from the umbilical station and communications wall. He grinned broadly as he beckoned the boys to come along...

"This station has quarters for how many?" asked Ligan as he began walking back towards the central promenade, leading Kel Derek and the two boys out of Ops.

"Uh...two hundred, Mr. Ligan..." offered Kotan.

“Well, let’s increase that, shall we? You men, you have access codes for the station’s industrial replicator?”

“Yes, sir?” managed Coth Jasdon, Engineer Second Class.

“Very good, Mr. Jasdon. You and young Mr. Ghanto will replicate a hundred and fifty double bunks and install them in every habitable cabin up to the second level. Leave the Gul’s cabin and the command-level quarters alone,” said Ligan as he led the grey-draped men along the promenade towards the engineering section.

Both Jasdon and his partner, Korvort Ghanto, Engineer Third Class, kept silent. The fact the Obsidian Order operative apparently knew who they were was sufficiently unnerving.

“You want to triple bunk every room except the officer’s quarters?” asked Kotan.

“Yes. Oh...” Ligan stopped short and caused his trailing companions to bump into one and other. “I’ll also need you to empty out cargo bay two. It’s pressurized and environmentally controlled. You’ll replicate a further three hundred bunks and install a barracks there as well.”

“Uh...”

Ligan looked over to young Coth Jasdon and feigned concern. “Is there a problem, Engineer Jasdon?”

“It’s just that...the replicator won’t allow that much...”

“Hush now, I’ve already updated the restrictor protocols. You’ll have no issue replicating what’s required. Now, we expect your fellow troopers from the Second Order shortly. Let’s have those bunks in place, yes?”

“Our *fellow troopers*?” asked Derek incredulously.

Ligan turned from the younger men to lock eyes with Kotan Derek. The smile dropped away from his dark lips. “As of now, gentlemen, you are all members of the Second Order. The five of you have been specifically selected to join the Third Legion and support its efforts to annex Bajor and all she has to offer for the Cardassian Empire. Congratulations.”

Neither Kotan, nor the younger men spoke a word. They were stunned.

"Now, please get to work on installing those bunks, troopers Jasdon and Ghanto." Ligan watched as the young men hustled into the engineering module of the station and begin priming the industrial replicator.

"As for you, Kel Derek..." Ligan waited until young Ghanto was well out of sight before letting the grin return to his face... "...or, shall we say Glinn Derek?"

"Glinn?"

"Nobody uses Kel anymore...that's something Padar and what's left of the Ninth can cling to. You're to be the new station overseer. As such you're rank will be that of glinn."

Kotan nodded his understanding, but the shock was writ plainly across his face.

"Good. Now, you'll draw proper uniforms for yourself and the others aboard. Don't let the rest of the Second see you in those childish overalls."

"I have men on the surface..." the words left Kotan's lips like a sudden revelation.

"Indeed. Some three hundred and seventeen. They too will be absorbed."

Diplomacy

Stepping out from his quarters dressed in his new, somewhat constrictive uniform, Shon Valar was immediately taken aback. The wide-open deck separating the guest quarters on the Anderson's port side from the *Ambassador's* suite on the starboard, was decorated in elegant shades of blue and gold. A wide, pristine carpet had been laid out from the lift doors at the aft of the deck all the way to the large white conference table standing in front of the large forward-facing viewports. The carpet was trimmed in gold brocade and featured a subtle pattern of three oddly-shaped stars clustered together in a familiar arrangement. Shon's eyes grew wide as he surveyed the remarkable sight he'd discovered just beyond his door. He quickly forgot about the new cinching belt digging into his soft belly.

The commander remained rooted to the deck even as the doors to his assigned quarters hushed closed just thirty centimeters back of his posterior. The rich, blue carpet with familiar pattern ran like a river towards the conference table. Shon let his pale blue eyes follow the blue and gold tapestry along the deck towards the ship's bow. The stark white pearlescent bulkheads had taken on a slightly blue hue – an optical illusion created by the walls reflecting the dark blue carpeting. The conference table was appointed in a shimmering blue and gold runner as well. In the center of the table stood two small flags rooted in a shared base of brilliant white sconsa ivy. On the left, the blue and white flag of the United Federation of Planets. On the right, the blue and gold flag of Bolaris IX.

“Commander Valar, I was just coming to collect you.”

Shon blinked and jerked his head back to see that Ura Jann had appeared from somewhere. She smiled at him and raised her left arm and swept her delicate hand towards the far end of the shining blue deck, where the doors to Ambassador Renard's suites stood open. Jann was dressed in a white and blue formal

gown and wore a tiara of white sconsa ivy atop her beautiful, bald head.

"Thank you, I...I..." Shon cast his eyes towards the Ambassador's suite and noticed two full sized banners had been staged either side of the open doorway; a UFP pennant and the star clustered blue and gold banner of Bolaris, his home.

"You're ten minutes early, Commander," cooed Jann as she quickly assessed the commander's bewilderment at the décor.

"Did...? Did you do all this, for me?" stammered Shon.

"Certainly, Commander. You're a guest. Shall we?"

The beautiful Deltan woman snaked her right hand through the crook of Shon's left elbow and the two seemed to glide across the rich, high-pile carpet towards the inviting entrance to Ambassador Renard's private quarters. Stepping across the threshold, Shon was taken aback once again by the sumptuous beauty of the room Ura Jann had escorted him into. An enormous single pane of transparent aluminum ran the length of the large room's exterior bulkhead. Plasma streamed by the window in shimmering ribbons of white, blue and yellow. Another Bolian blue carpet had been laid out across the deck plates and blue and gold accents adorned a long white dining table with a floral center piece arranged in the colours of Bolaris IX.

"I hope you don't mind the pageantry, Commander Valar. It's been far too long since we've hosted any of our Bolian brethren," said Ambassador Renard in his deep, warm voice.

"It's...it's wonderful, sir. You really shouldn't have bothered..." managed Shon as Ura parted from him to join Captain Notrand by a long, white polished bar.

"Not at all, Commander. May I interest you in a fermented fish oil aperitif? I believe this is *Xiwd Dinad*, from the mid-south wetlands. I'm told it's a superior vintage." Renard extended a fluted glass of greenish liquid, with a smile.

Shon took the offered glass with thanks. He'd not had genuine fish oil since his last furlough home more than a year earlier. He raised the glass slowly to his nose and caught the distinctive scent of the finest fish oil he'd ever encountered.

“Well, to the Federation and Bolaris, then,” purred Renard as he lifted his own glass of fish oil.

Both Captain Notrand, dressed in a glimmering white and blue dress uniform, and Ura Jann raised their glasses to acknowledge the toast.

All four took a sip of their drinks and the evening began. Shon marveled at the exquisite flavours exploding in his mouth. *Xiwd Dinad* was the most exclusive and most expensive brand of fish oil one could hope to enjoy on Bolaris IX...assuming one could even find a bottle.

After the small party had finished their drinks two porters dressed in diplomatic uniforms entered the great room from a side door and laid out the salad course. The ambassador bade all to gather round his table and the meal began. Shon was stunned. Every course was a native delicacy of Bolaris IX. From the arvaditum and seaweed salad to the Bolian tomato soup and ferlic-dough black bread to the aged manxved roast; everything tasted as if it had come from Shon's own mother's kitchen.

Even more remarkable to Valar was the way in which all three of his non-Bolian hosts eagerly devoured and even seemed to enjoy the cuisine. Over dinner, Shon learned from Captain Notrand that the *Anderson* would be crossing the border into Bajoran space in just under three hours. *Fury* and Captain Syrk were just ninety minutes behind the smaller *Sydney*-class transport and would hold position on the Federation side of the border. Close enough to monitor the *Anderson* and close enough to be monitored by the Bajorans, or anyone else who might be lurking just beyond Federation space. All told it would be another nine hours until the *Anderson* reached her destination at Bajor VIII.

“...and this is where you'll be holding your talks then, Ambassador Renard?” asked Shon as he caught the scent of real Bolian coffee brewing from the next compartment where the porters had been parading course after course of sumptuous Bolian fare.

“Yes, Commander. The Bajorans established a small colony on Bajor VIII, which they call *Andros*, over four centuries

ago. There are now six colonies on this outer world of their home system. This is where the Council of Ministers prefer to host diplomatic talks with off-worlders.” Renard placed his utensils upon his plate and deftly wiped his face with the blue napkin he’d neatly rested upon his lap.

“Forgive me, but if the Bajorans are so advanced as to have mastered interplanetary travel centuries ago how is it...I mean, they’re farmers, aren’t they?” Shon had cleared his plate and was well satisfied with the meal he’d been served. The smell of brewing coffee was becoming something of a distraction, though.

“When my own people on Earth were still fighting nation wars with flint-lock weapons, the Bajorans were purportedly sailing the stars in small ships and exploring the Denorios Belt. They are artisans, poets...yes, farmers too, but I think what you mean to ask is how are they not among the great powers of the quadrant in science and technology?” Renard smiled as a porter swept into the room to collect the plates from the main course. Desert would be offered shortly, once the coffee was done brewing.

“Well, I’m afraid all I’ve ever heard about Bajorans is that they’re xenophobic, religious zealots...which is likely not a fair representation of them as a people, but haven’t they spent decades refusing to even entertain Federation overtures?”

“*Farmers and priests*, I believe is the common descriptor of the Bajorans,” offered Captain Notrand with a smile.

“Yes, first contact with Bajor occurred over a century ago, as you likely know. At the time their Kai advised the Council of Ministers to reject any contact from the Federation,” offered Renard, before rising from the table to lead the small group to an open seating area closer to the giant viewport where they could converse while waiting for the porters to clear the dinner debris and prepare desert.

“Yes, that’s right! I remember listening to a lecture on that during my Academy days...*The Perils of First Contact*, or something to that nature.” Shon followed the ambassador to the far side of the grand room.

“*First Contact: Peril and Confluence*. Professor Suduss, from the Vulcan Exo-Biology Institute. I wasn’t aware he lectured at Starfleet Academy,” said Jann in her light, seductive voice. She and Captain Notrand took up two comfortable seats opposite one and other.

“Uh...yes, possibly?” Shon watched the beautiful Deltan repose in her gorgeous gown. Had he not already been flushed from the hearty portions he’d just enjoyed, the sudden blush that Ura’s sultry voice had provoked would have been embarrassingly obvious.

“A *Daedalus*-class vessel under the command of a Saurian captain, first encountered the Bajorans. Unfortunately, the Kai at the time had convinced the Council of Ministers that one of the sacred prophecies of the Bajoran faith had warned of the coming of evil snakes, or reptiles...or sadly, even Saurians. These *snakes* would signal a grave threat to all of Bajor. As a result, the Bajorans wanted nothing to do with the Federation for generations.” Renard gestured towards a comfortable sofa so that Shon should sit and be comfortable.

“Prophecies? Kai?” Shon lowered himself into the sofa as the ambassador too took a seat in large winged-back chair.

“The Kai is the spiritual leader of the Bajoran people. It’s a title bestowed upon a Vedek, a senior priest of the Bajoran religion, by an assembly of Vedeks who vote to decide who shall be responsible for the spiritual welfare of all Bajorans. The Kai has no official standing in the day-to-day government of the planet, but the influence wielded by the Kai, who is largely seen as the closest Bajoran to the Prophets themselves, cannot be understated...ah, coffee.”

Shon had three cups of Bolian Brew while Renard explained how only in the last decade had the Bajorans become more open to formal diplomatic talks. The Cardassian issue was a growing concern. The fact that Renard largely suspected Cardassia of influencing Bajoran foreign policy towards the Federation had meant many concessions were necessary to keep the lines of communication open. The *Anderson* was completely

unarmed. To the last soul everyone aboard was a civilian (Commander Valar being the only exception) and a diplomat. Talks were tense and only ever took place on *Andros*, far away from Bajor itself.

Aurora Visits

The sun was climbing over the distant mountains of the Dahkur Hills throwing long shadows across the hard scrabble wastes surrounding the perimeter of Teklan T424. Trooper Mahg Delayjo shivered silently as his partner, Trooper Nohj Mahet complained bitterly about the cold Bajoran mornings and the fast-approaching winter. Both men were clad in standard field armor and insulated with woolen undergarments they had purchased the season before in the Teklan Marketplace. The Troopers were part of the advanced unit dispatched from the Second Order – tasked with securing the various staging points across the face of Bajor and safe-guarding the engineers from the Ninth Order.

“-*sniff*- This accursed planet is going to be the death of me,” muttered Mahet as he thumbed the safety on his phaser rifle and tapped the control pad on their station’s water dispenser.

Weapons were strictly limited to “defensive arms” only and only permitted to be openly carried within the confines of defined Cardassian installations as per the mutual treaty put in place between the Council of Ministers and the Cardassian Cultural Outreach Bureau. As far as the Bajorans were aware each of the small Cardassian installations hosted only a small number of security personnel with limited sidearms. In truth, over the years the Cardassians had quietly smuggled in thousands of battle-ready phaser rifles and had staged them across the planet.

Mahet sniffed again as he rubbed at his cold nose and waited for the tower’s hot water dispenser to heat up so that he could make a hot cup of fish juice from the MRE packet of desiccated beverage crystals he’d brought up from the mess.

“Heads up, trooper,” growled Delavio.

Mahet spun around and scanned the morning vista quickly. A lone figure was slowly approaching Teklan T424 from the civilian road running along the furthest perimeter of the Cardassian installation. Mahet’s naked eye picked up a Bajoran hovercar parked on the road behind the lone visitor.

“Clock it,” said Delavio as he raised his own rifle and quietly charged the weapon’s isotolinium power cell.

Mahet moved behind the tower’s high-powered scope, mounted on a tall tripod, and quickly dialed in on the intruder. “One-seven-four, by one-three. Crosswind of point-ought-three...”

“Check.” Delavio’s targeting system hummed, the rifle vibrated slightly in his hand. Blowing the approaching stranger in half from such a short distance would be child’s play.

“It’s a Bajoran...civilian security force, brown uniform.” Mahet had shut out the cold. He was focused on the man steadily walking towards their position.

“Armed?”

“Carrying a tablet...utility belt...small device strapped above his left hip...looks like a commsat device...” Mahet thumbed a small actuator just behind the mounted scope’s focus wheel and saved a digital image of the intruder.

“If he blows past the speaker post, I’m taking the shot.” Delavio snugged up the rifle against his cheek and focused on the simple targeting display.

“Roger that,” responded Mahet from behind the scope.

Other than keeping an eye out for more targets, there wasn’t much he could do to help his partner. Keeping his left hand on the scope, Mahet let his right hand fall to the two-way control panel linked to the perimeter speaker post. Both men waited and hoped their Bajoran would become the first to fall – be it a day early or not.

A Few Questions

Urin pulled himself out of bed before the sun had even peaked above the horizon. He quietly showered and dressed in a clean uniform without waking Iprah. Dol lingered for a long moment at the doorway from his matrimonial bed chamber to the narrow stairs leading down to the dark kitchen and gazed enviously at his slumbering wife. Her jet-black hair had started going grey at the roots and her pert, full cheeks had shallowed some over the years, but she was still wondrously beautiful to him. She slept soundly on her side, facing his half of the bed with a pillow crushed between her arms.

Dol had laid awake the whole night. Staring blankly at the dark ceiling. Every time he felt his eyelids grow heavy and his mind begin to wander, images of the murdered girl came in relentless waves. He'd told Iprah that he was looking for a *missing* girl and even as the words first left his lips, he wondered why he couldn't share the truth of the matter with his wife and mother of his own child. What had been done to Nata Onar was savage and depraved. Even before Dr. Prav had laid bare the extent of the damage, Urin knew Nata Onar had been torn apart by a monster. Maybe this was why he protected Iprah from the truth...

Urin had no appetite. He drank a cool glass of water at the kitchen sink before setting off for the Precinct. The pre-dawn streets of Teklan Township were eerily quiet. If not for the images flashing in his mind, Dol might even have let himself believe that things in his Township were peaceful and good...but there was a monster on the loose. It was his duty to find the boy; halfway down the sloping street to the main road, Urin Dol stopped in his tracks. Somewhere between his bed and this spot, he'd decided the missing boy was guilty of Nata Onar's depraved murder. It was bad police work to seize on a conclusion without hard evidence, but Dol's gut, his very pagh *knew* Rifu Trij had murdered and desecrated the girl.

Urin signed out the Precinct's hovercar and set off towards the edge of town where the Cardassians had established their support facility. The sun was climbing over the distant Dahkur Hills by this point. His thoughts were scattered. He tried to keep his focus on the questions he needed to put to "Ace", the Cardassian officer who apparently had been visiting Nata Onar's school. The Cardassians were fostering a burgeoning trade relationship with Bajor. They had little interest in the day-to-day goings on in Bajoran life; however, the feeling that somewhere Rifu Trij was getting further and further away from justice was gnawing at him and "Ace" might know something.

The Cardassians had erected three low, long sheds where they serviced and stored their agricultural tools in a closed triangular formation a kilometer off the civilian access road on the outskirts. There was nowhere to park, so Dol simply pulled off to the side of the road and parked. Not many people bothered to come out and "visit" the site. Urin checked that his commsat was charged and secure in its holster on his duty belt before grabbing his Precinct tablet and starting the trek towards the site the Cardassians had named: Teklan T424.

Passing an obvious perimeter sensor post, Urin drew a breath of the clean, crisp morning air and walked steadily towards the looming tower which looked out over the ditches and scrub of the wastes. A yellow signpost declaring the area to be under armed surveillance by Cardassian security was written in both Bajoran and Cardassian script. Urin sighed as he passed the sign and wondered if anyone might head out to meet him.

Three kilometers back down the road was the primary transmission corridor for the iridium plasma which powered the municipal grids throughout Dahkur Province and the surrounding lands. A low, barely detectable hum, hung in the air like an atmospheric inclusion – the sound of flowing power, coursing along PDJ from the central reactor eight hundred kilometers away in the heart of the Dahkur Hills.

As Dol made his way across the hard packed, rocky earth between his parked patrol hovercar and the Cardassian guard

tower, he thought he could see someone moving high above. Ahead of him was a brass and brown post sprouting out of the brown and rocky earth. It was heavy-looking and resembled a cane with a box bolted to its curved head. Urin knew he was to buzz in to the guard tower to gain permission to approach the compound. Cardassians were a very security conscious people.

Stopping at the speaker box, Dol wondered if he should have called ahead. The sun was still rising in the distance and soon the late-summer heat would make the hardscrabble feel like a giant baking sheet. Urin wanted to make this a quick visit and get back to tracking down the boy before he started sweating through his thick uniform.

After quickly checking that the tablet he'd signed out was charged, Dol rang the orange "call" button mounted to the simple control panel in the no-man's land between the road and T424.

"Your business, friend?" came a disembodied, emotionless, Cardassian voice.

Urin looked at the speaker plate and cleared his throat: "Urin Dol, Constable Teklan Township. I need to speak with..." Urin tried to remember the name Micah had assigned to "Ace". "I need to speak with a Glinn Gomlir, please. Precinct business."

"Hold and stand by."

Prelie

Jori shifted in his heavy combat boots and drew a long, slow breath. He was wedged between Corbin Mosot and young Kovor Tule. They were crammed into the *Prelie's* primary cargo bay along with three hundred other Troopers awaiting deployment. He'd spent the voyage from Rondac III to the rendezvous with this new, massively impressive battle cruiser with Mosot as his constant companion. They'd been flight partners throughout the years of slow grinding dissident suppression in, around and over Retek City.

The battalion had discovered four ancient Type-2 *Krellah* interceptors abandoned in an ancient hanger beyond the walls of the city. They'd been cobbled together from a total consignment of seven such scramjets which the Central Command had written off as surplus years before the troubles on Rondac III had begun. The jets were intended to be used to teach colonial students the rudimentary engineering skills they'd need if they hoped to enlist one day in one of the Cardassian Orders. Three of the jets had been cannibalized so that four might function again. Jori Daro and Corbin Mosot had laid claim to one of the four "birds" and had for years, alternated between piloting and functioning as the other's onboard intercept officer. Both men had come to trust one and other completely.

