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Revolting Comfort: Meeting the Shadow's Gaze

by Kate M. Daley

It started so slowly that, at first, I did not notice. I just had a vague sense that something had changed. It was some time before I could see the shadow.

I couldn't look at it directly; not at the start. Perhaps I didn't want to. I could only see it out of the corner of my eye, usually while working on my research.

But I cannot ignore it anymore. It has a face, now, and a gender. There is still some fuzziness, and he fades slightly in and out of focus. But even as I refuse to look at him, he is unmistakable.

The green, scaled man stands across from me as I peck at my laptop. His suit fits perfectly, though its dark fabric pattern might have been from my grandmother's couch. His prominent neck ridges ripple, accentuated by the shape of his thick tunic, as he tilts his head to look at me disarmingly. His hooded eyes try to convey that I have nothing to fear. They are convincing. I cannot trust them.

I let him watch me for a time, without comment or question, as I observe him. He stands silently, with an unassuming but obfuscating smile. Finally the uncomfortable passes into the intolerable.

"Why have you been following me?" I ask.

"Me?" he says with an innocent look, casual yet attentive. "You cannot possibly blame this on me."

He is right, of course; one is not followed by an alien tailor unless one is to blame.

“Alright,” I concede. We glance at each other. I am uncertain, but he is calm enough. “You’d better sit down.”

Elim Garak nods his assent and lowers himself into a chair in the corner of my office, next to my bookshelf. He does not let me see him looking at the titles, but I know he has memorised them. I cannot expect less from a former spy of his calibre. He looks out of place, surrounded by my 21<sup>st</sup> century human furnishings. This does not seem to bother him.

I take a halting breath. “I don’t know where to begin.”

He chooses his words carefully, as he always does. “Perhaps it would be best to start at the beginning.”

It began many years ago. I was young. I came into myself through *Star Trek*. The other series were comforting, more or less. I would watch them and feel excited for a time, but soothed at the end. They made me think, sometimes about difficult things. But my favourite characters acted well. They would risk their lives to do what was right. *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* was different.

It was partly my youth; I did not deal well with episodic television that effectively ended with “To Be Continued.” I craved resolution.

But as I grew older, I realised there was more. I was already used to dealing with failings. In other *Star Trek* series, scientists may succumb to hubris,<sup>i</sup> admirals may refuse to recognise the rights of beings they do not understand,<sup>ii</sup> and beloved Starfleet captains may break rules and commit crimes to help a friend.<sup>iii</sup> They may be vindicated. They may

learn from their mistakes. But their failing were always part of human fallibility. They were appropriately humbled by their experiences. The structures within which they worked and acted were just. These had been the lessons of *Star Trek*.

I could not count on *Deep Space Nine* for these lessons. Slowly, the ethics of the utopian institutional world had unravelled. Starfleet used counter-infiltration techniques that lead Earth to an attempted military coup.<sup>iv</sup> Federation agents engineered a disease in a genocidal attempt to wipe out an entire species comprised of their enemies.<sup>v</sup>

I was left with fallible people on whom to rest my moral intuitions. I could not trust their institutions to be just and righteous.

I could perhaps have lived with that, if it had not been for him.

I tell him all of this, as I make tea for both of us. He is reserved, careful about what he says to whom. But I can tell he is not satisfied. I am not satisfied.

“Come, now. You give me too much credit. You said yourself that the institutions in my universe relinquished their moral righteousness.”

“You snuck up on me back then, like you’ve snuck up on me now. An exiled tailor. You hemmed pants. And between lunch dates with the space station’s idealistic young doctor, you gave us flashes of your past as a spy, an assassin. A ruthless interrogator.”

“It wasn’t my past that perturbed you.”

“No, it wasn’t. We saw plenty firsthand to object to.”

“And you’re indignant because you judge my moral failings?” A hint of a smirk surfaces as he speaks. He sips his tea. “If you were sure they were simply *my* failings, if you were so certain of your moral superiority,<sup>vi</sup> I wouldn’t be here.”

We sit in silence, for a time. I do not know for how long.

When Garak speaks, each word is articulated with purpose. “Let us cut to the chase, shall we? This is all about *In the Pale Moonlight*.”<sup>vii</sup>

“It’s not!” I insist. “Why should it be? You’ve done worse!” I spit. “You tortured Odo. You broke him.”<sup>viii</sup> And for what? So that you could go home and play your geopolitical spy games? Whatever it took to get what you wanted...”

He’s fully here, now. Before, he seemed a perfectly good imaginary figment. I could see him and speak to him; he could drink my tea. But now I can smell his flesh as he leans toward me. I breathe deeply. It is musty and sickly, revolting. It is comforting.

“I did all kinds of things. But you’re not concerned about my moral shortcomings. Not really.” He walks around the front of my chair and bends down close, so I cannot look away. We have not touched, but I can taste his sweat. “It’s not really about me at all. It’s about Captain Sisko.”

He steps back, elongating his spine and tilting his head backward in challenge. His neck ridges shine under the fluorescent lights. I know Garak cannot be trusted. He cannot be ignored.

