

Review: *In the Pale Moonlight*

by Jamahl Epsicokhan

The road to hell is paved with good intentions.

Given what it does to its central character, *In the Pale Moonlight* is one of the darkest chapters in the history of the Trek canon. I'd say this has a good chance to become a controversial episode. I would suspect there are going to be some out there who will see this episode and wonder if the DS9 writers are slowly dismantling everything about the Federation that [franchise creator Gene] Roddenberry's *Star Trek* idealism took for granted. The episode documents an ugly series of events, to be sure, and at the end of the episode I was left stunned, disquieted, and compelled.

But *In the Pale Moonlight* is a perfect demonstration of what DS9's Dominion War arc is all about – or at least what it probably should be about if it intends to maintain tension and dramatic realism. Anyone who thinks that the perfect Roddenberry vision can thrive in a Federation that's plunged into a war of this magnitude is probably hopelessly idealistic and hopelessly naive. Personally, I think it's absurd to claim *Star Trek* or the Federation cannot have a dark side, especially when considering that *Trek* usually, for all practical purposes, still keeps its moral compass in check when delving into dark issues in an episode like this. (Besides, to loosely quote Andre Braugher's character, Frank Pembleton, from *Homicide: Life on the Street*: "Virtue doesn't mean anything unless it's tested alongside vice.")

A big point of the episode is to show what ugly things war can lead desperate people to do, so it strikes me as only natural (and necessary) that a chapter like *In the Pale Moonlight* would take place during a time like this. The episode is a story superbly told – the best of the season – and I think there's a lot to be said for a tale that documents the agonizing effects of the war on one man, particularly one man who can make decisions that potentially impact thousands or millions of people – namely, Captain Benjamin Sisko.

The episode is told in flashback by Sisko as he makes a personal log entry. "I can see where it all went wrong," he begins. The foreshadowing is the first of many things this episode gets very right. It lets us immediately know where it's going – essentially straight into hell. From the outset, it seems obvious that Sisko's plan, whatever it is, is destined to go very wrong. As a result, we know we're in for what's going to be a rough ride with a not-so-happy ending.

The story marks an extremely significant return to the war storyline where Federation casualties are still running very high. One day, Sisko reaches the decision that something must be done if the Federation stands a chance of survival – and soon. He wants the Romulans to join the game. As we know from [the fifth-season finale] *Call to Arms*, the Romulans have signed a non-aggression pact with the Dominion, and they have no desire or motivation to enter a bloody war at this point.

But Sisko disagrees. His argument: When the Dominion forces are finished with the Federation, they'll go after the Romulans, no matter what the Dominion may have promised. But Sisko knows Romulans, and knows they're going to want proof that such a betrayal will take place.

Well, of course, there is no physical proof, and when Sisko seeks Garak's help to gather intelligence information from his few remaining Cardassian contacts, the result fails (that is to say,

everyone Garak talks to turns up dead within a day). Garak recommends to Sisko the only sure-fire method for convincing the Romulans a threat exists: They must manufacture the “evidence” themselves.

From here is the opening of a Pandora’s box unlike anything Sisko has probably encountered. As he states in his log, “The road to hell is paved with good intentions,” and in making the agreement with Garak, Sisko lays the first stone.

The plot of this episode is not as primary as the wringer it puts Sisko through, but make no mistake: This is by far the most important plot development episode since *Sacrifice of Angels* – perhaps even more so. Peter Allan Fields, the man behind many good second-season stories, returns to garner story credit in a pivotal episode; Michael Taylor’s teleplay demonstrates his knack for getting inside the characters’ heads with a flashback-like device (a la his earlier *The Visitor* and *Things Past*). Although, considering the story also had an uncredited rewrite by Ronald D. Moore, it’s difficult to dole out credit accurately. I’ll just heap the praise onto everybody for pushing as far as they did in both the plot and the dark underlying themes. The plot pretty much works like a well-oiled machine and is constantly interesting and relevant. Meanwhile, given how much is often made of the *Trek* franchise and ideology, it seems to me the unpleasant themes took some guts to see through.

Sisko’s involvement in Garak’s plan takes turn after frightening turn. Sisko enlists a criminal named Tolar to fake a holographic recording of a briefing between Weyoun and Damar regarding a supposed planned attack on the Romulans. Sisko orchestrates a trade with one of Garak’s sources: An authentic and rare data rod upon which to record the holo-briefing in exchange for a highly dangerous biological substance that is normally regulated directly by the Federation. Sisko bribes Quark to keep things quiet when Tolar assaults him. Sisko makes bold-faced lies to the Romulan Senator Vreenak to convince him to join the war effort. All of this, meanwhile, is conducted in secret; no one knows what’s really going on except Sisko and Garak. Even Starfleet Command, who gave Sisko permission to see the daring plan through, probably doesn’t know everything concerning how the plan is being conducted.

Sisko’s plot quickly becomes a high-stakes game where the goal is to convince Vreenak that an out-and-out lie is actually the truth. When trying to confirm Sisko’s story, will Vreenak discover that the data rod is a fraud, or will Tolar’s fabrication hold up under scrutiny? The episode builds an incredible sense of suspense in its later stages, helped along by the narration of Sisko’s own feelings of doubt and dread. I haven’t been so viscerally wound up in the outcome of a story since *Sacrifice of Angels* earlier in the season. Sure, we knew something was going to go wrong given the narration, but seeing how it would play out had me riveted to the screen.