Only a year and half before Jagul Doro appeared to pull the Fourth Battalion off Rondac III to reform the Third Legion, did the last of the *Krellah* scramjets finally, irreparably fall to ruin. By then after years of roundups, exterminations and brutal martial law, Retek City had been brought to heel. Air support was no longer essential. Nevertheless, the years of overwatch sorties, spy flights, bombing runs, strafing raids and a handful of actual dogfights (a few dissident cells had scramjets of their own) the Fourth Battalion of the Second Order boasted half a dozen genuine "aces". Daro, Mosot, Tule...all of them gathered here and now in fact, were the Fourth's "aces".

“Gentlemen, your deployment orders.”

Jori snapped his head around from the bulkhead he'd been staring at as he reflected on his years of service on Rondac III. The measured, steady voice of Glinn Galra was unmistakable and as familiar to Jori as his own father's had been during his childhood.

Galra passed each man in the tight group a single page of water-soluble paper upon which the final details of each man's deployment were detailed. Each of the eight troopers studied their orders in silence.

“Lufeki Skiffs?” asked Silar Teka with a sneer.

“Yes. You'll be transported to a secure compound where you'll man the skiffs and deploy to secure the primary power distribution node running through this Bajoran settlement...Teklan,” said Galra in a flat no-nonsense growl. His troopers hadn't noticed the new Dal rank pin affixed to the center divot in the chest plate of his old vacu-sealed battle tunic. Military men often harbored superstitions. Galra's was that his beat-up, worn and nearly antique tunic would protect him in battle like a talisman.

“Says: *teams of three...*” said Mosot in a matter-of-fact manner. Corbin didn't so much ask questions as leave statements hanging in the air he expected others to expand upon.

Galra shifted to face Mosot at the far end of the line of pilots he'd personally chosen to deploy to Teklan. The atmosphere was thick with the smell of rubberized battle gear, sweat and anxiety. The great ship's cargo bay was stuffed to capacity with troopers. Another four hundred men patiently waited in the cramped corridors beyond the cargo bay. All waiting their turn to advance into the cargo bay where they'd be transported to assignments somewhere on the surface of Bajor.

“Correct. A pilot, a gunner and a spotter. You'll decide for yourselves who does what.” Galra himself was tapped to deploy down to the capital city to oversee the regiments he'd commanded for years in Retek City. His place in line was far back on an upper deck leading to the *Galor*-class prototype's secondary cargo bay

where another heavy transporter would be dropping troops on an unsuspecting world.

"I think what Corbin means; sir is..." Jori stopped himself short and focused on Galra's familiar beat-up vacu-sealed tunic. A smile lit his face. "Dal Galra, sir!"

The other pilots all shifted and bumped to get a look at their commander's new decoration for themselves. Smiles all around. A swell of pride flooded Galra suddenly, but he managed to keep a straight face... "What do you think Corbin means, Jori?"

"Ah...there's not enough of us sir, we're down a man if we're to break into teams of three. We also appear to be the uh, well we're the best of the Fourth. Is it wise to have us all clustered together? Surely, we could each take a lead-roll in the other pilot groups apparently gathered here?"

"Originally, you were. All of you were going to be heading a flight group for just the reason you bring up Jori; however, Jagul Doro has informed me that Glinn Gomlir himself will be leading the Teklan flight group. I don't know how long he's been on Bajor, or why, but you voles will be flying with the ace of aces. That's why you're a man short and the best of the best." Galra looked at the faces of his men as he spoke. They were beaming.

"Glinn Gomlir...we're to fly with Gomlir?" asked Tule, sounding like a child suddenly.

"As the *Prelic* enters a tactical orbit of Bajor, we'll be transporting flight groups, ground forces and logistical support regiments across the planet. Gul Jegal will offload reinforcements to our ring station in orbit above the enemy's capital province, then our sister ship, the *Oroc Rallac* will engage and neutralize any capital targets in space which might cause us grief."

"Our orders, sir?" asked Jori, now eager to make landfall and fly alongside none other than Gomlir himself.

"Secure the power distribution network. Suppress any resistance, military or civilian and consider Glinn Gomlir your immediate commanding officer. Once all the targets are secured and the planet is ours, the real work will begin."

“*Suppress...suppress* as we did in Retek City?” asked Tule as Mosot crowded against him.

“Suppress with prejudice, gentlemen. We’re taking a world. Let there be no doubt of our power or willingness to wield it amongst the Bajoran people,” said Garla in a cold tone.

“Kill them all,” snarled Mosot.

“Destroy what’s in your way, Trooper Mosot. We’re conquering rulers, not genocidal monsters. Besides, we’ll need the Bajorans to serve us in various capacities going forward.” A darkness descended over Garla as he spoke the words. The “Butcher” had awoken once again.

The men jostled and grunted. Eager to get underway. Garla nodded quietly at what he saw. Cardassian troopers, ready to do their duty. He prepared to return to his own place in the standby queue, but stopped and added...

“Oh...try, try not to kill the priests. These people love their priests. If you see a Bajoran in a cowl or skull cap, do your best to leave him breathing. We can always come back and make any necessary corrections after we’ve taken the planet. For Cardassia, men.”

“For Cardassia!” cheered the pilots.

Field Work

Sovul gripped the thick orange stalks of kava firmly in his left hand. He was wearing the same well-worn leather work gloves his father had used when Sovul was just a boy. In his right hand he gripped the sickle he'd spent hours sharpening for today's labours. The morning sun hadn't yet climbed fully above the distant mountains. Joci stooped slightly. He stepped back with his strong leg and lowered himself to a knee while drawing his right arm back and away from his body. Harvesting kava by hand was not only labour intensive, it was also dangerous. To effectively reap kava with a full-sized scythe, one had to "cut-in" to the heart of the field and establish a point from which even, efficient and powerful swings could bring down the thick, valuable orange crop. Kava sickles (needed for "cutting-in") were deadly sharp. Accidentally catching a limb, or worse, over-swinging and slicing into your own trunk was an ever-present danger.

Once Sovul felt himself rooted in the correct stance he brought his razor-sharp tool around in a wide, powerful arch. The blade cleaved the half-dozen kava stalks as easily as it might have trimmed a few blades of grass. With a low, wide base, Joci caught the tall orange stalks from tumbling down upon himself with his left hand, while straining to slow and stop the deadly tool travelling through the air towards his exposed ribs in his right. He repeated the stooped, silent and dangerous dance a dozen times. After each swing of his sickle, he rose and walked his kava stalks to a clear area at the edge of his field to await bailing.

There was still a chill in the air. Joci was grateful for the slight breeze hushing-in from across the wastes running out towards the far-off Dahkur Province. He worked with a silent intensity. Bracing, stooping, slashing. Bracing, stooping, slashing. His plan was to cut-in to all four of his small plots, then start the reaping once the sickle work was done. The thought of stooping low and hacking away at the stalks in the coming full sun, was not an appealing one.

Once Sovul had cut-in to his final field to the point where he was eye level with his kava in all directions (save the path he'd just finished cutting), he exhaled loudly and wiped his right forearm across his brow. He was only now beginning to sweat. Joci walked his handful of kava out of the field to pile it with the growing mound. The sun was clearing the mountains. Sovul took a long drink from his canteen after sheathing his sickle. The scythe was waiting.

Joci replaced his canteen and steeled himself for the work ahead. In the distance the boy's ruined trike reflected the morning light. It would be hard, but it would be a good day, thought Sovul to himself as he rose and turned to take-up his father's scythe. At home the boy was still slumbering in Sovul's bed.

Boheek

Lasot stood above the trooper manning the *Boheek*'s heavily modified sensor station. Though old and well past her practical service life, the *Boheek* and her sister ships had been retrofitted with the best sensor and communications equipment. The three decrepit *Terok*-class vessels were listening posts, sensor platforms and electromagnetic counter measure (ECM) weapons; vital infrastructure to the Third Legion's coming conquest of Bajor. The skeleton crew manning *Boheek* and her sisters were simple engineers from the Ninth Order. While they all realized the necessity of their efforts, most longed to be somewhere else pursuing more stimulating duties.

"Can you confirm the sensor ghost?" Gul Lasot asked as he tried to make sense of the myriad returns populating the complex array of display screens and video return panels.

"The *Rugan Droro*'s sensors are still having difficulty locking onto it, sir..."

"Dalin Pillit's *echo*?" purred Lasot. He didn't believe in ghosts.

"Yes, Gul Lasot. The feed we're getting from *Rugan Droro*'s long range sensor buoy has stabilized, but...it's still just on the edge of their effective range," reported the young trooper working the controls.

"Try washing it through the secondary confinement receiver index, perhaps we can enhance the partial returns." Lasot rubbed the bridge of his nose.

They were up against time. The *Boheek* was to commence jamming long-range Bajoran sensors within the hour. It was Lasot's sworn duty to ensure his counter measures were deployed in conjunction with the planetary ECM attack *Ne' hol Nor* would be launching to cover the initial sorties of the Third Legion. Having a diplomatic Federation craft operating within the system was stressful enough; Lasot had to know what else might be waiting just on the other side of the border.

A series of chirps and a flickering panel caught the Gul's attention as the young trooper adjusted his scopes and washed the data feed through the impressive sensor computer core. Before Lasot could make further enquiries, the young man called up a new readout and began interpreting his data.

"It's a Starfleet vessel, Gul Lasot. Heavy Cruiser...a newer engine arrangement. From the power readings it doesn't appear as though their shields, or weapons systems are active..." Kel Teka turned to look up at Gul Lasot, hoping for direction.

"An escort to the diplomatic ship?" muttered Lasot.

"Perhaps, sir..."



Dialogue

“I’m sorry Constable Urin, but I don’t follow; you’re looking for a girl?” Gomlir stood tall and towered over the older Bajoran standing at the gates to the compound.

Behind the heavy steel doors within Teklan T424, the engineers of the Ninth Order were busily setting up and testing a series of transport pattern enhancers. The flight crews for the waiting skiffs would be transporting down in less than an hour from a high orbiting, fast moving, battle cruiser. The engineers were arranging no fewer than twelve enhancers in a large perimeter swept clear of debris and equipment behind the walls of the compound. The skiffs were now armed and ready. Their task was to set up and power the pattern enhancers to ensure safe and effective transport of the flight crews.

Urin Dol shifted on his feet. He’d worn an old pair of patrol boots. The soles of which were so worn down that every stone and rock he’d traversed from the road to the gates of T424, had dug into the bottoms of his feet. The sun was still on the rise, and he was already starting to sweat under his brown wool uniform. The tall, strikingly handsome Cardassian who was known as “Ace” didn’t seem to mind the full sun.

“No, uh, Glinn Gomlir I’m not looking for a girl, I’m investigating a girl’s murder. Up at the Teklan Sinew Monastery?” Dol tried to appear comfortable as the sweat began to pool at the small of his back and his feet ached.

The towering Cardassian lifted his chin slightly and sighed as if suddenly understanding what the Bajoran constable had come out to the middle of nowhere to discuss. Urin hadn’t asked to be let into the Cardassian compound to speak with the Glinn and judging from how quickly the solid steel door had slammed shut behind “Ace”, there’d be no point in doing so anyway.

“A murder? Well, that is concerning.” Gomlir’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“Ah, yes...yes, it is Glinn Gomlir. Uh, as I was trying to explain, I’m here to ask if you’d noticed or even interacted with the girl in question the other day while you were at the school?”

“I don’t recall any girl...mostly I speak with the young boys; they do love hearing tales of bravery and battlefield adventures...” Gomlir let a sneer tug the left corner of his mouth up into a ghastly half smirk.

“Yes, you’ve said. *Cultural exchange*, was it?” Urin had activated the recording feature on his tablet once the tall Glinn had consented to being put on the record.

“That’s correct...an outreach of sorts from the Detapa Council to the youth of Bajor.” The fact the policeman wore a duty belt, but no weapon, beautifully embodied the failing of the Bajoran people, thought Gomlir as he willed himself not to shiver in the morning cold.

“You were at the school the afternoon before yesterday?” Urin consulted his tablet. The Cardassian was cordial, but not overly helpful in any of his answers.

“I was.” This exercise was growing tiresome, and time was a factor. Gomlir was preparing to dismiss the good constable.

“The students have stated that the girl was present for your, uh, stories...and that she left, heading up the road towards Teklan Sinew and that you, uh, you left shortly after that.”

“Is there a question you mean to ask, Constable?”

“Well, you insist you didn’t see the girl...” Urin squinted against the bright sunlight and could see the towering Cardassian hadn’t moved. The mirthless smirk had disappeared, and a cold focus had seized the Cardassian war hero’s countenance.

“I recall a rather lovely young woman milling about, but I assumed she was a teacher, or instructor at the school. Quite comely, for a Bajoran.” The sneer was back.

Urin grit his teeth and slowly extended his tablet towards Gomlir. A scan of Nata Onar’s most recent school picture was displayed.

“That’s her! That’s the lovely young creature. I must say, I never had teachers as lovely as that when I was a boy on

Cardassia,” crooned Gomlir. Time was precious and this distraction needed to end.

“That is Nata Onar, the murdered girl. She was seventeen.” Dol’s mind raced, and flashes of yesterday’s autopsy came fast and furious.

“Oh? She looks much older than seventeen. She was murdered then?” He could see the pathetic policeman was quickly growing frustrated. Gomlir needed to get back to more important matters. He was prepared to have his men cut the sad man down, but the conversation had taken a different turn from what Gomlir had expected.

“You remember her the other day, yes?” Urin shifted and nearly staggered over himself. He was suddenly angry, nearly beyond control.

“Yes of course, lovely woman...”

“Girl.”

“Of course. The child was beautiful. What of it?”

“Did you see, or have you seen this boy?” Urin blindly thumbed his tablet and the image of Nata Onar collapsed and was replaced with a black and white image of Rifu Trij. Micah had pulled the image from the Transport Ministry’s files.

Gomlir dropped his arms to his sides and leaned in to examine the picture being presented. He didn’t recognize the pimply faced adolescent. He could see the constable was now quite agitated.

“I don’t specifically recall this boy. Is he...? Is this boy your suspect, Constable?”

“He’s a person of interest. You’re sure you didn’t see him the other day?”

The sneering smirk slowly transformed into a placid smile.

“I said I didn’t specifically recall him, which isn’t the same as saying he wasn’t there. In the short time I’ve been stationed here I’ve spoken with dozens of boys and young men, I’m sorry to say the faces all seem to blend together.”

“But you recognized and remember Nata Onar readily enough?” snapped Urin.

“One doesn’t forget beauty, Constable. Girl or woman...”
Gomlir saw fury building behind the constable’s eyes and quickly altered his plan of attack. “This isn’t to say that the boy wasn’t there. A handful of youths flittered away before I finished our informal talk.”

“More than just the girl?”

“Oh, yes. I wasn’t overly focused on any of them of course, but two or three skittered off to get up to whatever it is Bajoran youngsters get up to after school. Now, I’m sorry I can’t be of more help to you, but I have duties to attend to. May I return to my men?”

Urin drew back his tablet, closed the picture of Rifu and stopped the recording. He was spitting angry. Angry at the arrogant Cardassian. Angry at the murdering boy who’d assaulted and butchered an innocent girl. Angry at himself for deciding the boy was guilty before even questioning him. Shamefully, he was angry at Nata Onar herself for letting it all happen in the first place, which he knew was nonsense, but he felt it none-the-less. Not wanting to say anything inflammatory, Dol thanked the Cardassian for his time and promptly turned to make the painful walk back to his cruiser.

Comms

-chirp!-

Shon sat upright on the plush yellow chair he'd been loafing in for the past two hours. He'd been reviewing some of the materials preloaded onto the PADD waiting in his quarters. Mostly the PADD had been programed with a limited background the Diplomatic Corps had cobbled together concerning Bajoran culture and religious practices. So far, the displaced Bolian had learned little. The Bajorans, in essence were simply, farmers and priests...

-chirp!-

Shon pulled himself to his feet and strode to the far bulkhead where the comms panel was flashing behind the white metal desk. He extended a blue index finger towards the blinking amber square and immediately an internal comms channel opened.

"Commander Valar, Captain Notrand. Would you join me on the bridge, please."

"Uh, yes Captain. I'll be along directly."

No sooner had Shon responded to Notrand's direction, then the comms panel fell silent. As the Bolian turned to retrieve his new uniform tunic from where he'd stowed it the evening before after his wonderful dinner, a familiar twinge of anxiety lit within his mind.

Time to go to work. He thought to himself as he donned his jacket and stepped out into the pearlescent white world of the *Anderson*. Gone were the Bolaris banners and blue bunting and runners. The deck was sterile. Shon briefly glanced over to the Ambassador's suite, but the doors were secure and there was no sign of life. He turned to his left and started for the elevator he'd traversed the day before. Notrand and used it to get the bridge...

The turbolift doors parted and stood open, waiting.

Shon felt his anxiety peak. The elevator door remained closed. Clearly the lift had been sent for his use. Stepping into

the car Shon didn't get the chance to offer up a voice command. The doors hushed closed, and the lift shot upwards almost simultaneously.

Before Commander Valar could get his tunic fastened, he found himself standing on the threshold of the *Anderson's* bridge.

He shuffled off the turbolift in a state of disorientation. Shon knew the turbolift and elevator shafts were orientated to the *Sydney*-class vessel's aft; yet stepping out of the car, Shon found himself somehow facing the portside bulkheads.

"Commander, good. We're on final approach of Bajor VIII. Can you take your place at mark two, please."

The lift doors hushed closed, and Shon took a few muddled steps towards Captain Notrand. The man was standing at a raised status panel overlooking three crewmen seated at sleek terminals. The bridge looked nothing like the bright white deck below. It was dim and unadorned. The bulkheads were low and a flat grey in colour.

Notrand waived his right hand across his status panel and turned to regard the Bolian Starfleet officer slowly approaching. "Just over there, Commander."

Valar turned in the direction of the captain's gesture and noticed a single panel of white pearlescent paneling standing like a stark monolith along the aft...no, no! It was the starboard bulkhead. A sudden wave of relief flooded Shon's hippocampus with endorphins and his anxiety level dipped. The *Anderson's* bridge module was thirty degrees off center! As a cadet Shon had visited the *USS New Jersey* in the fleet museum and learned that off-set bridge modules were a common feature at one time in Starfleet ship design.

"Mark two, commander please. We have little time." Beck locked his panel and moved to guide their guest to the gleaming backdrop.

"Mark two?" Shon managed as he slowly pieced together the purpose of his surroundings.

"On the floor, Commander. Just stand on mark two and look...official."

“Captain, incoming from Andros Control,” offered one of the white and blue clad crewmen manning what Shon could only guess was the small vessel’s communications station.

“Slow to one quarter impulse, please. Commander, now.”

Shon let Notrand guide him to the white panel and noticed that there was indeed a subtle number two stenciled on the deck plate some ninety centimetres in front of the white backdrop just left of center. A number three was imprinted just right of center, and a subtle number one was briefly visible another ninety centimeters ahead of two and three, where Captain Notrand took up a heroic stance.

“Channel open, Captain,” said the young crewman.



Oroc Raallac

“Gul Jegal, we have confirmed six hundred and seventy troopers offloaded. *Ne’ hol Nor* reports they have reached capacity,” reported the short Glinn stationed at the *Oroc Raallac’s* state-of-the-art communications station.

“Status of the *Prelis*?” queried the head of the Second Order from his elevated command chair.

“She’s adjusting her orbit in preparation of her run, sir.”

Jegal narrowed his dark brown eyes and slowly spun around in his chair until he was facing the dark Obsidian Order operative he would never fully trust and a somewhat beleaguered looking young man in an ill-fitting battle tunic. Only hours before the young engineer had been tied to the utilitarian Ninth Order. Now this young stranger was one of the newest corpsmen of the grand Second Order.

“Well, Ligan? Has the legendary Obsidian Order efficiency made ready this pathetic waystation?” growled Jegal as he focused on the dark-skinned man’s black eyes.

“Gul Jegal, so nice of you allow us on board this impressive achievement of the Cardassian people...” purred Ligan in a smooth, steady tone akin to mocking derision.