I begin again. “Star Trek had always been a comfort to me. But your world was different.”

“My world was your world.”

“Yes. In all the ways that mattered.”

“And why should that upset you?”

I swallow hard. “You corrupted my hero.” I can’t look him in the eye.

“Did I really?”

He walks calmly to the DVD player and slips in the disk. We watch the whole episode. I stare straight ahead. It feels like an eternity.

He speaks first. “If you were being honest, you could see that it wasn’t me. Sisko made his own choice long before I entered the story.”

“That’s a stretch, Garak.”

“Oh, is it? He was in as much denial as you are. Sisko said it himself, right at the start: he’d walked through a door and locked it behind him. He had already decided that he would bring the Romulans into the war to fight his enemies with him.” His back is to my bookshelf. “What does your ethicist call it? Utilitarianism? <sup>ix</sup> Sisko knew before he came to me that he would do whatever it took.”

When he says it out loud, I can no longer pretend he is wrong. I speak quietly now. “When you suggested creating fake evidence that your enemies were going to attack the Romulans, he more than agreed. After he knew where it would lead, what it would do to other people, he still thought you were right. He was with you all along.”

“And, of course,” Garak adds, “the most damning piece of evidence, as I told him then: that he came to me in the first place, because he knew I could do those things that he wasn’t capable of doing.”<sup>x</sup>

But I still refuse to absorb it. “So my hero was corrupted before he came to you. It’s a fictional universe, Garak. I knew it was corrupted, like you said. So what?”

“So why are you still so ... unsettled?”

I’ve been fidgeting absently. “The resolution of the episode is lies, corruption, and murder. Why shouldn’t that upset me?”

But he won't let it go. As I can't. "What happened between now and when you first watched that episode?" His eyes widen as he tilts his head forward. "Your *favourite* episode."

I can no longer feign calm as I push my chair away. "What *happened?! 9/11* happened! Guantanamo happened. My political education has been defined by the War on Terror. Where anything is justified in the name of security for some people. And I'm not thirteen anymore. I've grown up, Garak. And I don't like what I see, in your world or in mine."

"You expect me to believe you're genuinely upset about the lies, the murder?"

"Shouldn't I be?"

"But the fact is: you're not, not really. You can't blame me for corrupting your captain. You know full well that there isn't a difference between him and me. And you're angry. We're too close to each other. And to you."

"You think I'm angry because I still feel drawn to him?!" My question becomes my answer. "Because it made me enjoy him even more. And you."

But he pushes on. "You took pleasure in it. And you can still squint at him and see what you were supposed to see, what others do: a tortured and righteous man in bad circumstances, who was willing to do whatever it took to win a war, to save the lives that mattered to *him*. You're eager to excuse his decisions because he shows himself agonizing over them. You're perturbed because what happened since you were thirteen hasn't changed the way you feel. In the end, you can live with it. Just like Captain Sisko." He gestures toward the bookshelf. "And your laws and your theory will never be able to

help you where it matters: in your soul. When you take comfort in our willingness to do vicious things for noble ends.”

He tilts his head back and looks down his nose, at me. After a moment, his confrontational posture softens. We sink back into our chairs.

I am finally calm, surprisingly quiet. “So why are you here? To show me the hypocrite I really am? To keep me from feeling righteous by blaming you? Like you did to Sisko?”

He is no longer goading me now. He is gentle, matter-of-fact. “My dear, I am here because I have always been here.”

For the first time since his arrival, our eyes meet softly, with some uneasiness but without accusation. There is nothing more to say, of course. I want him to stay. I fear being alone with my nagging pleasure. But he will never really leave me. It is the smell of his flesh. It will always be revolting. Comforting.

**Word Count:** 1,982

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<sup>i</sup> John Meredyth Lucas, “The Ultimate Computer,” *Star Trek* (NBC, March 8, 1968).

<sup>ii</sup> Jonathan Frakes, “The Offspring,” *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (Paramount Pictures, March 12, 1990).

<sup>iii</sup> Leonard Nimoy, *The Search for Spock* (Paramount Pictures, 1984).

<sup>iv</sup> David Livingston, “Homefront,” *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (Paramount Pictures, January 1, 1996); Reza Badiyi, “Paradise Lost,” *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (Paramount Pictures, January 8, 1996).

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<sup>v</sup> Michael Dorn, “When It Rains...,” *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (Paramount Pictures, May 5, 1999).

<sup>vi</sup> See K. Maja Krakowiak and Mary Beth Oliver, “When Good Characters Do Bad Things: Examining the Effect of Moral Ambiguity on Enjoyment,” *Journal of Communication* 62, no. 1 (February 2012): 132.

<sup>vii</sup> Victor Lobl, “In the Pale Moonlight,” *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (Paramount Pictures, April 15, 1998).

<sup>viii</sup> David Livingston, “The Die Is Cast,” *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (Paramount Pictures, May 1, 1995).

<sup>ix</sup> Judith Barad and Ed Robertson, *The Ethics of Star Trek* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 294.

<sup>x</sup> Lobl, “In the Pale Moonlight.”