



## Star Trek: Deep Space Nine: The Soul Key

By Olivia Woods

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Continuing the events from *Star Trek: Fearful Symmetry*, a new novel in the ongoing *Deep Space Nine* series set after the end of the critically acclaimed television series.

Captain Kira's lookalike, Iliana Ghemor, dreams of fulfilling a prophecy that will mark her as the one true Emissary of the mirror universe—a messianic figure who will lead her followers into a war that could trigger the cleansing of countless alternate Kiras in countless parallel realities. But the stakes are higher than anyone imagines, for the pull of destiny tugs at other souls who are swept into the vortex of the Prophets, remote and timeless beings who have set these events in motion. Yet the outcome of this struggle for the fate of one universe will ripple across many others, giving shape to a future that will prove to be greatest trial yet for the heroes of station Deep Space 9.

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## **Editorial Review**

### **About the Author**

Olivia Woods lives in New York. This is her first Star Trek novel.

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## **1**

### **NINE MONTHS AGO**

Far below the cracked ochre wasteland of Harkoum's surface, Iliana Ghemor turned away from the reading screen, her anguish and rage competing for dominance as she wedged the knuckles of her left fist between her teeth. She savored the sensation of her skin breaking against the pressure, the metallic taste of her blood mingling with the salty tears that flowed freely down the cheeks of Kira Nerys.

*Her cheeks.*

*Dead, she thought as her eyes traveled tremulously back to the shatterframe monitor atop her desk. They're all dead. And they've been dead for years.* Her mother, her father, Entek, the Obsidian Order itself...And now, if this newest intel from her spies was to be believed, even Gul Dukat was gone -- consumed in Bajor's Fire Caves during an arcane confrontation with the Emissary, a battle that had evidently claimed them both.

In truth, she'd half expected this. From the moment she'd learned the full scope of the Dominion War and the attempted genocide on Cardassia that had marked its end, Iliana had accepted the very real possibility that all the people she'd known in her old life were among the nearly one billion slain. But instead, after scouring the files of Dukat's personal database -- copied from his secret safe house beneath the lunar prison on Letau -- she learned that they'd met far different fates.

Her mother had been first. Less than a year after Iliana had departed Cardassia for her covert mission to Bajor, Kaleen Ghemor had fallen into a despair from which she had never recovered. She resigned from the judiciary, withdrew from the world, and eventually became gravely ill following a prolonged struggle with a crippling depression. She finally expired in a hospital room seven years after she'd last seen Iliana.

Corbin Entek met his end three years later, after he'd become one of the highest-ranking strategists of the Obsidian Order, and during a predictably convoluted plot to expose her father's covert involvement with a growing dissident movement on Cardassia. That the eroding certainty of her father's political beliefs had eventually led him to become one of the movement's leaders was a revelation, but it was as nothing compared to the shock of learning that Entek's scheme had involved manipulating Tekeny Ghemor with the promise of restoring his long-lost daughter to him, using a surgically altered Kira Nerys -- the *other* Kira Nerys -- to convince him that she had finally returned from her assignment on Bajor.

That her old mentor -- and the architect of her metamorphosis -- had chosen to defile her memory in order to achieve his ends came as little surprise. Entek had done a poor job of concealing his true interest in Iliana during her tutelage, and the things she had heard Dukat say to him at Elemspurr on the day of her memory transference left little doubt that Entek had manipulated her from the start, and that his frustrated obsession with her was directly responsible for the course her life had subsequently taken. Fittingly, the farce he had perpetrated against her father had been Corbin's final undoing, though it had thrust Tekeny into exile and had

allowed the other Kira to survive unscathed.

The final insult, however, had come two years later, at the time of her father's death of Yarim Fel syndrome aboard Deep Space 9. The bond that Entek's plan had created between Tekeny and Kira had endured right up until Tekeny Ghemor drew his last breath. He had sought to spend his last days in Kira's company, even sharing with her the final, supremely intimate rite of *shri'tal!* Had he known that Kira shared responsibility for killing the love of Iliana's life? Was it really possible that he had given up any hope of ever finding his real daughter, and had turned to the creature Iliana had been sent to replace in some pathetic need for a surrogate, just so that he wouldn't have to die alone?

*They gave up on me. All of them.*

It had been no less devastating to learn about the deaths of her Bajoran loved ones. Thanks to the memories of Kira Nerys, Iliana recalled the mortal wound Cardassian soldiers had inflicted upon Kira's father, Taban. But Kira's mother, Meru, had apparently lived for years as Dukat's concubine, long after her daughter had thought she'd died of malnutrition in the refugee camps of Singha. Dead too were Kira's brothers, Pohl and Reon.