“Save the attitude, Mr. Ligan. Everything hinges on what you were tasked to get done here. Are we ready to begin our electronic counter measure offensive?”

The primary viewer on the bridge of the *Galor-class Oroc Rallac* was ablaze with a glut of different tactical updates. Everything from the status of the three distant listening vessels stationed beyond the Bajoran System, to the individual staging points on the planet below scrolled across Gul Jegal’s screen in real-time. The oranges, reds, yellows and whites of the crawling data flickered and backlit Jegal in unnatural and unsettling vacillations of light and darkness.

“Allow me to introduce you to Kotan Derek, acting chief of station operations...at least until your people get settled.” Ligan

smiled and gestured towards the young man in the ill-fitting battle garb.

“Well Derek, is the station ready to begin broadcasting?” asked Jegal matter-of-factly.

“Uh...”

“UH!? What’s, uh?! I asked you a question, I expect an answer. You’re not in the Ninth any longer!”

Kotan forced his shoulders back and drew a quick breath. He was an engineer, not a trooper. He’d also spent the last few sleepless hours helping to replicate bunks and turn *Ne’ hol Nor* into a giant floating barracks. Mr. Ligan had terrified something deep within Derek’s soul...the way only an agent of the Obsidian Order could. While he didn’t doubt that Ligan could simply disappear him, or anyone on Cardassia Prime he might care about; Gul Jegal’s reputation as a merciless authoritarian was well known, as were his preferred methods of persuasion. That Kotan Derek was a loyal Cardassian meant nothing to Jegal, if he felt Kotan had failed in his duty.

“The, the station’s transceivers have all been aligned to ensure maximum coverage, Gul Jegal. The reactor needs time to recharge though...”

“Why?” The word fell from Jegal’s lips like a slab of marble landing flat on a steel table.

“The...we...” Sweat broke out on Derek’s brow. The heavy brown battle tunic the Obsidian Order man had bid him to wear was digging into his neck ridges and the lack of sleep was slowing his wits.

“In preparation of your arrival the handful of engineers I conscripted into the Second on your behalf, have been replicating and installing bunks for hours. No doubt this station’s modest reactor requires some time to recharge.” Ligan smiled and bowed slightly.

“How long?” asked Jegal, unimpressed.

“An hour and a half...an hour, if we shunt power from the modified integrity grid, Gul Jegal,” managed Kotan.

“Deck Master, make ready to disengage from the station,” barked Jegal.

“Yes, Gul Jegal!” responded an older Trooper seated forward to Jegal’s right.

“Once we’re free of the docking collar route whatever power you need to initiate ECM operations. *Prelis* begins her run in forty-five minutes. Clear?”

“Clear, sir. Yes...” stammered Kotan.

“We need a bigger station. This is intolerable,” said Jegal absently.

“I have some designs...I mean, I...sorry, sir.” Derek shrank behind Ligan.

“Do you indeed? Well, perhaps I will keep you on for a while.” Jegal spun around to face his viewscreen and bid Ligan and Derek to return to the station.

Swerve

“Diplomatic vessel *Anderson*, you are cleared to enter Andros orbit at the predetermined apogee. Transport coordinates for Ambassador Renard and one attendant will be transmitted once you are overhead, confirm.”

Shon stood bolt upright and concentrated on holding a statuesque stoic expression. The alien face displayed on the four separate viewers angled towards the white backdrop both Captain Notrand and Valar were posed in front of, was a weathered, joyless one.

Shon had only met a Bajoran once while visiting Lothra Minor in unaligned space years ago to watch the light-pod races. The man had been a trader peddling spring wine. As the grey uniformed, stern-faced man dryly instructed Captain Notrand on how he was to proceed, Shon found few similarities between the Bajoran on the screens and the man he'd met years earlier. The trader had been a happy, colourful soul, full of life, warm and friendly. The man speaking on behalf of Bajor VIII was listless and flat. Possessed of all the joy one might expect to find in a depressed Vulcan.

“Confirmed, Andros Control. We are proceeding into a standard orbit. Ambassador Renard looks forward to resuming his relationship with Ambassador Joran Talek.” Beck looked slightly to his left at the crewman sitting at the center terminal below the raised platform and nodded.

Anderson gently arched to starboard and fired her retro-thrusters to cut speed on approach to Bajor VIII. She gracefully sank towards the bright planet on the preset approach path the Bajorans had cleared them for. The bright white hull of the *Sydney*-class transport gleamed and flashed momentarily as it caught the light from the distant Bajoran sun as she slid lower and lower towards Andros.

Only three hundred kilometers to the little bright ship's port was the long and tan hull of the freighter *Carba Vul*. She was three

times longer than the *Anderson* and nearly twice her beam. On her bridge three different Bajoran technicians poured over sensor returns and attenuated active scanning beams which washed over the oddly beautiful alien ship slipping into Andros's uppermost atmosphere. The only condition under which the Council of Ministers would allow a Federation vessel to enter Bajoran space required any such vessel to be completely unarmed. The *Anderson* had visited Bajor VIII four times in the last few years and was familiar to the Bajoran Militia; yet, just as the first time Ambassador Renard sought congress with the Bajoran people, she was scrutinized with every available tool available to the wary Bajorans.

"Ambassador Joran has been recalled by the Council of Ministers. Ambassador Renard will be meeting with Vedek Kiran Solak," answered the grim man speaking on behalf of Bajor VIII.

Shon felt a lump form in his throat. Bolians were particularly adept at *sensing* when things were not *right*. The grey Bajoran on the screens remained emotionless but fell silent and appeared to be waiting for a response. Possibly he was hoping this news of their ambassador's withdrawal might prompt Captain Notrand to reverse course.

"Ambassador Renard will be honoured to meet with so venerable a vedek as Kiran, himself. We look forward to receiving your transport coordinates directly. *Peldor joi*." Beck kept his tone warm and his expression friendly. Upon relating the formal Bajoran greeting he bowed his head ever so slightly.

"Peldor joi," repeated the grim face from Andros and the channel went dark.

"Is this alright?" blurted Shon before Captain Notrand had even turned around.

"This...is unusual. Miriam, update the Ambassador, please. Mitchell, continue on course and lock onto their guidance beacons to allow for secure tracking."

Two of the three crewmen manning the *Anderson's* bridge nodded their compliance and set to work. Beck turned to regard his Bolian guest and offered the commander an unsure grin.

“Kiran is their highest ranking vedek. He’s widely regarded to be the Kai-in-waiting...”

“But he’s not an ambassador.” Shon observed as he unfastened his tunic’s bib and moved off his “mark”.

“No. Kiran Solak is most definitely not an ambassador.” Beck motioned for Shon to follow him back to the command panel. The Bolian was possessed of impressive intuition it seemed.

Shon followed Beck Notrand away from the stage. The *Constitutions* had rotated their bridges to accommodate EPS conduits, or some such nonsense. The *Anderson’s* bridge was rotated because it wasn’t a bridge at all, it was a performance center. He was on a ship of diplomats-come-actors. It was all genuine and it was all fake. Just then, Shon Valar very much missed the *Fury*.



D'I'r't'a

"Dalín Pillit, we've received a priority encryption from the *Oroc Raallac*!"

Pillit was standing in front of the *Rugan Droro's* viewscreen staring at the blue square rooted on the very edge of the red demarcation line depicting the border between Bajoran and Federation space. The cursed square hadn't moved since arriving the previous day on the heels of a small, unarmed, diplomatic transport. Without turning away from the screen, Pillit croaked: "Report."

"D'I'r't'a...*Begin*. Dalín Pillit, that's all it says, sir." Glínn Osge turned around to wait for direction.

"Is the *Oroc Raallac* aware of our contact on the border?" Pillit's mind reeled.

"I can acknowledge they are live monitoring all feeds from the *Boheek*, sir. I've got a live channel with *Boheek* right now..."

Pillit finally turned away from the tactical display and looked back along the bridge of the antique *Terok*-class warship he'd been given command of. He knew his duty.

"This message comes from the *Oroc Raallac*, directly? On channel Phz 99.1?"

"Confirmed, Dalín Pillit." Glínn Osge turned back to his instruments and noted that both the *Jaskih* and their lead ship, *Boheek*, were signaling their acknowledgement of the order.

Pillit walked silently back up to his command chair and retrieved his brown tubular helmet and donned it before turning to take a seat. Osge and the other troopers manning the bridge stations similarly donned their own helmets without a word.

"Very well. All power to main transceivers. Commence electromagnetic counter measures...Osge?"

"Engineer, all power to transceivers! Commence ECM!" barked the trooper seated at the *Rugan Droro's* Fire Control station.

“Yes, sir?” answered Osge, turning away from his screens once again to look towards his commanding officer.

“Keep a close watch on that Starfleet contact. I want to know if it moves so much as a deca over the border.”

“Yes, sir!”

Ditch

-TWEET, TWEET-

Urin wiped his brow with his left sleeve. He'd only just cleared the odd little callbox sprouting out of the rocky soil midway between the road where he'd left the Precinct's cruiser and Cardassian compound. For harvest time it was still feeling like high summer, he thought as the sweat continued to bead at his temples.

-TWEET, TWEET-

Dol slowed his laboured pace and huffed a hot blast of breath from his lungs. He carried his tablet in his right hand and fumbled awkwardly to transfer it to his left while simultaneously groping at his belt for the ringing commsat. He found himself standing in a rocky ditch, sweating in the full sun.

-TWEET, TWEET-

He squinted at the small screen in the morning light. *Iprah*. Urin sighed. He hadn't said goodbye to his wife that morning. He thought it kinder to let her sleep than to disturb her in the small hours of the morning.

-TWEET, TWEET-

For a second, Dol considered sending Iprah to the voice memo box to wait until he got back to the cruiser before calling her back. *The Cardassians must think I'm having some sort of conniption*. Thought Dol as he clumsily wriggled the tablet under his left arm and thumbed his commsat with his right hand.

-TWEET...-

"Hello, Iprah, I'm here....I know dear, sorry....I didn't want to wake you....Iprah? Iprah, hello? Hel...hello?"

Sweat was starting to run down his face again. Dol held his commsat away from his ear and squinted at its screen. At first, he thought the sun was blocking out the commsat's display. He turned to his right to shield the commsat from the direct sunlight and then noticed the screen was completely blank. He thumbed

the standby button to try and pull up the call screen. A yellow *NO SERVICE* icon appeared.

Urin tried to call the Precinct. The commsat had a full charge. It just couldn't connect to the communications network. *Just wonderful...*

Jegal

“Gul Jegal, the *Boheek* confirms her taskforce have successfully commenced system-wide ECM operations.”

Jegal called for a long-range tactical display of the expanse between Bajor and the distant Federation border. There would be no reinforcements. There would be no falling-back. There would be no second chances.

“Status *Ne’ hol Nor*?” barked Jegal.

“They report their transceiver is operational and standing by,” responded the hulking trooper manning one of the three posts at the *Galor*-class cruiser’s advanced Tactical Station.

“Thirty-eight minutes. Impressive young Derek, most impressive...”

“Sir?” Trooper Noro glanced up towards Gul Jegal’s command chair.

“Set First Alert status throughout the ship. Power forward phaser cannon reactors and signal crews to ready forward and aft torpedo bays! Viewer forward!”

“Yes, sir!”

The tactical display dropped away from the viewscreen, and Jegal was presented with a view of the slowly-rotating ring station, *Ne’ hol Nor*.

“Oran, order *Ne’ hol Nor* to commence their ECM operations. Signal the *Prelic* to commence her run. Send *d’l’r’t’a* to all commands.”

“Yes, Gul Jegal. Transmitting to *Ne’ hol Nor*, now.” Dal Oran at Communications began transmitting the commencement commands in meticulous order.

“Tactical, have you a lock on our primary target?”

Once again Trooper Noro looked up at his commanding officer and proudly called out: “Bajoran freighter *Gigen Obr* presently in orbit of moon three, Gul Jegal.”

There were three Bajoran freighters which were tagged as being targets of significance. *Gigen Obr* was the first. The second,

the *Brany Vornia*, was presently in port offloading a consignment of spring wine and silks at the Cardassian Colony on Pullock V, well within Cardassian space. Once Dal Oran had finished signaling the station and the *Oroc Raallac*'s sister ship, *Prelic*, he would send the same one-word command to the eight ships strong *Terok*-class wolfpack stationed in the Pullock System. Gul Ritza of the Third Order would then fall upon the hapless Bajorans and destroy her where she lay helpless and exposed in port.

The final Bajoran freighter in question was now at Bajor VIII at the far side of the system. The *Carba Vul* would be dealt with after the invasion.

"Helm, set course for the third moon, maximum impulse speed."

"Course set, Gul Jegal."

"Execute. Charge defensive fields and raise shields once we're within firing range."

"Charging defensive fields..."

"Oran, status of that Starfleet contact?" Jegal narrowed his eyes and watched as the stars started to stream past his viewscreen.

"Even without our team of ECM cutters it's doubtful the Starfleet ship could make out anything happening here from their vantage point," replied Oran.

"That's not what I asked Dal Oran!" snapped Jegal from his command chair. Any second now the shields would go up, the bridge lighting would dim, klaxons would sound, and battle would begin.

Oran flushed in embarrassment and immediately set about interpreting the limited data the *Oroc Raallac* received from the *Boheek* and her small taskforce. "The Starfleet contact has not moved, Gul Jegal. She remains in Federation space and is unable to penetrate this deep into the sector. Our countermeasures are working as planned."

The station would jam all communications on and from Bajor. The *Boheek*'s task force would scramble sensor beams throughout the system and make long-range scans and navigation

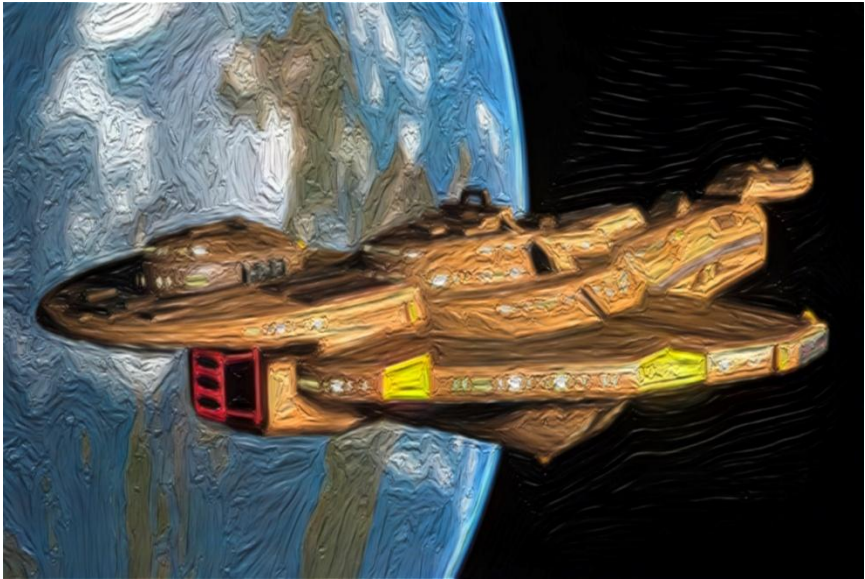
next to impossible for any vessel attempting to penetrate Bajoran space.

“Good. Continue monitoring that contact,” growled Jegal. He could see the simple orbital docking assembly the Bajorans used to service their heavy freighters.

“Target in range. Shields up!”

Jegal leaned forward in his chair let a wide, toothy grin contort his face. “Lock torpedoes on that orbital platform and fire!”

As the menacing yellow hull of the giant *Oroc Raallac* sliced through the dust strewn vacuum of space between Bajor and her third moon a yellow flash of explosive plasma belched from her forward torpedo tubes and two balls of red light streaked into the blackness.



Arrival

“What did he want?” asked Yok Dorla as Glinn Gomlir returned to the secure compound.

“It’s of no consequence, he’s gone. Status?” Gomlir walked directly to where the nine skiffs had been staged. Dorla was the lead engineer, but he was no trooper and certainly no equal to the famous Glinn.

“We’re done with the pattern enhancers, they’re powered on and working perfectly.” Dorla shuffled after Gomlir. The Glinn was tall and out-strode Dorla with ease.

“These cannons are primed and ready?” Gomlir ran a hand along the barrel of the nearest phaser cannon his engineers had mounted to each of the skiffs. He didn’t have time to stop and chat. The cursed policeman had taken up too much time.

“Of course, Glinn Gomlir. Each skiff is supplied with three spare energy cells...” Dorla was starting to breath heavy.

“Get word to the barracks, we’ll be receiving the flight teams anytime now,” snapped Gomlir over his shoulder.

“They’ve...-*huff*...they’ve already signalled...”

Gomlir stopped abruptly and spun around. The shorter man in the grey coveralls nearly crashed into him.

“Who signalled!?”

“The, the encrypted code word was broadcast just moments ago, while you were speaking with that Bajoran...”

“The blackout?”

“In effect. We’re uplinked with *Ne’ hol Nor* as we speak. The entire hemisphere has no ability to transmit or receive anything.” A broad smile spread across Yok’s grey face.

Before he could say another word, Gomlir’s focus was drawn from the skiffs to the wide-open courtyard. An unexpected hum of unseen energy filled the air and a swirling, sparkling display of plasma suddenly filled the emptiness with dazzling light. Gomlir and Dorla both raised their hands to shield their eyes. A second later both men were staring at twenty-six uniformed Cardassian troopers standing cheek-to-jowl within the confines of the recently erected transport enhancers.

Black Out

Urin slammed his hand down flat on the hovercar's interface console to try and jolt whatever connection might be loose, back into sync. The small status screen flickered momentarily, then went back to displaying the disheartening "NO SIGNAL" icon. He had the engine running and the atmospheric settings on full blast to cool down the cruiser's interior. The sun had cleared the distant mountains. It was going to be a cloudless, hot day.

"For the love of the Prophets, come on..." Dol muttered to himself as he leaned back in the driver's seat and stared at the yellow on black icon.

His personal commsat was useless. He'd hoped that the heavy-duty unit built into the brown and white Precinct cruiser would at least let him get in touch with Quas, but that hope withered and died quickly. Dol pulled at his collar and tried to loosen the thick brown uniform and allow some of the cool air to circulate down his sweaty torso. He looked over his right shoulder across the hot wastes towards the Cardassian outpost. Heat shimmers played in the air.

"Huffff... Well, at least the car started." Urin said aloud to nobody and turned his focus back towards his windshield and griped the cruiser's yoke.

The old cruiser hummed and stirred-up a puff of red/brown dust as Urin Dol piloted it off the rocky shoulder and back over the paved road. If he'd executed a three-point turn and headed back the way he'd come, he'd be back at the Precinct in less than twenty minutes, but he chose to ride out along the perimeter road and take the long way back. The Cardassian lead had been a dead end. Rifur was still out there, somewhere...and Nata Onar was still dead.

In less than a minute the lonely Cardassian outpost was out of sight of the cruiser's rear monitoring cameras and Urin Dol rode along the straight, empty road in silence. It would take him over an hour to reach the switchback that would allow the cruiser to

leave the narrow road and rejoin the Teklan Township routes back to town. As the nothingness of the bright morning flittered by his window, Dol mused that he could simply stay on the road and drive all the way to Dahkur Province...if he wanted to.

A revelation came to Dol's mind as he drove: *What if Rifu rode his trike out onto the hardscrabble, foregoing the easy paved roads and risking disaster? What if the boy ran into the wilderness, towards the Kendra Plains...or even Mulkul Township?*

He glanced at the status screen, "no signal".

It was unthinkable to take a trike across the hardscrabble, suicidal. Still...

Dahkur City

Four hundred and thirty-nine kilometers down the inter-Provincial thruway a column of thick black smoke was billowing into the morning air. Fires were burning out of control across the central core of Bajor's capital. The grey concrete building across Central Square from the Chamber of Ministers was a viper's nest of plasma fire and concussion mortars. It was the headquarters of the Bajoran Militia. A ring of armored Cardassian Troopers had taken up siege positions around the burning fortress.