Watching Sisko go further and further into this plot was literally scary. Sisko is not the type of character that I normally equate with obsessions, but this time he gets in so deep that it nearly becomes one; he’s willing to go to great lengths (“I’m making a new agreement!”) to protect this plan.

And when Vreenak uttered those three simple words – “It’s a fake!” – I seriously feared for the fate of the Federation. The twist, of course, is that Sisko’s plan ultimately works because Garak intervenes (outside Sisko’s knowledge) by planting a bomb on Vreenak’s ship, making it look like

Dominion sabotage killed him. It's a startling turn of events. The last scene between Sisko and Garak is powerfully acted, and pulls the plot together to turn the Romulans against the Dominion more plausibly than I would've thought possible. (Although, I'm certainly curious what Starfleet had to say to Sisko about the bombing, or if they even knew or suspected Sisko's connection.)

Director Victor Lobl deserves kudos for assembling this package in a manner such that it all holds together and in the meantime grabs us by the throat and refuses to let go until it's all over (and David Bell's brooding score is effectively appropriate). The performances are wonderful. Andrew J. Robinson [as Garak] and Avery Brooks [as Sisko] were both great; the former demonstrating his usual acerbic wit and cleverness even in the grim setting, the latter documenting a man under the great pressures of infinitely high stakes and moral crossroads.

The supporting characters were also effective. Howard Shangraw's Tolar wasn't a groundbreaker, but the character's early lack of discretion and focus (public drunkenness, attempted murder of Quark in his bar) was enough to convince me that the data rod had a good chance of failing inspection. (Even without the foreshadowing narration I would've been pretty doubtful of success.) Stephen McHattie's Vreenak, on the other hand, was a perfect Romulan – arrogant, suspicious, sarcastic, and skeptical; Sisko had his work cut out for him, and their discussion was wryly written.

And, ultimately, whether you like what *In the Pale Moonlight* does to Captain Sisko or not, you've got to admit – this is powerful character development. It left me both troubled and intrigued. It may not exemplify what I'd want to see in my ideal Starfleet hero, but that's what makes the story work so well. It's a tragedy in the most characteristically fundamental of ways: It questions the core of a man's morality by pushing him to the limits until he makes decisions that he never would've wanted to have to consider in the first place.

The fact that Starfleet sanctioned such a risky and morally questionable plan is itself a sign of very desperate times. I've never been one to pronounce black-and-white verdicts concerning the Roddenberry ideology, but I'd certainly say that the attitude of this show pushes far beyond [it]. By giving Sisko "their blessing," Starfleet has essentially condoned one officer to lie, cheat, bribe, and cover up the truth. It's a very interesting issue to ponder, though certainly disturbing.

Morality aside, however, I do somewhat question the strategic prudence of Starfleet approving of such a risky plan. If failure could indeed completely alienate the Romulans, it's a wonder they would be so willing to go through with it. It could very well be that Starfleet felt it had no other choice (especially given that partway through the episode news arrives that the Dominion has invaded and conquered Betazed), but it still seems like an awfully big risk to take with so much on the line. Forget such little plot anomalies; they're slight at best, and the big picture couldn't be much more involving.

But what this episode all comes down to is Sisko. Simply put, this Sisko is not the same man he was before the war began. Or maybe at his core he still is, and the whole point is that the darkness around him brought out the worst within him. To demonstrate such a point, Avery Brooks' monologues to the camera, particularly the final one, were downright riveting. When all's said and done, he shifts sideways on his couch and crosses his legs in a way that sent a chill running down my spine. (The gesture is simple enough, but it's executed so ingeniously that the image is forever

burned into my mind.) He says he can live with himself. And then he repeats himself – twice. And he sounds like he means it. Yet he also sounds like he doesn't believe it. This is a troubled man, having made choices that have ripped him up inside. He's tortured but hardened, and all he can do is try to make the right call while rationalizing that the ends justify the means – which in many ways, perhaps, they do.

This last scene is a masterpiece, showing how important the effects of the story's plot is upon the character. The episode's story itself is not just a means to a plot-development end, but a fully realized character piece.

Eight years ago, when *Star Trek: The Next Generation's* classic *Yesterday's Enterprise* aired, there was a brutal war between the Federation and the Klingons that existed in an alternate timeline. The Captain Jean-Luc Picard of that timeline was a strangely different man. He was a dark and somber “what-if” version of the real Picard. *In the Pale Moonlight* features a dark and somber Sisko, and what's so frightening is that this isn't a “what-if” situation; it's really happening for Sisko and the Federation.

Looking back at *Sacrifice of Angels*, when the Prophets [Ed. Note: the beings who live in the wormhole, exist outside of time, and watch over the Bajorans, who worship them as gods] told Sisko that his [fate] would follow another path, I cannot help but think that the events of *Moonlight* may indicate a possible direction that Benjamin Sisko may be headed in. I by no means hope that's the place he ultimately ends up, but the chilling consequences of *Moonlight* on his character are too great to be ignored, and far too compelling to be dismissed. This episode truly pushes the envelope of the Roddenberry idealism, but I think it's great that the DS9 writers have taken this step; *In the Pale Moonlight* is one of the all-time best DS9 installments. I'm very interested to see where Benjamin Sisko goes from here.