Most of Kira's resistance cell -- the Shakaar -- were gone as well. Some had fallen during the Occupation, like Dakahna Vaas, whose loss had been so painful to Kira that it drove her into a self-destructive spiral from which she had only barely escaped; others had been murdered in recent years by a vengeful Cardassian who'd survived Kira's bombing of Gul Pirak's compound on Bajor -- the same bombing that had killed Iliana's beloved Ataan Rhukal. Ataan's death had driven Iliana to the Obsidian Order in her need to exact justice -- and there she had drawn first blood by killing one of the Order's captured terrorists, Dakahna Vaas.

Ataan and Vaas. She remembered loving them both. She remembered *killing* them both. And the terrible symmetry of those memories often seemed too intolerable to contemplate.

And now to learn that Dukat, too, was dead...

She would have been the first to admit the source of the new information was dubious -- *if* she had lacked Kira's appreciation of Bajoran metaphysics.

The report, filed by members of the Vedek Assembly and now glowing out from her desktop screen, told of an account given by the wife of the Emissary. This Kasidy Yates claimed to have experienced her husband in the aftermath of his final encounter with Dukat, and that he had told her that the gul was lost forever to the very entities he had tried to unleash -- the Pah-wraiths. From a Cardassian perspective, it was utter nonsense.

But from the perspective of a devout Bajoran, it was an entirely logical and fitting end to the life of the planet's most universally hated enemy. Adding to that the information she'd gleaned from Dukat's own files on Bajoran mysticism and the many inexplicable events of the last eight years, and Iliana could well believe that the inscrutable alien beings who resided within the Bajoran wormhole had spun a complex web that had ensnared many lives, including that of Skrain Dukat.

And perhaps even her own.

*That's it, isn't it?* she thought. Cardassia and Bajor, her life and Kira's, Tekeny and Taban, Kaleen and Meru, Shakaar and Corbin, Vaas and Ataan -- they were all somehow intertwined; entangled by invisible strands that formed the pattern of whatever obscure and intricate tapestry the Prophets were weaving behind their impenetrable curtain of timelessness.

*And the thread of my life? Where does it lead now? How do I make myself whole again? Cardassia lies in ruins. Bajor has no place for me. Vengeance against Dukat is denied me. Entek is long dead. My mother succumbed to her own broken heart. And my father...My father's love was stolen from me forever.*

By Kira --

"Nerys?"

Iliana started, but didn't turn toward the voice, hastily moving instead to close the file on her reader and wipe the tears from her face.

"What is it?" she asked sharply.

She sensed Shing-kur's hesitation. Ever since they'd broken out of Letau, together with several other inmates, the Kressari had been her devoted right hand, and she'd had the clearest understanding of everything that Iliana had endured these last two decades.

Shing-kur alone knew that Iliana was not the Bajoran she appeared to be. But she seemed to appreciate nonetheless Iliana's all-consuming need, after fifteen years of physical and psychological torture in Dukat's private dungeon, to cling to the identity of the Bajoran woman that she should have replaced -- the woman whose identity was the only one that had any meaning to her now. Consequently, during the months since their escape to Harkoum, Shing-kur had become acutely sensitive to Iliana's moods, and it had to be obvious to her now that she had intruded upon Iliana at a moment of acute vulnerability.

"Well?" Iliana demanded. "Out with it!"

The Kressari seemed to take the hint, though she gave no further sign that she thought anything was amiss. "There's been news out of Bajor."

Her interest piqued, Iliana turned her head halfway toward Shing-kur, so that the Kressari would see her profile. "What sort of news?"

Shing-kur's voice carried an air of possibility. "There's a Jem'Hadar soldier aboard Deep Space 9."

Harkoum proved to be everything Iliana could have hoped for, and more: Dukat's secret Dominion transporter on Letau had deposited her band of fugitives deep within the abysmal Grennokar Detention Center. This was one of many underground secret prison installations that the Obsidian Order had quietly maintained over the last century, until Cardassia finally abandoned the remote planet for good. Rumor had it that mummified corpses still resided in many of those forsaken facilities, and that the so-called enemies of the state who had been incarcerated here at the end of the Order's reign -- many of them having served as test subjects for the Order's medical research initiatives -- had simply been left to die in their locked subterranean cells. Iliana had tried to imagine what it must have been like for those poor souls, caged and starving, their ever-weakening screams for help and rescue going unheard until they had at last faded into eternal silence.

But if those rumors were true, then Grennokar was a notable exception to current Cardassian policy. The initial search that she and her cohorts had made of the facility showed considerable evidence of *recent* use, which appeared to have ended both suddenly and disastrously. Between the detention center's still-intact records, which had included copies of Dukat's personal files, it hadn't taken long to piece together what had happened here, or why Dukat had taken such an interest in this place that he had used the Dominion su...

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