Glinn Erot sat high in the observer's seat of a Casket-tank the engineers of the Ninth Order had prepared years in advance of today's invasion. The yellow, blocky tracked chassis was barely large enough to accommodate the commander of the Sixth Battalion, Second Order and the young trooper piloting the lightly armored vehicle and tasked with operating the comically small tank's plasma cannon.

"Set range .25, winds at 1 by 1.3 East-Southeast, declination 5.8!" screamed Erot from his seat, a pair of oversized field glasses pressed to his eyes.

The trooper hauling on levers and pumping various peddles to keep the Casket- tank moving nimbly across the litter and debris strewn street to avoid the plasma fire streaming from the upper levels of the Bajoran fortress hoarsely called back the short Glinn's orders. He heaved the lefthand lever back one quarter and pushed the right lever ahead nearly full to avoid an incoming ball of death. The yellow box spun wildly away from a patch of pavement which suddenly exploded into a molten bubbling puddle.

Three hundred meters back of the weaving Casket-tank, set behind an oversized ornate planter on the raised platform outside the main entrance to the Bajoran Chamber of Ministers; a team of three troopers in well-worn battle tunics adjusted their mortar. Two men set the range and declination on their weapon while the third quickly lifted a bright blue plasma charge from a rapidly depleting supply out of an ammunition chest. The most experienced man

double checked their inputs, barked back the coordinates he'd just received and nodded at the trooper carefully holding the blue ball just above the maw of their mortar.

-PHOOOT!-

The mortar kicked and a second later a chunk of concrete exploded, crumbled and slid away from the Militia building's façade.

Glinn Erot leaned forward in his seat and strained to see through the dust and debris. "Bah!"

The mortar hadn't cracked the edifice and the Bajoran Militiamen behind the walls were still pouring plasma fire down from within. All but two of Erot's shock troops had managed to gain cover safely before the surprised Bajorans began laying down defensive fire. The bodies of two boys lay amongst the debris in front of the Militia Building's main entrance.

Eight Casket-tanks and two companies had stormed up to the streets around the Chamber of Ministers and Militia Command from four subterranean depots the Cardassian engineers from the Ninth Order had been using for years as "infrastructure monitoring stations". Traffic around the Capital Building was light by the time the assault began. Most of the men and women responsible for the day-to-day running of Bajor's affairs had hurried into their offices nearly an hour before Erot and Dalin Galra charged into the sunlight to take Bajor or die trying.

Each of the small yellow tanks had a dampening field generator attuned to the military frequency Erot and Galra had agreed to use between the combined elements of their Sixth and Fourth Regiments. For a radius of roughly two kilometers the Cardassian forces swarming the streets were able to clearly communicate in spite of the intense interference raining down from *Ne' hol Nor* above.

Erot was just about to call for Casket-bravo to increase its dampening amplitude so that he might communicate with the *Prelic* high in orbit above, when he spotted five grey-uniformed Bajorans scrambling out of a broken window on the ground floor of the Militia Building.

“Ha! There, in the dust! Filthy Bajorans are trying to break out!” Erot shrieked in excitement.

The driver seated beside the short, flinty-eyed Glinn, winced as his commander’s voice rang through his earpiece. The tanks were loud, and the din of battle was intense. Though shoulder-to-shoulder all Casket-tank crews wore throat-mounted transmitters and earpiece receivers to communicate with one and other. The driver reversed his lever positions and the yellow tank spun hard about to face the front of their besieged target. Without having to be ordered, the young trooper slammed his left foot down onto the recessed peddle wired to his tank’s plasma cannon. A red diode illuminated, and the heavy plasma cannon mounted to driver’s side of the yellow brick sparked to life.

Erot lowered his field glasses and grit his teeth. The mortar attack had kicked up too much dust. The tanks were light and fast, but they were crude. Their plasma cannons were linked to the operator’s helmets and functioned on a look down/shoot down system, but there was no scope. There was no targeting save for the trooper wearing the helmet’s ability to “eyeball” his intended target. Five Bajorans had pushed through a shattered window and scuttled like mysa-crabs across the cracked and smoking concrete to try and flank Erot’s position.

This would not do.

“Casket-delta, position? Over,” barked Erot as he sat and watched the last of the desperate Bajorans flee into the smoke.

“Casket-alpha, Casket-delta...twelve-by-two, on your eight as anticipated. Copy?” came a disembodied voice through Erot’s earpiece.

“Casket-delta, Casket-alpha, you have five hostiles on foot approaching your KZ. Locate. Target. Eliminate. Copy?”

“Standby...”

Erot closed his eyes and listened. There were screams here and there... The sound of small arms fire echoed through the dust, but it was coming from the Capital Building at their backs... The sound of an angry wind; fire burning hot and out of control somewhere behind the fortified concrete walls of the Militia

building... A half-dozen barking explosions which could only have come from a heavy plasma cannon somewhere down the street...

"...Casket-alpha, Casket-delta...targets eliminated, Kill Zone clear." The sound of a distant engine humming and the uniquely distinct rattle-clank-rattle of Cardassian tank treads clattering along the street filled the open channel. "Casket-alpha, I count five targets down. Repeat, five targets eliminated. Copy?"

"Copy, Casket-delta. Any signs of arms or offensive capabilities? Over."

"Copy, Casket-alpha, two plasma rifles with scopes...small arms all around. Copy?"

"Copy. Fall back to *safe three*. All units Company Two, fall back to *safe three*. Over." Erot didn't wait to hear his commanders check in. They knew what *safe three* meant.

Erot leaned over and tapped his driver on the head. The young man slammed the tank into a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree turn and made for cover. Glinn Erot looked skyward and tried to see blue through the rising atmosphere of dust, smoke and death. As he rode along the uneven pavement away from the fortress, he ordered his mortar teams to pour on suppressing fire, advising them of the coming *safe three*. They'd never crack the Bajoran Armory with light fire, but they could pin down the bastards manning the battlements until the proper arrangements were made.



Scramble

Gomlir secured himself to the retaining rail of skiff-one. He wore a thick grey engineering jacket borrowed from his support crew and stood out from all the others. He'd taken close to half an hour explaining what was expected of the flight group. The yellow skiffs had all been prepared for the work which lay ahead and the T424 engineers had carefully applied large font, black numerals to the sides of all nine weapons platforms. Glinn Gomlir, the "ace of aces", would lead the sortie from skiff-one. The subsequently numbered platforms would fall in behind in a standard slither pattern until they reached the urban center of Teklan Township.

First order of business would be to commence a two-pronged attack on the Teklan Precinct, as it had been well established that the community's only cache of weapons and formally trained combat professionals (the local police force) were concentrated there. The fact that the township's constable had just departed the front gates of T424 and was isolated from his deputies and armory made the already likely successful raid on the Precinct that much more assured.

Each skiff had a Type-3 heavy phase-cannon mounted on a swivel arm in the forward center of their platforms. Gomlir stood to his skiff's portside aft quadrant at the raised control panel each pilot would use to sweep through the Bajoran settlement while the gunners suppressed hostiles and destroyed targets of strategic value. The cannons (which, like all the equipment smuggled to Bajor over the years in secret) had been primed and readied by the engineers of the Ninth Order. They were fed via internal energy cells loaded into the bulky square bodies of the skiffs only hours before. Everything was in perfect working order.

Beside Gomlir, at the skiff's aft starboard quarter, stood Trooper First Class, Jori Daro. He'd volunteered to serve as skiff-one's "spotter" and had clipped himself into the safety harness at the small platform's raised engineering terminal. Corbin Mosot had eagerly volunteered to man the cannon position up front. Both

Troopers would normally not have settled for anything less than piloting their own ships, but the chance to fight alongside Glinn Gomlir was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

"You both are clear on what we're about to do?" asked Gomlir quietly as he toggled on the skiff's internal reactor and began building power in the well-serviced ion flux cells.

"Yes, sir. We lead skiffs two through five towards the primary target from the east, while Tule leads the other half of the flight in from the west, standard swarm around the target and Mosot opens up with cannon fire until we've raised the structure," answered Jori in a clear voice. He'd already completed his preflight checks.

Gomlir lifted his right hand above his head to signal the others to power up. He kept his eye on the skiff's resonator index. At fifteen hundred MRz the restrictors could be disengaged, and they could lift off.

"Once the armory is neutralized the others will pair off and sweep through the town. Corral the Bajorans into their homes. They'll kill whoever they see in the streets and commit to a general *hold and secure* until ordered to do otherwise; we'll break off and proceed north from the Precinct to the monastery on the ridge overlooking the settlement..." Gomlir held his arm still above his head as he spoke and kept focus on his controls.

"We're to secure the power node. It's west of the primary," growled Mosot from his swiveling stool anchored to the articulated armature the heavy cannon was fixed to.

Gomlir sighed. They were still about a minute from liftoff. The burly trooper manning the cannon came across as direct, not insolent, so Gomlir kept his response measured and professional: "The node control point isn't at the exposed section in the west end. It's located beneath one of the monastery's buildings and accessible by-way of a narrow ally way running through the rock, between a school and the monastery's outer walls..."

Mosot kicked the stubby peddle at his left foot and spun a hundred and eighty degrees to his left, so that he could look at Glinn Gomlir hunched over his control panel. Before he could say

anything, Jori cleared his throat to signal that Corbin should keep quiet.

A smile lit Gomlir's face. The skiff was almost to power. "The Bajorans installed the network several centuries after the monastery was built. Instead of upsetting their gods by razing a wall or two, they burrowed beneath the rock, like filthy voles."

"Will there be resistance?" asked Mosot.

"Perhaps some students, wayward monks...it won't matter. Kill anyone in our path. The approach becomes untenable after the school; the ally is too narrow for the skiff. I'll drop us to an altitude of two meters and..." Gomlir turned his head towards Jori. "You will off-load and proceed to the node's access point and secure it with the modular confinement core device you'll find stowed in that compartment at your feet."

Jori looked down and saw that there was a red handle flush mounted to the decking between his feet.

"It's only a ten meter run along the ally to what will appear to be a sealed door set into the rocks below the monastery."

Jori stooped quickly behind his terminal and opened the small compartment in the floor. The device Gomlir expected him to affix to the power node looked heavy and there were two very obvious handles at either end of the device. He closed the compartment when he was sure there were no additional tools or weapons stowed within.

Gomlir waited until the younger man was back on his feet before continuing: "Don't worry about the door. It's unlocked and will easily give way for you with a little shove. I sojourned up there a few days ago to magnetically release its pins and bypass its alarms."

"So, I go unarmed into an enclosed environment to affix a module and just hope I don't encounter any resistance?" asked Jori, somewhat concerned.

"Ha! At most you'd encounter one of the monks. They'll offer no resistance my young friend. You should be happy. As circumstances have it, there was to be a harvest festival and religious service held there in the coming days, but recent events

forced the Bajorans to relocate their activity to another venue..." Gomlir noticed the other pilots were raising their own arms into the air now.

"Don't worry young *ace*. Your friend Mosot will cover your back and once the device is activated, we'll rejoin the others and await reinforcements as we play our part in adding this world's riches to the Cardassian Empire..."

Gomlir shoulder checked both sides of his skiff to be sure all units were signaling ready.

"Glinn Gomlir, can I ask?" ventured Jori.

"Ask why I'm leading this nothing-mission in this nothing-town, when I should be flying overwatch for the capital assault? Ha! Let's say the legates were tired of me refusing promotion and I entertained one too many Guls' daughters." Gomlir beamed a toothy grin at his spotter. "I'm to be made a Gul myself after this. An honour I will not be permitted to refuse. This shall be my last frontline action...and I look forward to seeing how a collection of Krellah scramjet aces navigate on these sad blocks."

Jori shook his head and smiled. Gomlir had heard of the "aces" of the Fourth.

"These logistics reports we're relying on, how accurate are they?" asked Mosot.

"We've spent years scanning and mapping everything of interest with these very skiffs. We know Bajor as well as we know Cardassia herself."

Pivot

Urin Dol piloted the old brown and white hovercar along the perimeter road at a steady speed. He wasn't in a hurry to get anywhere in particular. With the communications network down there was little he could do and now that he'd exhausted the local Cardassian Ace for any useful leads, he had no immediate destination. He thought about heading to Teklan Sinew to follow up with the ancient nun, but he doubted she'd have anything further to add to what was already known.

Dol took his right hand off the yoke and rubbed his temple gentle while he rolled things over in his mind. He'd left the Cardassian outpost nearly forty minutes ago. He didn't see the swarm of yellow agricultural platforms lift off from behind T424's Nissen huts. He hadn't seen the nine yellow *agricultural* platforms rise above the Cardassian outpost and then drop to a mere four-meter altitude above the rock-strewn wastes only to rocket out towards Teklan Township on a direct course. Nine yellow platforms bristling with heavy cannons and brown-uniformed Cardassian troopers.

Why didn't we discuss the possibility of Rifu Trij running towards Kendra Province? pondered Dol to himself.

Because there's no paved route to Kendra from Teklan Township and to try and navigate a hovercar across the wastes would be to invite catastrophic mechanical failure, piloting a trike would be positively suicidal. Urin's inner voice responded in an imagined condescending tone.

Still...

All thoughts of wasted trips to Teklan Sinew and dealing with the hoopla surrounding the vedek's impending visit for the hastily rescheduled Harvest Service were pushed out of Urin's mind. He opened the old crusier's throttle and poured on some more speed. Once he came to the switchback, he'd head for the Precinct. With luck whatever was affecting the communications

network would be solved and he'd have Quas Micah contact the Mulkul Township Precinct to make enquiries.

The brown and white cruiser sped along the empty perimeter road blissfully unaware of the chaos exploding all around.

Scrub

Ambassador Renard stood straight and proud in his heavy white and blue handmade Andorian mantlet. His strong hands gracefully folded over each other and held perfectly still just below his sternum.

Ura Jann stood a few meters behind and to the right of the ambassador. She too wore a formal blue robe accented by a crystal fringed poncho which had been exclusively tailored for her by a master seamstress while she worked alongside Renard soothing tensions between the Vulcans and Andorians. She sported a simple blue headscarf that perfectly framed her delicate features above the caracal fur trimmed collar of the poncho.

To the ambassador's left and just two meters away from the beautiful Deltan woman who'd so coyly titillated and fascinated him upon meeting her, stood Commander Shon Valar of the *USS Fury*, Starfleet. His garish red tunic stood out as an eyesore amongst the refined elegance and beauty Renard and his personal secretary projected. Just as he had on the bridge of the *Anderson*, Shon made a concerted effort to remain stoic and hide his unease and growing anxiety in the presence of the Bajoran contingent here on Bajor VIII, *Andros*.

"May I open by stating how deeply honoured we are to be in the presence of Vedek Kiran," said Henri Renard in flawless Bajoran. He deftly dipped his head in deference to the holy man who'd been waiting instead of Ambassador Joran; whom Henri had established something of a rapport.

Vedek Kiran didn't return the nod. He was dressed in bright orange and brown robes intricately looped and laced together through three progressively larger golden hoops which were tied to his upper right shoulder, the center of his chest and just above his left hip. His form-fitting cowl was of a rich black material that looked sleek and supple. It was trimmed in gold around the face opening and both openings through which his ears protruded. His

d'ja pagh was almost comically long and minted from platinum and gold links adorned with half a dozen small orange crystals.

He'd been waiting for Renard in the Great Hall of the Faiepern Temple, the holiest site on Andros. Centuries ago, before the Great Awakening, Bajoran explorers had established the first off-world colony on Andros. They'd hoped to populate the new world and from there, spread out into the universe to explore and enrich themselves.

Records were sparse, but at some point, a sweeping revelation of faith exploded on Andros and spread to Bajor itself. The people turned away from outward exploration and instead renewed their vows to the Prophets and dedicated themselves to domestic improvement through faith, instead of the conquest of space. A humble prylar named Faiepern of a small order only barely established on Andros built what would become this very temple. All of Renard's previous meetings with Ambassador Joran had taken place within the walls of Faiepern Temple.

"I greet you as a representative not only of First Minister Corzu Woy, but as a humble servant of the Prophets themselves, Ambassador Renard. You were instructed to bring but a single companion, however," said Vedek Kiran in flawless Federation Standard as he let his cold eyes rest on the Starfleet officer.

Flanking the short vedek were two tall and thin ranjens. They were both incredibly pale-looking and their faces were two unique collections of wrinkles and liver spots. From where Shon stood, it looked as though a strong wind might turn both old men to dust and easily blow away any evidence of their ever having existed in the first place. They wore identical red/orange robes held in place by singular brass rings fastened to their right hips. Their cowls were bright orange wool affairs, free of any adornments whatsoever and their matching *d'ja paghs* looked to be made out of dull iron links.

"I trust Ambassador Joran is well..."

"Joran is recalled to the capital by the Council of Ministers. I have been charged with negotiating a close to these frequent

solicitations your Federation feels strangely compelled to inflict upon us.”

Shon blinked hard at the sound of the Bajoran holy man’s cold words. He very nearly gasped but managed to recover himself. Both Renard and Jann appeared completely unphased by the vedek’s harsh retort to Renard’s polite enquiry.

“Surely, Vedek Kiran...the progress made with Ambassador Joran towards normalized relations between the United Federation of Planets and the people of Bajor must merit...” Henri paused as a grey uniformed Bajoran security man entered the hall and hurriedly whispered something into one of the old ranjens’ ears.

“Please Ambassador Renard, save your words. So much has been said already without speaking a syllable, yes?” Kiran nodded towards the Bolian in the red uniform.

Henri swallowed his words and quickly regrouped mentally. The Bajoran reaction to a Starfleet officer wasn’t totally surprising, but the vedek had no diplomatic grace and came to his points sharply and without pretense.

“Commander Valar is simply an observer, Vedek Kiran. Nothing more.”

“Oh? The Starfleet warship on our border, that is simply observing as well, is it?” Kiran turned his green eyes back to the tall human in the resplendent robes standing before him.

“It is not a warship, Vedek Kiran. She’s a deep space exploration vessel, tasked with safely escorting us to the border. We are, as the people of Bajor have requested, completely unarmed in every way.” Henri could feel the tension washing off the Bolian behind him. Commander Valar was unaccustomed to the sort of warfare diplomats regularly and mercilessly engaged in.

“We have heard how well armed your *exploration vessels* are, and how proficient your Starfleet soldiers are at employing those arms,” remarked Kiran, not taking his eyes off the tall human. Behind him he could hear the militiaman whispering to Ranjen Aanot.

Shon shifted slightly on his feet. Starfleet officers were not soldiers. They were scientists, explorers, engineers and doctors. The vedek, whether he was to be the next *Kai* or not, needed to be set straight. Before Valar could begin to form the words in his throat he felt a sudden wave of focused anxiety. He turned to his right as if someone had whispered “*psst!*” and found himself locking eyes with Uran Jann. Her face appeared blank, but her eyes cried out: KEEP QUIET.

“Tools, Vedek Kiran. No different than the formidable, phased plasma emitters affixed to your own heavy freighters,” remarked Renard, his hands still held perfectly still at his sternum.

Kiran was impressed with the human. He was a formidable diplomat. His path was clear though and he’d been dispatched by the Kai himself for the sole purpose of ejecting these Federations from Bajoran space for good. Just as the vedek was about to speak, Aanot moved in and began whispering in his ear.

Henri stood still and watched the vedek’s face closely. Agitation...puzzlement...acceptance...anxiety...whatever was being shared was not part of the diplomatic strategy the holy man had intended to follow.

“I am told there is a matter of import requiring my attention and immediate return to Bajor. Ambassador Renard, please do not return. The Federation and its politics are not welcome here. Do you understand?”

Renard could see real worry stirring behind the vedek’s cold expression. Something serious was wrong. Ordinarily the rejoinder he’d employ to reignite discussion would be delivered smoothly and directly, but before he could even open his mouth three more grey-uniformed Bajors stormed into the Hall and evacuated the vedek and his two ancient attendants.

“What in Bolaris was that?” sputtered Valar as the Bajoran Militiamen swept out of the Hall with their VIPs cloistered in a moving wall of protection. They’d left in such a hurry that the ancient wooden doors leading deeper into the temple were left to hang unceremoniously open.

"I have no idea. Jann, call for transport." Renard turned and let his arms fall to his sides.

Seconds later all three of them found themselves standing on the transporter pad aboard the *Anderson*.

Shon moved off the pad towards the young woman manning the transport controls: "Report."

The crewman turned towards Ambassador Renard, who simply nodded at her to respond.

"We've lost long-range sensors and comms are erratic. From what we can tell, the Bajorans cannot communicate with their home world. The freighter in orbit above us is powering her reactor and looks to be preparing to get underway."

Shon spun around and looked to the ambassador. If he'd been aboard *Fury*, he'd have called for a yellow alert. If he'd been aboard *Fury*, he'd also have the authority to follow his training.

"Secure your post crewman and set status one throughout the ship," said Jann.

"We must get to the bridge, Commander. Follow me." Renard strode out of the transporter room into the sterile white corridor beyond.

Valar unfastened his bib and followed on Henri Renard's heels with Ura Jann close behind. An odd throbbing began to echo through the PA system and *Anderson's* crew began securing non-essential systems in response to status one...

Whatever that was... thought Shon as he squeezed into the turbolift with the Ambassador and the beautiful Deltan.

Cota Regiment

Dalin Rell stood on the balcony overlooking the *sahn* of the red-bricked building where the Vedek Assembly conducted their business. Below was a small, but meticulously cultivated garden of weeping tornam trees with their long fragrant leaves of blue/green splendor brushing and lapping at the cool still waters of a small pond populated with multicoloured umomi fish. A short, winding path of flat paving stones looped around the trees and along the flower beds to the very edge of the pond where a steeply arched bridge of emjish planks bridged the small body of water and the pavers picked up once again. There were no birds singing in the tree, though. The nearby sounds of mortar fire and plasma discharges had scared all the birds away.

Rell wore the black chainmail associated with the Cota Regiment with pride. The contrast his tight black mail under armor created beneath his standard brown rubberized battle tunic was striking. He'd dispatched most of his regiment amongst the companies undertaking simultaneous actions around the capital, but he'd been sure to keep his best troopers with him.

Two Casket-tanks and four Lufeki-skiffs. That's all it took to blast through the Assembly's front gates and eliminate every living thing from the street to the inner sanctum. He'd ridden aloft in an unarmed skiff to observe his forces in action. From six meters up he quickly saw that his fifty infantry troopers, two tanks and the overwatch cover provided from the skiffs was complete overkill.

A flurry of fresh explosions echoed through the air.

Rell drew a long breath and could almost smell the living greenery on display below. It was a shame about the birds.

He looked up and listened intently. Mortars. Suppressive fire...

Turning from the balcony and unsheathing the polished ebonite dagger he always carried on his belt, he looked past the two rows of bleeding corpses in red and orange robes and smiled.

“Do you know what that sound is...eminence?”

Kai Asel looked up from his place splayed on the cold marble floor beneath the circular conference table the Vedek Conclave used for their most holy meetings and sputtered hurt puppy noises in terror.

“That’s suppressive, mid-range, light artillery fire. Which means very shortly, hell will be descending and all the enemies of Cardassia will be wiped away...like blood from a blade.”

Council of Ministers

The advance party of engineers from the Ninth Order and the select troopers from the Second Order had meticulously collected intelligence on the critical infrastructure, key civilian targets and prime military concerns peppered throughout Bajor's capital province over the years. Under the guise of "cultural outreach" and "interplanetary cooperation", detailed laser scans of the planet's topography had been catalogued and the intricate system of criss-crossing power transfer lines mapped. Mineral and mining charts had been copied. Existing corporate entities and labour organizations had been infiltrated. For years the friendly face of the Cardassian Outreach Collective watched, recorded, reported and charted everything of interest.

Regular trade between the two worlds had been ongoing for centuries. The presence of permanent Cardassian outposts scattered throughout Bajor's cities and towns however, had only been a recent development of the last decade. Initially the plan had been to make rudimentary surveys in preparation of the aborted invasion eight years earlier. The failure to successfully launch the offensive had very nearly toppled the order of the entire empire.

Central Command managed to narrowly avoid a coup following Alpha 441 and the loss of the *Kreke Disac* by scapegoating an unknown dalin. To maintain stability, they'd had to pivot quickly. Rebellion, riots and civil unrest exploded across the impoverished colonies and the Third Legion had been swiftly redeployed. Stability through strength. The legates and jaguls spent years securing the empire, all the while retooling the ultimate strategy for seizing Bajor and its wealth of resources to save their increasingly destitute culture.

The Cardassians sent to gather advance intelligence for the full-scale conquest of Bajor, dug in. The handful of representatives posing as traders and cultural ambassadors; largely Obsidian Order operatives and elite Military Intelligence Specialists from the

First Order, were switched out for engineers and real diplomats. Terms were negotiated. Lands secured for permanent outposts. Trade of technology for agricultural goods was greatly expanded. All while the resources and manpower of the Third Legion bled away on a dozen different worlds and in a hundred different skirmishes along the ragged border.

Central Command bet everything on a “long-game” strategy the Obsidian Order had proposed. They developed relationships and informants amongst Bajor’s politicians, largest merchants...even their religious elites. For years they ran up deficits to *charm* the Bajorans into thinking the deepening economic and social ties between their two worlds was a gift from the Prophets. They leveraged everything investing in the new prototype *Galor* heavy warships, even to the detriment of the rest of their fleet and all twelve of their active Orders. The Ferengi Alliance was now the fiduciary pillar upon which the Cardassian Empire teetered.

They played for time, watched for weakness...and the time to strike was now. Material supplies and hardware had fallen to critical levels. The manpower of the original Third Legion had dropped by a third. They had only just managed to replenish those numbers with an influx of young troopers. These were the last viable recruits for at least a generation.

Fifty-two Casket-tanks and one hundred and six Lufeki cargo skiffs had been successfully and surreptitiously smuggled to Bajor. The skiffs were vital to scanning and mapping targets and the Bajorans were only too happy to grant them *carte blanche* access to everything as they believed the skiffs were helpful agricultural tools. The tanks were shipped in pieces to strategic staging areas as “technical components” and reassembled in secrecy. These heavy assets had been spread across the flight crews tasked with securing the power network, the urban assault squads and the Cota Regiment securing the urban centers of power in the capital cities.

Dal Garla, the “Butcher” of Retek, had been afforded none of the tanks and none of the skiffs. His company was tasked with

securing the First Minister and as many members of the Bajoran ruling "council" as possible. The Obsidian Order had provided timetables for when and where key Bajoran targets could be found. According to the latest intelligence the Council of Ministers, save for a handful of Ministers from lesser Provinces, were meeting this day. Garla's task was to capture the political leaders of Bajor.

After the *Prelis* had orbited the planet twice dropping various task forces and companies across the designated launch sites across the northern hemisphere, she locked into a stationary orbit above Dahkur City. Garla and sixteen troopers armed with phaser rifles and stun grenades were transported directly into the Capital Building's main concourse. The stunned Bajoran bureaucrats, school tour groups and lightly armed, blue and grey uniformed security officers were shocked at the sudden appearance of battle-ready Cardassian shock troops.

Rushing from the center of the tight phalanx, Garla thumbed his phaser rifle to *continuous fire* and swept his weapon left-to-right in a low, controlled movement. Two security men manning a podium in front of the entrance to the Minister's Chambers, were blown backwards as bright yellow balls of plasma slammed into their chests. Half a dozen young girls in matching school uniforms lay dead on the polished floor. They'd been short and took mostly head shots from Garla's weapon.

A great roar exploded from the troopers now at their commander's back as they too spread out quickly, indiscriminately blasting every Bajoran that stood between them and the secure entrance to the inner chamber. *Prelis*, holding position in a low orbit of just twenty-five hundred kilometers, transported another fifteen troopers to the same coordinates Garla's vanguard had just moved off. These men quickly orientated themselves and fanned-out in a second wave of hostile advancement. A third wave materialized. These troopers, armed with identical phaser rifles, collapsed towards the exit facing the street beyond the Capital Building to fortify their position.

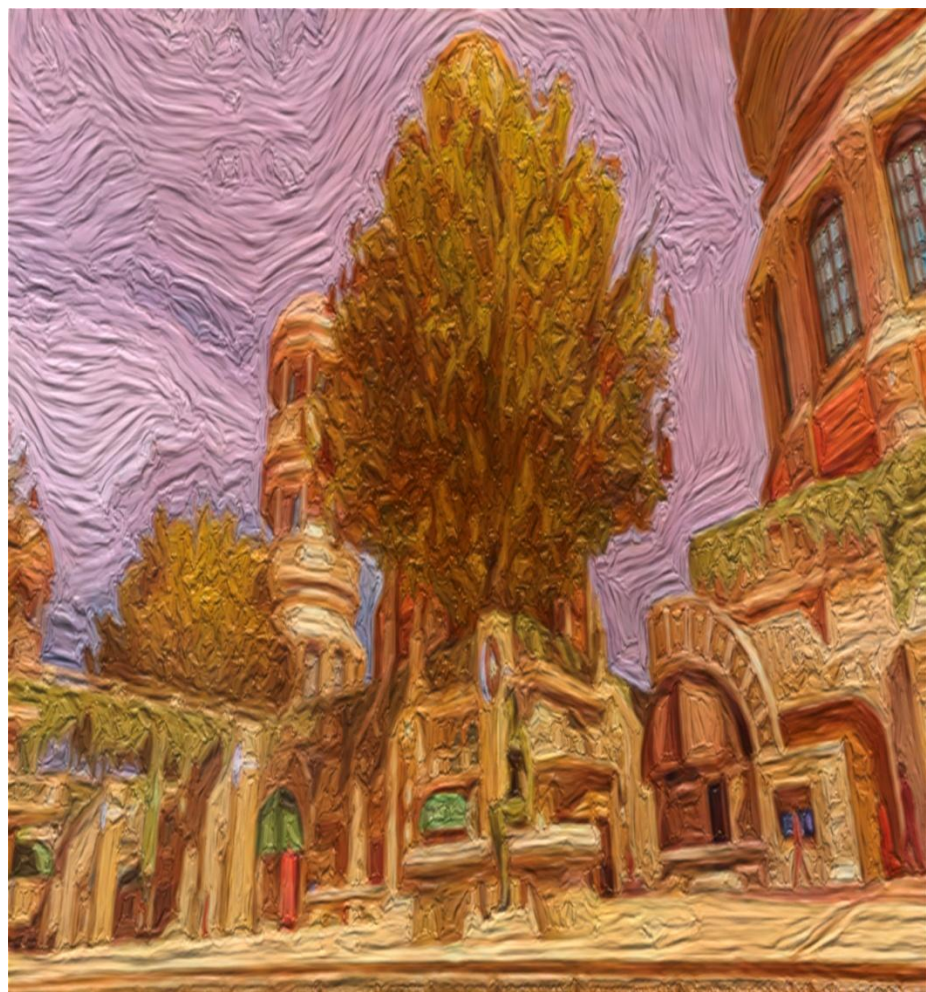
As a fourth and fifth wave of reinforcements transported into the lobby, Garla led his initial wave of troopers past the dead

security men and blew the rich nya wood doors leading to the Minister's Chambers off their hinges. They'd been briefed to expect between six and ten security officers. Garla had killed the first two almost immediately upon materialization. Another two had been blasted while standing at the front entrance; one of the grey and blue uniformed Bajorans had managed to get a shot off and had stunned Rek Tilly. Rek had been with the Fourth Regiment since Alpha 441 and was greatly respected as the oldest serving trooper in the entire Second Order. Three of his comrades focused their fire on the offending Bajoran and literally blew the man to pieces. This left at least two more armed men unaccounted for.

Garla rushed into the chamber and found himself standing on the floor of an ornate meeting hall. He scanned the room quickly, sweeping his eyes from left to right, up and down. Two of the troopers behind him opened fire and cut down two young pages attending the empty pew-like seats rising on either side of aisle the Cardassian force found itself standing in.

"There!" barked Garla, spotting a door cloistered at the far end of the aisle.

More troopers were pouring through from the outer concourse. Two teams of two split and began sweeping through the pews searching for hiding targets. Garla gripped his rifle and quickly checked his power cell. He'd drained the weapon to 50%. He grunted and pumped his armored legs hard to lead the younger, stronger men behind him towards the small door leading to some inner sanctum where he hoped the Bajoran First Minister would be found.



Thunder

The switchback was just up ahead. Urin checked his speed and eased back on the cruiser's throttle. Both the car's and his own personal commsat were still displaying their "*no signal*" icons.

The brown and white hovercar slowed and gently lowered its altitude by half a meter. The well-used, aging cruiser would have to execute a rather sharp lefthand turn to pick up the switchback road back towards the Teklan transport grid. Dol had tried to push the anxious thoughts and half-baked theories on the boy, and where he might have run, out of his mind. He'd deal with *next steps* when he got back to the Precinct. The horrible images of the mutilated girl laying butchered and naked on Dr. Orvo's table were less manageable and he struggled living with what he'd seen.

A flash on the horizon.

Lightning? Dol wondered as he instinctively throttled back even further, bringing the cruiser to a near stop.

The turn was still half a kilometer ahead. Urin blinked and tried to make sense of what he'd thought he'd just seen far off towards the horizon.

An eerie sort of silence suddenly gripped the world.

The scythe hissed through the kava stalks like a cold wind. Jovi had fallen into a wonderfully trance-like rhythm of swing-swing-step, swing-swing-step, swing-swing-...

A shiver suddenly ran up his spine. He came to a shuffling stop and let the heavy blade of his father's scythe *thud* onto the hardpacked soil amongst the severed kava shoots. Instinctively he looked out towards the wastes beyond his small fields and caught sight of an odd flash on the horizon.

Lightning? Sovul wondered as he wiped the sweat from his brow and tried to catch his breath.

Seconds later a low clap of thunder unlike any clap of thunder which had ever been heard on Bajor before, rolled across the land. Urin Dol slowed to a full stop and slowly pulled himself out of the vehicle to stand perfectly still in the middle of the deserted road. Jovi Sovul dropped his scythe and watched. They stood silently in concerned puzzlement, staring at the horizon where there'd just been lighting and thunder and yet there wasn't a cloud in the sky.

Obstructed

“The Bajorans are leaving orbit, Captain.”

Beck grunted in acknowledgement of his young operations specialist's report on the heavy Bajoran freighter which had been sharing orbit of Bajor VIII with the *Anderson*. His status board was red with alerts and lost signal notifications. The helmsman had already laid in a parabolic return course to the outer marker along the border, but nothing could be done until the...

The sound of the turbolift's doors hushing open caused Beck Notrand to turn away from his panel and lock eyes with Ambassador Renard as he stepped out of the lift onto the bridge. Ura and the Bolian were filing out behind the ambassador.

“Captain Notrand, an update if you please.”

Beck cleared his throat and waited for the lift doors to close before speaking. “We lost our long-range connection with the *USS Fury* approximately eight minutes ago, Ambassador Renard. At the same time, we observed the Bajoran freighter begin powering up in apparent preparation for departure.”

“Where's the freighter now?” asked Henri.

“They just left orbit, Ambassador. Claude?” Notrand turned to look at the crewman manning the Ops station.

“Confirmed, Captain. She's cleared Bajor VIII's gravity and is on course for Bajor Prime at high impulse.”

“Can we hail them? Find out what's got them so spooked?” injected Valar as he tried not to let the fact that they were apparently cut off from *Fury* spark a fit of anxiety.

Notrand consulted his panel quickly, then looked directly at the blue Starfleet commander. “The subspace interlink between the control facility on the surface and Bajor Prime is no longer receiving. From what we can tell, they've lost all communications with their homeworld. Our comms are *spotty* as well.”

Ura Jann stepped off the slightly raised command platform and moved alongside the young woman stationed at the subspace communications station. “They're able to transmit...look, they're

sending a repeating hail on a binary cycle, likely a distress signal of some kind...”

Beck looked over at Commander Valar and was about to say something when Ura spun around from the communications station and continued...

“All they’re picking up from Bajor is garbled static. It’s the same thing we’re getting on the channel we had dedicated to *Fury*. The interference looks to be deliberate.” Jann put her hand on the young crewman’s shoulder in reassurance, then slowly moved to rejoin the ambassador and Captain Notrand.

“Captain, hail the Bajorans and offer any assistance we might provide,” said Renard coolly.

Beck nodded and motioned towards Dij Mahol, the young woman crewing the comms station.

“So, *Fury*’s being jammed and the Bajorans are being jammed...” mused Valar, hoping Notrand would understand the tactical realities of their present situation.

“The Bajorans are, Commander. Our subspace channels appear to be indirectly influenced by whatever is going happening on Bajor. Helm, make ready to leave orbit, bring impulse engines to power.” Beck turned away from the ambassador and the others to focus on his panel and the three young specialists making up his bridge crew.

“Captain, we’re unable to raise the freighter. The interference is too intense the closer to Bajor,” reported Mahol.

Shon stepped forward to urge Captain Notrand to go after the Bajorans, but Renard shook his head and motioned for Ura to escort the commander back towards the turbolift. “The Bajorans were very clear about not wanting further interaction with us. Captain, make your course for the border. If you’re correct, our communications issues should improve the further we move away from Bajor.”

“Yes, Ambassador. Helm, return course, engage at full impulse. Sensors to maximum,” ordered Notrand.

“Yes, but...but we could flag down the Bajoran ship and share tactical information...work together to investigate...”

sputtered Shon over his shoulder as he stumbled towards the lift next to Jann.

"The Bajorans barely tolerated us entering their space as it was. Chasing them down and injecting ourselves into their matters isn't an option," said Renard in a slightly condescending tone.

Shon stopped short of the lift doors. "What if it isn't just *their matters*? What if the Cardassians are making a play? That is why I was brought along, wasn't it?!"

The bridge fell silent for a second. Shon blushed a dark blue; embarrassed at his less than professional outburst. He didn't feel he was wrong, but he'd let his anxiety get the better of him and had been too emotional and too loud.

"Any evidence of Cardassian activity within the system, operations?" asked Beck without turning around from his station.

"Interference is making long-range scans difficult, Captain...though from what we're getting on returns, Bajor itself appears fine," reported Claude.

"No abnormal contacts?" asked Beck as he placed his left hand atop his raised panel to steady himself as the *Anderson* pulled away from Bajor VIII. "Helm, increase power to inertial dampeners."

"We're just barely able to confirm the Cardassian station in orbit, Captain...no...no real sign of anything *abnormal*. The sensor interference is quite intense though."

"Ambassador, please..." stammered Valar.

"Continue on course, Captain," ordered Ambassador Renard before turning to face Commander Valar. "We'll observe both the wishes of the Bajoran Government and the Prime Directive, Commander. Once we clear Bajoran space and connect with the *Fury*, we'll reassess the situation. Agreed?"

Shon nodded and sheepishly turned to board the turbolift with Ura Jann. His instinct was to consolidate assets and probe the source of the problem...but Renard was right. The Bajorans weren't exactly friendly and likely shouldn't be viewed as assets in any way. In the end *Anderson* was nothing but a well-appointed,

unarmed transport. Realistically there wasn't a lot the diplomats could do at this point.

The idea of getting back aboard *Fury* and working with Captain Syrk to address whatever was happening, was soothing to his raging anxiety.

The Butcher

Two breach teams of four troopers each were quickly organized. A low-yield grenade was expertly tossed at the secure door at the back of the Bajoran's parliamentary chamber. In a flash of plasma and a near-deafening roar, the reinforced door blew away from its frame to disappear into the chamber beyond. Alpha Team swung around from their staggering points along the outer chamber wall to the left of the ruined door and the troopers charged into the smoking gap.

Before Beta Team could swing 'round on their own flank from the right side of the narrow passage, four bolts of yellow plasma streamed out from the smoldering unknown. Garla had been coordinating the hastily-organized assault from near the center of the chamber floor and found himself diving for cover as two of the yellow lightning bolts sizzled through the air just millimeters from his right ear. He rolled and came up to his knees aside the base of the first row of pews, his rifle clutched and ready. Glinn Etrok, Quartermaster for the Fourth Regiment, lay prone and lifeless on the floor half a meter away.

The unmistakable sound of Cardassian weapons fire washed out of the hidden chamber. Garla picked himself up slowly, aching from his unexpected acrobatics and bitterly ruing his old knees and the decreased stamina of age. There were shouts. There were screams. Flashes of red and a single flash of yellow flickering beyond the charred remains of the doorframe. Garla turned and motioned for the troopers marshalling at the main entrance to follow him.

Once more, unto the breach...

Garla charged into the darkness, eyes wide, face contorted into a homicidal mask. He planted his black left combat boot in the middle of a dead Bajoran's chest and pushed off as though he'd simply found brief purchase on an unsteady rock while traversing an uneven road. The sick sound of the dead man's ribs cracking echoed in a queer way off the unseen walls of this smaller

chamber. Ahead, Garla could sense movement, and the sounds of whimpering and shouting grew louder.

More bodies lay on the dark floor. The chamber, which had a low ceiling, but seemed just as deep as the parliamentary hall they'd just taken, smelled of burnt hair and plasma. Two of the fallen had been dressed in grey and blue Bajoran security uniforms. Through the smoke and haze, Garla caught sight of someone struggling to push themselves off the floor. He slowed his advance and raised his rifle. Seven or eight meters further on came sudden shouts and another bolt of yellow plasma. Garla ducked instinctively – though the bolt slammed into the ceiling well ahead of him.

Two long bolts of red/orange peeled through the choking atmosphere of the room from over Garla's shoulders. His troopers were laying down suppressive fire.

Garla was about to snarl at them to *hold fire* less they cut down the breach teams, but the figure ahead of him was now finding its feet. He tucked his rifle close to his core and aimed center mass...

"Bastards are...using stun settings..." wheezed a young trooper.

Garla quickly raised his weapon and moved close enough to the form in the darkness to see the boy wearing an ancient hand-me-down, brown battle tunic. "Police your weapon trooper. Fall in," he growled through the acrid smoke. Something was burning.

Ahead in the darkness, a bright white flame erupted. The Alpha Team leader had ignited a flare. The low-ceilinged chamber illuminated in a surreal, sterile haze of flickering bodies and smoldering wreckage. Garla advanced towards the seven troopers holding what looked like two dozen cowering Bajorans against the far wall.

More troopers were moving in behind Garla and the wounded man who now had his commander's back. They dragged the twisted remains of the ruined door out of the close darkness; it was glowing orange and giving off plumes of acrid

smoke. A few more faceless soldiers moved bodies to either side of long dark hall, to make sure nobody tripped over the corpses as well as to be sure they were all in fact, corpses.

Just what this odd chamber was used for, didn't matter to Garla at that moment. His eyes were watering in the smoke and haze, but in the light of the flare he could see a tall Bajoran in the near center of the mass of cowering politicians wearing white robes with golden accents and a gawdy earring; the First Minister, no doubt.

"What in the...in the name of the Prophets, what are you doing?!" the tall Bajoran demanded when he noticed the decorations on Garla's dark tunic.

Without a word, Garla dropped his rifle's muzzle and swept its barrel from left to right. Two and half seconds later the Bajoran, who'd been dressed in pristine white robes, was flanked by piles of corpses.

The First Minister stood shaking. The troopers who'd corralled the ministers along the rear wall were shaking too...Garla had been brutally surgical with his weapon.

Before Garla could speak...before anyone could recover from the sudden volley of death, the world shook. A deafening thunderclap knocked everyone not already dead, off their feet. Alpha team leader toppled over and landed on his own flare. The world went dark.



Rell

The Kai was held up by his armpits. Two glinns had wrestled him out from beneath the heavy conference table he'd tried to hide under. A dark stain of dribbling blood had ruined the little old man's beautiful golden robes.

Dalin Rell took a step back to assess his work. The world had fallen eerily silent. The fit young glinns holding the unconscious priest on either side said nothing. Rell could hear the old Bajoran's raspy breathing. He could even hear the blood falling from the blade in his hand and splashing on the cream-coloured marble floor. Part of him had wanted to take the man's eye with his knife regardless of the pudgy old priest's cooperation...but as Dalin Rell had often reminded the Central Command; the Cota Regiment were professionals.

The old priest had denied being the Kai at first. Even after being pulled out from under his table and threatened with mutilation, the old man claimed to simply be an administrative assistant, a ranjen. Rell knew different. He'd been supplied with recent digital images of Kai Asel. Rell knew where the old man would be and even what robes he would be wearing all thanks to the actual ranjen the Obsidian Order had converted into an informant years earlier.

Still, it was important that the priest show contrition and demonstrate his complete subservience to his betters. Not owning up to his identity immediately upon request earned the frail old man a long, deep slice through his left cheek. To the bone and around his orbital socket. To nearly the bridge of his nauseatingly wrinkled nose...the minute the old man admitted his was Kai Asel, Rell had stayed his hand.

All he needed was another second or two and he'd have plucked the old man's eye from his skull, but Rell was a professional. He nodded at his men to take the slumped figure away and secure him, then sheathed his blade. Mission successful. They'd captured the Kai alive.

Before Rell could use his dedicated comms unit to signal the Cota Regiment's success at the Vedek Assembly, a deafening clap of thunder blew everyone off their feet. The large glass windows fronting the entrance of the Assembly Building were blown into the luxurious hallways and the gardens and trees adorning the street level approaches to the holy site were leveled by a concussive explosion.

Fall Back

The torpedo hits had knocked the Bajoran Lunar Space Dock out of its stable orbit and destroyed the facility's unshielded reactor. As the twisted mass of metal and glowing orange plasma slowly tumbled closer and closer to an inevitable demise on the barren surface of the lifeless moon, the freighter *Gigen Obr* strained to free herself from the debris.

"The freighter is attempting to bring her main drive systems online," reported the trooper manning the tactical station.

"Status: forward phaser cannon?" Jegal sat back in his command chair watching his tactical display the way a predator might watch its prey from cover.

"Independent reactors one through four to power. Primary ignition coils are charged, Gul Jegal."

Eight years earlier the *Oroc Raallac*'s sister ship, the seventh *Galor* prototype, the *Kreke Disac* had tried to employ her menacing phaser cannon to end a massive Andorian Battlecruiser. Her inexperienced and ultimately traitorous commander had left himself and the *Disac* open to attack when he drew power from shields to try and charge the ship's massive forward phaser cannon. As the *Kreke*'s weapon slowly began charging at the expense of the ship's defensive systems, a Starfleet warship dealt the *Galor* a fatal blow as she hung helplessly in space.

Cardassian naval designs were often kept in the development stages for upwards of ten, even twenty years. The massive new *Galor*-class warships were the most complex and largest military craft ever designed and built for the Central Command. They had been under development for nearly a decade and weren't projected to be *line ready* for at least another decade.

The failure of the *Disac* to independently charge and fire her most formidable weapon without leaving herself starved of power was regarded as scandalous. Research and design teams were set to work on the issue and a year after the disaster at Alpha 441

all six remaining *Galor* prototypes were outfitted with four independent field reactors dedicated exclusively to powering their forward cannons. Further refinements and redesigns had taken place, and more were yet to come.

Jegal, head of the Second Order and soon-to-be Prefect of Bajor, leaned forward in his comfortable seat and snarled... "Target the freighter's reactor core..."

The trooper manning the primary fire-control station adjacent to the tactical panels, quickly tuned his targeting beams and struggled to cut through the interference their own task force was generating.

"Gul Jegal! The *Prelic* is firing on the surface of Bajor!" reported the mission operations officer from his station beside the communications post.

Jegal snapped his neck to the left and glared at the young trooper... "I gave no permission for planetary bombardment! Who are they attacking?!"

"Unclear, Gul Jegal. We wouldn't have even noticed had I not been using our aft visual scanner to augment navigation in the interference field. I believe she only fired once."

Jegal furled his brow and the shallow frown in the middle of his forehead went white. He was the ultimate commander of this day's action. If the men he'd entrusted with the initial thrust on Bajor itself had somehow fouled their objectives; their failure would be his own.

"Sir, we have target lock on the *Gigen Obr*. I've manually adjusted targeting focus towards the freighter's aft quarter. The interference field *Boheek's* taskforce is generating, combined with the plasma bleed from the Bajoran station makes precise target lock impossible." The trooper at fire-control didn't dare take his eyes from his scope. His left hand hovered over the flashing yellow actuator which would unleash the pent up power of the *Oroc Raallac's* primary weapon.

"Fire," ordered Jegal in a clear, calm voice.

Two and half seconds later the Gigen Obr's reactor erupted in a flash and the brown freighter ensnared in the crumbling grey framework of her ruined space dock, was gone.

"Secure the cannon. Raise the *Prelic*!" ordered Jegal as he watched the bright light of the fatal strike fade into the vacuum of space.

"We're too far out, sir. We can't establish a subspace channel with *Prelic* in all this interference," said the young woman, a trooper third class, who'd been selected to serve aboard the *Oroc Raallac* as a communications operator.

"Helm, bring us about sharply. Set a direct course for *Ne' hol Nor*!" roared Jegal as he balled his hands into fists. He needed to understand what was going on with his operation. A fleet of reinforcements would be on their way from Cardassia Prime. There was no turning back. There could be no failure.

The *Oroc Raallac* engaged her impulse plant.

Awakening

Trij opened his eyes slowly and drew a deep shaking breath. His legs burned with pain, and he was numb all over. A soft groan escaped his parched throat and seemed to rattle his cracked and dry lips.

Where am I...? he wondered as he focused on the thatched ceiling he found himself staring up at.

He tried to sit up. Pain exploded from deep within his core and a sharp groan rattled out of his chest. He could feel he was on a mattress; he was in a bed. As he lay motionless, panting, the realization that he wasn't in his cell in his own bed came crashing down on him.

The familiar scent of kava bread baking in Prylar Lompa's ovens was absent. The constant murmur of the brothers praying to the Prophets in the cloistered chapel was also missing... Instead, the scent of soiled bedding, old sweat and some sort of ointment filled the still air. Faintly, there was a hint of wind moving just beyond whatever hut or building he was presently laying in...and, had that been a queer clap of thunder which had awoken him?

The boy struggled to turn his head from side to side. A wave of nausea washed over him as his empty stomach screamed in protest and a searing pain he couldn't understand burned like a fire in his legs and arms.

I...I had to run...why was I running? He couldn't remember what he'd been doing exactly before waking up in this stale, strange place. He suspected he should be panicked, but he was too weak and in too much pain...

Onar...he was ripping Onar apart...

His eyes came to rest on a closed door, through which shafts of daylight streamed like lasers. A large pitcher and a carved wooded cup were resting on a small table beside his bed. A brown straw poked out of the cup.

A stone formed in his throat. He couldn't remember anything, but a sense of terror... He wanted to cry, but he had no tears.

If he could find the strength to move, he'd very much like to have a drink of water.

Objectives

Garla marched out of the dark chamber where he'd captured the First Minister of Bajor and had put every other Bajoran with him to death. The troopers he'd tasked with sweeping the parliamentary chamber were still recovering from the sudden...*explosion?*...which had knocked all of them off their feet so unexpectedly. The stern dal surveyed his men on both sides of the chamber without slowing his advance.

"On your feet and execute every Bajoran you find. I want this building swept clean!" he barked to everyone and no one in particular as he walked through the showering dust raining down from the high ceiling.

The First Minister was propelled between two hulking troopers, closely on the heels of Dal Garla. Two fire teams had been left behind to probe the odd chamber the lead ministers of the Bajoran government had been cowering in. Their orders were to seek out and eliminate all resistance.

Stepping into the grand concourse at the entrance to the Capital Building, Garla came to an abrupt stop. Dozens of men were littering the glass and debris strewn floor. The impressive three-story-high windows which had looked out onto the grand staircase and main street below, had been blown in by some holocaust...

The air was thick with grey ash and dust. It stung Garla's eyes and caused him to cough harshly. All around him men were slowly picking themselves up and collecting their senses. Many were badly cut and bleeding. Several were picking sherds of glass from their comrades and themselves.

Garla lowered his rifle and with his free hand groped at his duty belt to free a ten-centimeter cylinder...

"Rebreathers!" he yelled between coughs, then quickly fit the brown and yellow tube between his teeth.

The rebreather units were an emergency measure. Individual supplies of clean, scrubbed air to be used to facilitate

escape from a compromised environment. Each unit had ten minutes of breathable air.

Garla tasted the stale oxygen but was immediately grateful to not be inhaling the showering grey particulate that seemed to be everywhere. Around him his men were clenching down of their own rebreathers.

Just what had happened and how to deal with it were Garla's principal concerns. Through tears he gazed out of the tall, gaping holes where glass had once been to try and make sense of the world beyond the Capital Building. What he saw was a grey and black world of shadows and flames. The grey ruin was raining down in sheets obscuring everything. Nothing alive could be seen moving beyond the concourse where Garla, his men and the choking Bajoran politician stood in puzzled bewilderment. Outside the trees and buildings and ruined street below seemed to shimmer in a queer heat haze.

Many of the men who'd been in the concourse when the world just across the street had exploded, were suffering from concussive hearing loss. Had Garla not been nearly blinded by tears and dust, he'd have seen that his men were all bleeding from their ears. It was only Garla and the dozen troopers he'd led out from the inner sanctum who reacted to the sudden roar of industrial fans coming from behind and above them.

With his rebreather still clenched firmly in his teeth, Garla spun around and hoisted his rifle in preparation for battle at the sudden sound of... WHOOOOOSSSSHHhummmmmmmmm...

Half a dozen troopers had found four large industrial fans somewhere along the corridors of the building. Three of the large fans were wheeled out behind Garla and his company and powered on while a fourth, much larger fan had been pushed to the very precipice of the ornate balcony overlooking the concourse.

Before Garla, or any of his escort could lower their weapons an old, familiar trooper stepped out from behind the large fan above the debris strewn concourse and heroically stepped up onto the balcony railing and saluted his dal.

“Rek Tilly, reporting second level secure, sir!” Tilly bellowed.

Garla spat out his rebreather and smiled up at the man. “Maybe they should have made you dal instead, eh Tilly?”

The fans swept the horrible grey ash and dust out of the building in plumes and thick rolling waves. The air wasn’t fresh, but at least the men could breathe without swallowing bucketfuls of grey sludge.

“No sir, they made the right choice,” called down Tilly.

He’d recovered quickly from his *wound*; even Bajoran stun settings were weak. Rek had led a company of troopers to the upper floor and was deep in the bowels of what no doubt were the bureaucratic offices of the capital when the world beyond exploded. It was dumb luck that he’d just breached a storage room where several large fans were standing on mobile platforms. One of the younger men he’d tapped to accompany him on his sweep, reported a shower of glass and dust had exploded over the transport sight and Rek had acted quickly to disperse the fans.

The streaky grey atmosphere was quickly blown out into the street and the troopers set about triaging their wounded. An older man Garla had known since before Alpha 441 stepped up to hand him a wet rag. He’d torn one of the Bajoran tapestries down from the inner chamber and had started soaking the rags in a water fountain.

Garla accepted the rag and delicately wiped the dust and ash from his eyes and nose. “Rek, leave a team up there to keep the fans going, but get down here,” he called up to the balcony.

A moment later, Tilly was standing before his commander.

“You’re sure the second level is...*clean*?”

“Eighteen confirmed dead, no casualties, Dal Garla.” Tilly snapped to attention. He’d been with Garla for years in Retek City and knew how his commander operated.

“I need to know what the hell just happened. Have the transport enhancers erected and find me a working communications unit to contact *Prelic*.” Garla watched the old man nod in understanding and immediately turn to begin mustering

those troopers who were ambulatory to begin setting up the pattern enhancers as ordered.

“Sir, should we execute the prisoner?” asked one of the burly troopers standing behind Garla with the First Minister kneeling in a coughing fit at his feet.

Garla glared down at the feeble Bajoran and sneered. “No...you’ll take him up to the *Prelic* and secure him in the brig, for now.”

Ligan

The Operations Center aboard *Ne' hol Nor* was buzzing with activity. Derek stood on the platform overlooking his two overworked engineers who were busily trying to maintain reactor levels while modulating the interference broadcast pouring through the ring station's overworked transceiver array. Three hundred troopers and officers offloaded from Gul Jegal's flagship were settling into the recently modified habitat module. Another three hundred troopers were making do in the converted cargo bays, while hundreds more were milling about the ring searching for meals and supplies.

"Coded signal from Dal Garla's command, sir..." stammered the poor engineer monitoring the station's internal systems and the garbled communications station at the same time.

Derek stepped forward and gripped the edge of a status panel to steady himself. He was many things, but he was not a commander.

"Oh, do put him through, please," came the calm, even voice of the Obsidian Order operative.

Kotan turned to his left and tried to remain calm. He'd not seen the black-clad Ligan since the operation had begun. The man had been in the station administrator's office, Gul Padar's old office, quietly *contemplating the enormity of the situation*, as he'd put it.

"Open the channel..." croaked Kotan as he searched Ligan's dark face for some sign of reassurance.

"This is Garla, what in all the hells is going on!" came a static-streaked voice from the planet below.

"Dal Garla, wonderful to hear from you. I trust you have good news?" responded Ligan as if he were discussing the weather with a next-door neighbour.

"Who am I speaking to?!" came a barked response.

“Ligan, the Obsidian Order attaché to Gul Jegal’s command. Well, Garla? Status?” Ligan moved in beside Derek and offered the befuddled engineer a wan smile.

After a few seconds of static, Garla responded: “We have the First Minister. The other ministers didn’t *survive*. I have wounded down here!”

“What a shame about the other ministers. Your orders were to secure as many heads of government as possible, Dal Garla. I do hope...”

“Primary objective met. I have the First Minister. That should suffice for the Order. My men need evac and medical attention and I need reinforcements. What just happened anyway!?”

Ligan chuckled and motioned to the sweat-covered engineer manning the communications panel to mute the channel. The boy in the ill-fitting battle tunic caught the signal and silenced the static hissing through unseen speakers.

“Kotan, have we transport capabilities currently?” asked Ligan in a nearly cheery tone.

Kotan looked over at his men and could see plainly from the status boards that they were barely managing to maintain life-support while funneling nearly 98% of the reactor’s output into the transceiver’s interference broadcast. He simply shook his head. He had no idea what was going on, or what his actual role in any of it was.

Ligan nodded towards the comms station and the hissing static returned. “So good of you to leave the First Minister alive at least, Dal Garla. Organize your wounded and perhaps deploy some pattern enhancers...”

“I’ve already done that! Now tell me, what hell has the Order unleashed down here!?” roared Garla.

“I’m flattered, dear Butcher...but it wasn’t anything to do with the Order. Glinn Erot called for the *Prelic* to send a small torpedo down to neutralize his target. Now, organize your dead and wounded and standby for *Prelic*, or somebody to meet your needs. Ligan, out.”

The channel went dead. Garla stared at the transmitter in his hand and then out at the grey hellscape beyond. "Bastard," he hissed.

"Sir, sixteen severely wounded. Five KIA," reported a young corpsman who'd been organizing the dead and wounded within the perimeter of the pattern enhancers now powered and glowing around the original incursion point.

"Remind me, when we next see Glinn Erot, to execute him," fumed Garla.

Teklan Township

Pillars of thick black smoke hung above the far-off roof tops of Teklan Township. At first Urin had thought he was seeing some sort of low-hanging storm clouds. After all the thunder and lightning had been odd, but certainly real. As he pushed the accelerator full to its stops he knew as he closed the distance between his brown and white cruiser and his home that the dark smudges in the atmosphere were not clouds. He'd picked out four distinct columns of smoke as he rocketed along the switchback road. As the kilometers flew by, he counted eight pillars, then ten, then too many to count.

His first thought was to get the Precinct, but as he glanced at the hovercar's speedometer and noted with some alarm that he was travelling too fast for an accurate reading, all he could think of was Iprah. He'd been a blur as he hurtled past the Teklan marker post. The outer service sheds and the first of the Township's Inns and industrial buildings were rapidly charging towards the old, over worked cruiser. Dol had to wrestle with the throttle and breaking flaps to slow the bullet to a controllable speed.

In a flash he shot beneath what looked like a yellow agricultural sledge. Urin wanted to turn his head to have a second look but didn't dare take his attention off the road he was barreling down less he kill some pedestrian or run the hovercar into someone's shop.

Marra Ekak leaned hard to his left to swing his heavy phase-cannon around to catch the fleeing Bajorans they'd flushed from a burning shop. He pulled back on the cannon's dual handled triggers, and three hot balls of plasma flew from the muzzle.

A woman in a yellow robe dragging a child behind her screamed and in a satisfying... - SPLURT! -...her yellow robe expanded like a balloon full of red goop. The child stumbled and rolled through the mess which just a half second earlier, had been its mother.

“What are you doing!?” screamed Kori Moro from his perch behind Ekak at the skiff’s engineering post. Morro was Ekak’s “spotter”.

“Killing Bajorans, why?” replied Ekak, somewhat annoyed that he’d not been able to get off another volley to obliterate the now mewling child.

“We haven’t got enough power cells for you to be pulping them! Knock it back a setting!” hissed Morro.

“There!” shouted Elor Trina, the skiff’s pilot as he banked to the right and spotted the approaching cruiser.

Ekak thumbed the intensity down on his cannon and swung himself back to the right to center his sights. “Spotter!” he howled back at Morro and opened fire on the speeding hovercar.

Dol weaved to the left as plasma rained down from another yellow platform hanging in the air. He’d been travelling too fast to really notice what the Cardassians had been doing. Now, as the road he found himself too quickly leaving, exploded in fiery chunks of glowing paving stones, it was all Urin could do to keep from killing himself by running into the burnt-out building that was too quickly lunging towards his windscreen.

The cruiser clipped a cement corner of what had been a small mercantile just ten minutes earlier and bounced up onto a raised sidewalk. The sudden impact caused the thrust manifolds to go into shutdown. As the tail end of the brown and white missile shot out and around, Urin was pitched violently into his driver’s side door. The emergency impact cushions did not deploy.

Morro watched as the Bajoran hovercar tumbled and rolled into a ruined heap. Ekak was howling something else now, but Morro couldn’t be bothered listening. Trina had passed over the road and the burning building they’d just razed at a barely two and half meter altitude. Everything was moving too quickly. Morro saw the Bajoran vehicle come to a rest in a drainage culvert on the other side of the road it had been travelling along from the burning building.

Ekak wanted Trina to break hard left, so he could get his cannon fixed on the wreck and finish it off. Morro lost sight of the

wreck as their skiff suddenly ascended another three meters and began a sharp turn. He didn't see the brown-uniformed Bajoran scramble from the wreckage and stagger to cover behind another ancillary building they'd not yet set ablaze.

Skiff seven came around hard and descended on the smoldering hovercar like a predator. Ekak opened fire and as he burned through the last reserves of their second-to-last power cell, the Teklan Township's brown and white Precinct Cruiser was eviscerated. Trina leveled out the skiff and throttled back at an altitude of barely one meter above the rocky earth, just ahead of a two-storey inn that was ablaze. The cruiser burned and creaked behind them. Morro laughed and swung his gun seat around just in time to loose his final two shots at the distant, blood-soaked child.

Erot

He wiped away the dust and ash that had accumulated on the flat lenses of his flash goggles and looked about quickly before pressing the black transmit actuator at his throat...

“Casket-alpha to all units, signal in.”

Before any of the others had the chance to transmit their status to Erot's lead tank, the over-zealous glinn was leaning over to his driver and motioning for the man to pull out from their sheltered spot behind a non-descript Bajoran tower.

Erot's driver too wore a pair of heavy flash goggles and a fully-enclosed face mask hooked into their tank's self-contained air supply. The kit was standard for battlefield deployments where chemical weapons might be employed. Shifting the rumbling tank into gear and heaving back on the left lever, the tanker wheeled out and away from the brick wall they'd been hiding behind. Casket-tank alpha rumbled out towards the main street through the haze of smoldering grey ash.

Erot wiped his goggles a second time as he tried to make out how effective his offensive had been. On the simple status panel bolted to the bulkhead just in front of his seat nearly all the status diodes were illuminating green. His task force had weathered the storm.

The small yellow tank lurched to a halt across the street from a burning crater. The grey fallout of pulverized concrete, debris, bodies, earth and who-knew-what-else was raining down thick and heavy. Erot could feel the heat radiating from somewhere deep down in the center of the pit where the Bajoran fortress had stood only moments before. A deep sense of satisfaction washed over him along with the intense heat wrought by the *Prelic's* well-aimed, low yield, inverse atomizing torpedo.

He patted his driver on the shoulder, proud of what they'd accomplished and put his finger to his throat to call for a clear channel to *Ne' hol Nor*.

Glinn Derek stood at the door to what had so recently been Gul Padar's office.

"Enter," came the unnervingly cheerful voice.

"Mr. Ligan, Glinn Erot has just reported in," said Kotan as he stepped through the doorway into the small office where their visitor from the Obsidian Order had taken up residence.

"Oh? Well, that is kind of him to get in touch after very nearly vaporizing our capital task forces," responded Ligan from his place behind Padar's old desk. He was standing at the large oval viewport with his back to Kotan Derek.

"Yes...uh, sir. The glinn reports the Bajoran military fortress has been, uh, completely obliterated. He's deployed his forces to secure a two-kilometer radius around the Capital Building and wants us to put him in direct contact with Garla's taskforce for reinforcements?" Derek was extremely uncomfortable.

"I see, mission accomplished for good Glinn Erot, then. I don't think Dal Garla is in any mood to deal with Erot though, do you?" Ligan turned away from the viewport. He'd just spotted Jegal's *Oroc Raallac* approaching Bajor from the distant third moon.

"I...uh, no. I don't think Dal Garla and Glinn Erot should be anywhere near one another at the moment."

Ligan smiled and nodded. "Have we heard from the Cota Regiment?"

Derek too noticed the approaching warship through the viewport. He cleared his throat and refocused on the dark man now casually leaning up against Gul Padar's desk.

"Dalín Rell has reported that he has the Kai in custody. The entire regiment is moving to rendezvous with Dal Garla's task force at the Capital Building."

"Excellent! Before Gul Jegal starts adding to all this melodrama with his own unique brand of self-aggrandizing buffoonery, contact *Prelic*. She is to bring up Dal Garla and the Bajoran First Minister and Dalín Rell with the Kai. Prisoners to be

fairly treated and confined to the brig, of course. Once they're secure have dear Garla's wounded and stricken brought up and all of them brought back here, clear?" Ligan flashed his brilliant white teeth at Kotan.

"Uh, yes...right away..." Derek retreated from the office as quickly as he could without breaking into an out and out run.

Once the doors to the administrator's office had hushed closed, Kotan began relaying instructions to the communications station. As he spoke, he noticed the red *incoming* light above the Ops transporter receiving pad began to flash.



Federation Border

"I'm sorry, Captain, we've been through the entire spectrum and there simply isn't a clear subspace channel we can access within Bajoran space," reported Lieutenant Rin.

Captain Syrk leaned on his left elbow and furled his brow. "Have you tried modulating sub-frequencies within the primary band widths, lieutenant?" he asked.

Rin bit her lower lip, a trick she'd learned while at the academy to keep from saying the first thing that came to mind. "Yes, Captain, that was the first thing I did when we lost contact twenty-five minutes ago."

"Very well, reapply your methodology from the start and cycle through the spectrum again, perhaps something will register."

The ship had been at Yellow Alert since the *Anderson* had crossed into Bajoran space hours earlier. So long as the subspace link between *Fury* and the Ambassador's unarmed transport remained clear and unbroken, Captain Syrk was content to leave his crew on high vigilance status. Losing all contact as suddenly and as completely as they just had though, had left Syrk with no options but to raise the stakes to Red Alert.

"Aye, Captain." Rin turned back to her panels.

"Mr. Grosa, your sensor records once again, please."

Paul Grosa, assigned to Mission Operations cast the recorded sensor sweeps the captain was interested in, to the main viewscreen.

A standard sector sweep was displayed. *Fury*, represented by a simple Starfleet Delta, sat at the right of the screen on what was delineated as the border between Federation and Bajoran space. To the far left of the screen, depicted by a simplified approximation of the Federation's coat of arms, was the *Anderson*. The view was primarily static. *Anderson* was shown to have arrived at the eighth planet in the Bajoran system, and all appeared as it should until...

“Hold!” called out Captain Syrk.

Grosa immediately paused the playback.

On the screen near the very top and again near the very bottom between the Delta icon and the UFP icon, were two distorted areas of static.

“Lieutenant Commander Bogga, what do you make of that?” queried Syrk.

Bogga, acting First Officer, leaned up against his Ops panel studied the image intently. His elastic cheeks inflated as he concentrated. Without looking, Bogga entered an equation into his workstation and waited for the computer to confirm what he imagined the captain had already surmised.

“I would say we’ve captured at least two independent sources of intense subspace interference, Captain,” said Bogga as his ballooning cheeks slowly contracted to their normal proportions.

“At least two?” asked Syrk from his command chair.

“Aye, sir. We’ve only a sliver of data here. There’s no telling how many more of these, uh, these subspace *blooms*, there are.”

“Am I correct in surmising that these *blooms*, as you’ve called them, are not natural phenomena?”

Bogga looked towards Grosa and nodded for the lieutenant to speak.

“Sir, my analysis confirms that both, uh *blooms*, are identical in modulation and frequency. There’s almost no way they can be natural and affect our sensors so profoundly.”

Syrk nodded. He’d already calculated the odds as being extremely improbable. “We’re sure there’s been no flare ups from the Umoth Nebula, or plasma storms from the Denorios Belt?”

Bogga switched the main viewer back to its tactical mode and shook his head.

“Shall I calculate a route to Bajor VIII, Captain?” asked Lieutenant Poste from his seat at *Fury’s* helm.

Syrk arched his right eyebrow, cleared his throat, then spoke: “The Bajorans have forbidden any Starfleet vessel from

entering their space. Ambassador Renaud was only permitted to attend their colony on Bajor VIII under diplomatic auspices and only in a completely unarmed, civilian vessel. We cannot violate Bajoran sovereignty and risk an interstellar incident over disrupted communications and failed sensors.”

“Sir, the Cardassians...” injected Grosa from Mission Ops.

“...have been present in Bajoran affairs for centuries. We stay put, gentlemen. Continue to monitor for any sign of Commander Valar and the *Anderson*,” Syrk said dryly.

Reins

In a mad swarm of swirling gold, yellow and orange energy the tall, broad shouldered figure of Gul Jegal appeared on the Ops transport pad. Derek and Ligan were both still standing at the dark status panel on the elevated platform in front of the administrator's office. Glinn Derek quickly straightened himself into a respectful upright position of attention. Ligan rolled his eyes and mentally prepared himself for the bombast Jegal no doubt was about to assault them with.

As the matter stream dimmed and cycled down, Jegal took a forceful step off the narrow receiving pad and made directly for the command deck. He wore his favored battle tunic and his tubular battle helmet. The two overworked engineers trying to keep *Ne' hol Nor* in orbit, while maintaining the ECM efforts and monitoring the garbled logistical signals from the distant taskforce headed up by the *Boheek*, lost their focus for a few seconds and gawked at the head of the Second Order. Jegal was respected across the empire. The man had risen from nothing to command the greatest conventional Order that had ever been formed. Many whispered that Jegal would one day rise to the rank of Legate and possibly even supplant R'aka himself.

"I specifically forbade planetary bombardment! What traitorous mull ordered *Prelic* to fire on the surface!?" roared Jegal as he ascended the short flight of stairs up to the administrator's level, two steps at a time.

Kotan staggered back and made way for the angry Gul storming towards him.

"That *mull*, would I suppose, be me. So good to see you Gul Jegal. I trust your sortie to the lunar space dock went well?" said Ligan in his cheeriest voice as he stepped into the gap created by young Derek.

"You? The Obsidian Order isn't in charge of this operation, Ligan. I am!" Jegal sneered and locked eyes with the dark skinned, black-clad operative.

"If it weren't for the Obsidian Order, this operation wouldn't be possible at all, Gul Jegal," replied Ligan in a somewhat less cheery tone.

Jegal pushed his way in front of the dark status panel and pressed his right thumb against the top left-hand corner of the smooth black surface. A second later, the panel sparked to life and Jegal surveyed the skimpy details the computer had compiled concerning the operation so far.

"What were you bombing, Ligan? If you've eliminated any of our targets your black suit won't save you from the firing squad," Jegal growled.

"I gave Glinn Erot and the others a good deal of latitude to accomplish their goals. The good glinn called for a rather surgical strike against the Bajoran Militia fortress that had Central Command so very concerned during the planning of this operation."

Jegal drew a breath and turned to glare at Ligan once more. He completely ignored the bumbling engineer standing awkwardly against the closed doors to the administrator's office. "Erot was assigned sufficient arms to take that objective."

"Erot decided those arms weren't *sufficient* enough, apparently. A single torpedo from *Prelic* at one twentieth yield and set to some *implosion* feature has rather completely obliterated the fortress and destroyed its armory and contingent of troublesome Bajorans." Ligan smiled.

"That installation is directly across from the Capital Building and within sight of the Vedek Council..." sighed Jegal, trying to restrain his rage.

"Yes, which is why I complimented the strike as *surgical*. Both Dal Garla and Dalin Rell have reported success. They're transporting up to the *Prelic* even as we speak and will be delivering both the First Minister and the Kai, directly," cooed Ligan.

Jegal slowly removed his helmet and set it to rest atop the status panel. "Casualties?"

“Oh...well within acceptable limits. Several troopers wounded by flying glass and what have you, but from what we're told, less than two dozen dead.”

Jegal looked down at the panel a second time. The telemetry was benign, useless. Reactor output levels. Orbital rates and transceiver gains charted along meaningless K'lovic Scales. He needed a proper tactical board. A ring station was no substitute for the bridge of a warship.

“*Prelis* is evacuating the dead and wounded along with Garla and Rell. Erot is in the process of securing a two-kilometer radius around the Capital Building as per orders, but reinforcements are required,” continued Ligan in a suddenly very professional voice.

“You're certain Rell has the Kai?” asked Jegal quietly.

“Dalim Rell himself has reported the religious king of Bajor is secure and has suffered only a mild flesh wound. Dal Garla has the First Minister in custody, though regretfully it appears the other ministers did not survive.” Ligan stepped back from the balcony and gestured towards the office.

“More of your latitude for the Butcher?” said Jegal flatly.

“He is the best at what he does. The Capital Building is secure. Garla's company are fanning out to reinforce Erot's men; I rather think we should keep the glinn separate from Dal Garla, however.”

Ligan tapped several jagged icons on the status panel and turned to look at Derek for the first time. “You, are you playing dress-up, or are you now a member of the Second Order?”

Kotan cleared his throat and looked towards Ligan, who simply nodded and smiled. “Mr. Ligan informed us...uh, we three, that we're no longer attached to the Ninth Order, Gul Jegal.”

Jegal looked down at the two men frantically attending to the needs of the station and frowned. “Fine. You report to me and me alone. You're responsible for station operations, anything fails or goes wrong, it's your neck. Clear?”

“Yes, Gul Jegal,” answered Glinn Derek. His head was spinning.

Jegal pulled a slender microphone from a recessed port at the side of his panel then motioned for the terrified looking boy below him to open a station wide channel.

"This is Gul Jegal, head of the Second Order. Those troopers assigned to bunk in the cargo bays are to prepare for immediate deployment to the surface. Draw arms and approved equipment as necessary and report by company to the primary docking port. *Prelis* will be arriving shortly to offload our wounded and ferry you to reenforce our positions across Bajor. You will deploy within the hour. For Cardassia."

"For Cardassia!" came a thunderous roar of voices from throughout the station.

Jegal replaced the microphone and told the boy at the communications station to send word to the *Oroc Raallac* to immediately hunt down and destroy the freighter *Carba Vul* returning from Bajor VIII. With the Kai secured, there was no need to spare the Kai-in-waiting.

Word went out to the *Galor*-class warship sitting just off *Ne'hol Nor's* outermost deflector limits. Jegal scooped his helmet from where he'd balanced it on the panel and strode into his office with Ligan and Glinn Derek immediately behind him.

Discovery

The scythe lay in the course dirt amongst the cleaved stems of the freshly-reaped kava. Less than half the field had been culled, but Joci felt a strange compulsion to walk out towards the sound of the queer thunderclap. Sweat rolled down his cheeks and dripped from the end of his nose. His lower back was starting to ache. Reaping kava by hand was a strenuous activity for men far younger than Sovul, and he knew it. Breaking the rhythm and letting his muscles seize was going to mean agony when he returned to the heavy work. Still...

Sovul stepped out of his cultivated field to stand in the open hard scrubble looking out across the wastes towards the far off Dahkur Hills. Something felt, *off*.

The sun was beating down now and Sovul was aware that midday was fast approaching. *I've got to get this kava in...* Joci thought to himself, but he couldn't quite will himself to return to the field and take up the scythe.

He drew a deep breath of warm air and tried to calm whatever it was that was stirring in his gut. He started to turn his head to look back at his fields, to assess his progress so far and perhaps break whatever spell that was pulling him away from the harvest. From the corner of his eye, he caught a reflected flash of sunlight and snapped his attention back to the wastes...to the ruined trike.

Before he'd consciously thought of anything, he was standing over the ruined Prowler the boy had plowed into the dirt only days before. When he'd pulled the ruined child from the wreckage, he'd never bothered to inspect the old red trike too very closely. He had little interest in such things.

Now though, he found the hulk of the Prowler's battered core very interesting. The seat was hanging off its frame and Joci could see there was a hidden compartment beneath the worn and ruined black padded saddle...

He pulled out a balled-up brown jacket with curious alien looking insignia and patches sewn onto its shoulders and the right side of its breast. It was a brown leather-like garment with old looking burns and repaired tears running up and down its left shoulder and collar. The jacket looked too big to have belonged to the boy...

Bundled within the oddly military looking brown jacket was a curious tool. It was heavy and had the same sort of odd markings as some of the patches on the jacket. Sovul turned the maben-mellon sized tool over in his hands and tried to reason what it could be. To Joci's mind it looked vaguely like a field inverter of some kind. Scraps of metallic debris stuck to the tool – clearly it was magnetic.

Defeated

Dol had managed to crawl and duck his way along two blocks of burning buildings and charred corpses to make it to the far end of Teklan's Main Road. He'd counted three yellow platforms swooping and strafing their way along side streets. Why the Cardassians were destroying businesses and cutting down innocent people in the streets, baffled the constable as he pushed himself through the back lots and up the tight alleys of Teklan's meagre industrial sector.

His head thumped and the ribs on his left side sang out in pain, but he could breathe normally. He guessed he'd only bruised himself in the wreck, nothing broken. He had to get to the Precinct. Quas and the others would know what was going on. They could draw the weapons from the armory and maybe...

Dol pulled his head back behind the wall of the old tool and die workshop. He'd made it this far without the Cardassians spotting him, but panic suddenly set in. He stuck his head out from between the tool and die and the burning shell of the assayer's office for a second look up the road.

Another platform off was buzzing around the intersection of Main Road and Ulhmn Street, leading up the hill into Teklan's residential neighborhoods. A thick plume of black smoke streamed skyward from where Dol knew the Precinct should be. He couldn't reconcile what his eyes were seeing and what his logical mind expected to behold. The Precinct was ablaze. The Cardassians seemed to be watching it burn as if they were standing around a campfire.

Urin knew he shouldn't draw attention to himself, but he was transfixed. The Cardassians had a huge cannon affixed to the front of their yellow platform...*how could they have cannons?* The yellow platforms were agricultural tools, not weapons of...*war?* *Invasion?*

Urin pulled back to his place of cover and closed his eyes tight. *Iprah...* The heat from the burning building just a meter and half across from him was starting to become unbearable.

The Cardassians had been attacking the buildings along the industrial side of the road. There didn't appear to be many fires burning up the sloping rise towards Teklan Sinew. Urin couldn't risk cutting along the lots on this side of the road any longer. He needed to cross the wide road to make his way home through the tight neighborhoods of Teklan Township.

Dol sank to his knees and coughed up a throatful of dark phlegm. It was time to move. He pushed himself off the warm workshop wall and felt the heat of the burning office building beside him start to sear his exposed skin. He bolted into the road to escape the smoke and flames, nearly losing his footing. He'd not had time to shoulder check for Cardassians and simply prayed to the Prophets that he could cross the open road without being spotted.

He very nearly made it to the sidewalk opposite the tool and die when the paving stones just ahead of him suddenly exploded and popped in a volley of plasma bolts.

Like a drunken man, Dol shifted his weight violently to pull himself back from the flurry of popping stones and flashing plasma. He staggered and careened forward as a numb pain spread up his torso and he couldn't discern why. He stumbled as if pushed and tumbled bottom over crown into a heap beside the molten craters that had just been blasted into the pavement. From his jumble of limbs he spotted another yellow platform swoop by.

The sound of the platform landing struck Dol as extremely odd. He kicked at the uneven stones in the road with his right foot to try and turn himself over, to at least see what was going on. He was hot all over and couldn't make any of his limbs respond to his will. A burning pain racked his entire body.

Gomlir hopped off his skiff and crowed in triumph. His hand phaser was still warm. He'd managed to tag the stumbling man from three meters up, from-the-hip, while maintaining control of a

speeding skiff. Impressive, even by Gomlir's own standards. He holstered his weapon and strut towards the broken man.

"Well, Constable Urin! What a coincidence running into you again so soon after our little visit this morning, yes? You know, when you arrived at my gate, I rather hoped you were going to try and arrest me...that you'd found that sneaking little boy who stole my jacket while I was busy with my *cultural outreach*. He'd followed the girl you see. I think he was fond of her."

Dol coughed and tried to speak, but a mouthful of blood and broken teeth caused him to spew out a garbled load of horror instead. He was bleeding out and fading fast.

"Oh, Constable, don't trouble yourself. There's nothing to be said. Very soon my people are going to do to this planet what I did to that ripe young girl. She found me accessing the chamber below the monastery to get to the power nodes. To be clear, she was the one who wanted to show me her decorations in the hall above." A garish smile spread across Gomlir's chiseled face.

Urin struggled to stand, to fight, or flee...but he couldn't move. The last thing he saw before his life ended was the grinning face of the dashing Cardassian "Ace" in the odd grey utility jacket, tight pants and gun belt. His pistol was now resting in its holster.

Hold and Secure

“Am I correct in assuming that the mechanized divisions from the Seventh Order are already enroute to reinforce our foothold?” asked Ligan as the office doors slid closed behind the very recently promoted Glinn Derek.

Jegal took the tall seat behind the administrator’s desk and scowled. “Gul Ritza of the Third Order has destroyed the Bajoran freighter at port in Cardassian space, which was the sign for Gul Elloy to commence his run to resupply and reinforce us.”

Ligan nodded his understanding and moved silently to activate a wall mounted screen opposite Jegal’s imposing black desk. Kotan shuffled awkwardly out of the way of the screen. The office was tight for three men.

A static tactical display appeared showing Bajor, her moons and the relative positions of *Ne’ hol Nor*, *Prelic*, *Oroc Raallac* and the *Boheek* ECM taskforce. Bajor’s third moon appeared with a red hashmark running through it, denoting a completed objective. The interference prevented live updates. Jegal’s flagship would be closing on the freighter carrying Vedek Kiran somewhere. Beside the yellow icon depicting *Prelic* was a flashing yellow chevron, indicating the *Galor*-class warship was actively transporting personnel aboard from the surface of the planet.

“Let me see the status board,” said Jegal thoughtfully.

Ligan called up a touch screen control pad of jagged icons and began keying in command codes. Derek stood silently to Jegal’s left, taking everything in. Gul Jegal had some trepidation concerning Ligan’s reliability, but he had to admit that the Obsidian Order had done a fine job in locating and isolating the primary targets required to make this last desperate operation a success. The fact Ligan himself had arranged to have a *backup* Kai safely off world should the need to replace Kai Asel arise, was impressive.

R’aka himself had been opposed to allowing a Federation delegation to cross the border so close to their commit date.

Strategically it had made all the sense in the world to Jegal and the other guls though. The Federation would know only what Jegal chose to share and *interstellar law* could be used to keep Starfleet out of Bajoran space indefinitely.

Ligan, the Order's assigned operative, had influence at the highest levels of the Bajoran Government. He proposed substituting the Bajoran ambassador for Vedek Kiran, a man of extreme xenophobic tendencies, to treat with the Federation. This had two advantages. First, Kiran would make it bluntly clear that Bajor wished nothing further to do with the Federation. Second, as the accepted "Kai-in-waiting", his isolation and engagement off-world would make him readily available should the operation's primary objectives fail.

Ligan had been publicly exposed as an operative of the Obsidian Order during the trial following the failure at Alpha 441. As a result, he was of little use amongst Cardassians. This assignment to Bajor was the man's last and only call to duty.

The status panel appeared on the screen. Nearly 75% of the secondary sorites had reported in that they'd successfully secured their objectives. Dahkur City, Sahving, Adarak, Berain City, Teklan Township, Bar'trila... Objectives met. The board was still updating. The trend was positive. Things looked to be progressing as planned.

Teklan Township...Gomlir, ah Glinn Gomlir... A smile came to Jegal's face as he recalled that months ago the great and heroic glinn-who-wouldn't-grow-up had been sent to augment the provincial taskforce out at Teklan Township. It had been R'aka's own decision to punish the pompous ass. His piloting days were over.

"Our heavy reinforcements won't be here for another seventy-two hours at least. Can the Legion hold out until then?" Jegal asked Ligan.

"I believe so. Garla's people are well versed in urban pacification..."

"Ha! The Butcher's standing order to kill anything found on the street qualifies as *pacification*, I suppose. I'm not concerned

with the capital. Erot's show of force will have them all cowering for years. What I'm concerned with are these dung spec townships and small cities...have we spread ourselves too thin?"

"Not at all. We still have hundreds of troops waiting to be deployed when the *Prelic* offloads our *VIPs*. I'd reinforce Erot's people first, then rotate a few hundred troopers in and out of the various power network hubs to make the locals believe a few hundred troopers are actually a few thousand," said Ligan as the percentage of completed satellite objectives continued to tick upwards on the screen behind him.

Jegal had proposed a similar strategy during the planning stages of the operation more than two years earlier. He sighed and then casually turned to his Head of Station Operations. "I need a second port reinforced. There are going to be more than twenty heavy freighters coming in in the next three days and we can't afford backlogs."

Kotan cleared his throat and sputtered... "We can have the secondary port reinforced in two days, provided my engineers...uh, the men manning Ops..."

"I have close to three hundred trained and operations capable men aboard this ring right now. I'll have the deck officer select a team of eight to come and properly man things. Your men can have a few hours rest and then you will get that port up and running before Gul Ritza arrives. Clear?"

"Yes, Gul Jegal. It will be done."

"Good. I hate these pathetic orbital rings. Mr. Ligan, what are the chances you've got some vole or confidential traitor down below willing to find me a suitable base of operations?" asked Jegal.

"Ah...to be honest, I wouldn't vouch for the security of any such arrangement just yet, Gul Jegal." Ligan hadn't expected that.

Jegal grew dour.

"Gul Jegal? I've, uh...if you'll recall, I have some proposals for station improvements which might, in the long-term that is, make things somewhat more suitable aboard *Ne' hol Nor*, sir," injected Derek.

Kotan explained how he could extend reinforced spars from all three main ports to create causeways to a greater docking-ring and eventually fit stabilizing sails and even massive docking pylons to facilitate any number of *Galor*-class or greater vessels moving forward. It would take years, but by building out from the existing ring and eventually constructing a centralized primary command and control complex the existing deficiencies in reactor output, capacity and overall practicality could be vastly improved upon.

Jegal listened intently, then said with a weary smile: "Prepare a proper proposal, Glinn Derek. I'll carry it forward to Central Command. For now, reenforce that port and make ready for Gul Riza. Clear?"

Kotan nodded and excused himself.

"I want to make my address as soon as possible. What's the status of that Starfleet ship?" Jegal asked Ligan, as Derek left.

"Still on the border. If you broadcast on the general channel across Bajor, it's quite likely that ship will pick up on the broadband transmission as well."

"Can't be helped. Provided the Order's reports on Starfleet deployments are correct, they've nothing that can match the *Galors* nearby. Besides, we have interstellar law on our side." An arrogant sneer appeared on Jegal's face.

"Yes, of course..." Ligan nodded and with a guarded expression, exited the office to order the communications operative to prepare the broadband channel for Gul Jegal's immanent use.

Dead Reckoning

Shon stood quietly watching the black nothingness of space drift over the bow of the *Anderson*. Notrand had the bridge and Valar had no place up there. The ambassador had retired to his suit. As ever, Henri Renard was nearly painfully polite, but it was made very clear that he was not interested in debating next steps with the short Bolian Starfleet commander.

The subspace interference had grown so bad that Notrand didn't dare to risk engaging the diplomatic transport's warp drive. They were picking their way back towards the Federation border under impulse power. Though Shon wasn't above with Notrand and his small crew, he could feel the subtle course corrections the *Anderson* was making. The navigational sensors weren't operating correctly in the unexplained interference soup.

"Isik for your thoughts?"

Shon startled and turned to see Ura Jann leaning against the polished white table behind him. "Pardon me?"

"It's a Vulcan saying. To be honest, I don't really know what an isik is. You looked forlorn, it just seemed like a good ice breaker."

"This is...it's just wrong. I'm sorry, I know you're not Starfleet." Shon desperately wanted to be back on the bridge of the *Fury*.

"No, we're not," said Ura quietly. She was wearing a simple white and blue duty jumper. At impulse the best they could hope for was to make the border within five days. Given the difficulty Beck was having with navigation though, it might take them twice as long to limp their way home.

"I should go to my quarters..." said Shon as he slowly began to move away from the impressively large viewports.

"For what it's worth, Shon...we all feel the way you do. We're just not equipped to deal with the unknown." Ura sighed and let defeat colour her expression. Her guard was down. Her regimented training as a consummate diplomat set aside.

“That’s what Starfleet is for, Ura. Dealing with the unknown. Exploring it. Confronting it even...” Shon felt his throat close, and a wave of sorrow and regret washed over him. He wasn’t sure if he was feeling his own emotions, or if Jann was projecting the way Deltan’s could.

“Henri and I spent years repairing the rift between the Andorians and Vulcans. I know all about confrontation, Shon. If you think Klingon captains and Romulan spies are a challenge, you should try going one on one with Sarek...” She let a pathetic smile touch her lips for just a second. “...war with the Cardassians isn’t a possibility. It’s a certainty, Shon. Do you understand? It’s just a question of when, and what sets it off.”

Valar unfastened his bib and let his tunic fall open. His flashy new uniform was uncomfortable and too tight. In time he’d break it in, but for right now he wanted to get back into something comfortable and reassuring.

“I think not doing what’s right to avoid a confrontation that is inevitable anyway, is wrong Ura.”

“Acting without preparedness can be costly...”

“Not acting at all can be costlier still. Please excuse me.” Shon offered the beautiful Deltan woman a respectful bow and made his way to the sumptuous quarters the ambassador and crew of the *Anderson* had furnished him with.

Something was obviously wrong. Shon didn’t know what exactly, but he felt it in his bones. He’d joined Starfleet to explore the unknown and make a positive difference in the lives of his fellow citizens and people everywhere... They were running away from people who needed help and it felt wrong. Rationally he knew they were ill equipped for any sort of aid mission, but in his gut, Shon felt they were heading the wrong way. He’d learned one thing during his few days aboard the *Anderson*, he was no diplomat.

Broadcast

-click, click-

-click, click-

-click...

Syrk sat up in bed and turned to look at the blinking white light on the comms panel. He'd disabled the auditory alert for incoming calls as his well-attuned Vulcan ears could readily pick up the sound of relay switch *clicking* on and off in time with the visual indicator lamp. Wearing nothing other than a light undershirt and a loose pair of shorts, the captain got off his hard mattress and opened an internal channel.

"Captain Syrk, here."

"Sir, Lt. Commander Bogga. Can you attend the bridge immediately, please?"

"I shall be there directly." Syrk closed the channel and moved to pull on a pair of flared lounge pants and his white meditation robe. Bogga was not one to exaggerate situations and if he requested immediate attendance, logically he meant immediate attendance.

Fifty-eight seconds later Captain Syrk, dressed in his long white robe and a blue pair of lounge pants stepped off the turbolift onto the bridge. He had a pair of simple black slippers on his feet.

"Report," said the thin Vulcan as he stepped up to the command chair where his Denobulan Third Officer had just been sitting. They were barely at the halfway point in the ship's night shift.

"Captain, seven minutes ago the subspace interference subsided substantially." Bogga stood respectfully to the right of the command chair as his captain seated himself and quickly surveyed the status panels.

"*Anderson?*"

"We have her on long-range approach sir. She was off course by more than a lightyear. Evidently her navigational

sensors were affected by the interference. We've contacted her captain, all souls accounted for and well."

Syrk turned to face his acting Executive Officer. "Tactical situation?"

"That was my reasoning for your urgent attention, sir. Lt. Lowel, please."

The young woman at Ops called up a static filled sensor log for the captain to see on the main viewscreen. As the recording began to play, the static suddenly cleared up and just for a second and half, a very clear reading was displayed on *Fury's* long-range diode scanner.

"Is that..." Syrk started to ask.

"We have confirmed the power readings, mass and metallurgy as being consistent with those typified by Cardassian warships, captain. It was obscured again almost immediately by another wave of subspace interference, but we're fairly confident it was a *Terok-class* battle cruiser," said Bogga as his expressive brows and elastic cheeks furled and bellowed with anxiety.

"Ops, full sensor sweep..."

"Aye, Captain."

"Mr. Bogga, it's coming through again," injected Ensign Clemont, manning the night watch at the communications terminal.

"What is coming through, Mr. Bogga?" asked Syrk as the sensor log was dropped from the view screen and a Cardassian emblem suddenly appeared.

"Uh, well...this...it only lasted thirty seconds the first time, when we picked up that ship on long-range..."

Aboard the *Anderson*, Henri Renard's private comms panel alerted the ambassador to a call from the bridge.

"Yes Captain Notrand, how can I help you?" Henri had been working on his after-action report for the Federation Council.

“Ambassador, the interference is lessening. I’m patching a broadcast we’re picking up from Bajor to your quarters, apologies for the abruptness...”

Henri stepped back from the wall mounted unit and watched as his screen sparked to life. Suddenly he was looking at First Minister Corzu and Kai Asel himself. The men were dressed in dirty and wrinkled clothes. Corzu’s face was filthy and looked to be covered in grey dirt, while the Kai sported a wide white field dressing on his left cheek just below his eye. Renard was alone in his quarters and openly gawked at the bizarre scene. Before either the First Minister, or the Kai could say a word, a third man stepped into frame.

He was a tall, middle-aged Cardassian with deep-set eyes and an unusually narrow forehead frons. He wore an imposing brown leather battle tunic with an ornate golden insignia embossed down a narrow panel set to the right side of his chest. The man’s eyes were dark, sharp and magnetic. He seemed to look through the screen.

“My name is Gul Jegal. Head of the Cardassian Second Order. Supreme Commander of the Third Legion and Prefect of Bajor. By now, most of you receiving this transmission are aware that Marshall Law has been imposed not only on the Bajoran capital, but in towns and cities across the planet. There has been a devastating accident at Bajor’s central power regulation plant. There has been bloodshed...many of you in the outlying settlements along the energy distribution corridor are experiencing severe shortfalls in power, some communities have reported fires and accident-related damage...”

Henri staggered backwards and nearly tripped over the dining table. He managed to seat himself without taking his eyes off the small screen.

“...the Cardassian troops patrolling your streets are doing so for your own protection. We are here at the request of your government and seek only to secure Bajor and her resources for the greater good of both our people. First Minister?”

The Cardassian stepped aside and ushered Corzu forward. Through the grime and filth, Henri could see the First Minister had a swollen right eye and a dark bruise on his right cheek.

“People of Bajor...as First Minister, I...I must ask you to cooperate with our Cardassian, friends. The damage in the capital is severe and we risk losing, everything. The loss of life in the capital is extreme...” Corzu looked shellshocked and nearly despondent.

The Cardassian Gul smiled and shooed Corzu out of the frame. “Yes, it’s a tragic situation. Local authorities in league with Cardassian forces have been deployed to ensure order and civil security...eminence?”

The Kai looked pale. In fact, he looked as though he was about to faint at any moment. Henri’s hand went to his face in horror.

“My children, the path the Prophets have laid out for us...can be difficult at times...” A tear rolled down the Kai’s bandaged cheek and the white field dressing started turning pink as the bandage absorbed the moisture.

“Yes, difficult at first, but worth the pain in the end. I believe that is what the Kai is saying. We are here to help. Bajor has petitioned to join the Grand Cardassian Empire and that request has been granted. Your government and your Kai shall remain in place. I shall be your Prefect; your living embodiment of Cardassia here, on Bajor. First, we shall extinguish the flames and repair the damage to Bajor’s infrastructure, together. In the coming days we shall work towards fulfilling the needs not only of Bajor, but of the Empire as a whole.”

A pathetic moan escaped Henri’s throat.

“In closing, know that the sacrifices you make today will make for a greater Bajor tomorrow and a stronger Empire for Cardassia in the future. For Cardassia!”

The screen went black for half a second, then the Imperial Cardassian sigil appeared in bold colours.

“Bridge to Ambassador Renard, did you receive that, sir? Sir?”

"Oh my God..." blurted Clemont.

"Captain?!" Bogga's face had fallen and looked to be hanging off his skull.

Syrk kept a stoic expression on his face, but his thoughts were disordered, chaotic. Mentally he began trying to formulate an appropriate course of action. It was like an unexpected attack in kal-toh suddenly being unleashed by an opponent who takes the very bounds of logical possibility and dares to push just beyond what had always been considered extreme. The Cardassian emblem faded from the viewscreen, and the normal view of standard forward returned.

"Sir?" Bogga couldn't think straight, he needed his captain to show him the way.

"Mr. Bogga...advise the *Anderson* to make haste and clear Bajoran space as soon as possible." Syrk ran through the regulations and procedures he'd committed to memory years ago; it was the only logical thing he could think to do. "Comms, transmit a copy of that recording to Starfleet Command, along with all ship's and mission logs from the last three days on a secure channel."

"Aye, Captain," was all Clemont could think to say as he got to work.

"Maintain long-range scans, Mr. Bogga. Yellow Alert. Once Mr. Valar is aboard, send him directly to my Ready Room..."

"Aye, Captain...sir, are we at war?" asked Bogga glumly.

"I...I don't believe so. You have the Conn, Mr. Bogga." Syrk slid out the command chair and made his way to the Ready Room to await the return of his First Officer.



*Darkness burns
Fires in the soul fail
Pah-wraith feed*

Untitled poem from: Renga, Reflections on A Coming Emissary.

Epilogue:

The invasion of Bajor by Cardassian Forces began in the Earth year 2319.

The resulting occupation of the planet and enslavement of the Bajoran people would last half a century.

The governing Council of the United Federation of Planets would debate the merits of interstellar law and the non-interference doctrine for nearly two decades while the Cardassians plundered Bajor of its uridium and rebuilt their economy. Even after war broke out between the Federation and the Cardassian Empire in 2347, the Federation Council refused to sanction any intervention into Bajoran space.

In the Earth year 2369 the Cardassian Occupation of Bajor ended. An estimated fifteen million Bajorans died under Cardassian rule.

The choice not to stage an interdiction on behalf of the Bajoran people remains one of the most controversial policy resolutions ever undertaken by the Federation Council.

CODA.