

"Arrivals, Departures, Omens"

Chapter 1

"It was terrible!" Valim repeated.

In Kira's office, she and Emyr listened somberly as the minister's obviously-shaken aide continued his report. There was a discolored, oval swelling across his forehead, and a parallel set of cuts across his cheek, ending in a split lower lip that had the man speaking with a bit of a lisp. Every now and then, he winced in pain, but it didn't stop him from talking.

"Minister Lizin and I were in Ilvia for the opening of the new exhibit of artifacts from the B'hala excavations. We had just arrived outside the museum, by transporter, and we saw there was a large crowd gathered. We thought nothing of it, obviously — as the Minister said, it was to be expected our people would be eager to see the opening of such a display. These artifacts are probably twenty thousand years old! Their historical value to Bajor is incalculable!"

Valim paused to lick his lips, wincing when his tongue touched the swollen wound. Then he took a careful drink from a cup before setting it back down, out of sight from their viewscreen.

"The minister thought mingling with the people would be appropriate, to share a few informal greetings before the scheduled speeches...."

Out of the corner of her eye, Kira caught Emyr mouthing the word "politicians" behind the clasped hands before her face, but her expression remained impassive. Kira couldn't help mentally agreeing.

"So we moved down to join the crowd. Suddenly the shouting started, out of nowhere, for no reason!" Valim shook his head as if in disbelief before repeating yet again, "It was terrible, terrible! There was jeering and pushing. And then they began throwing things!"

"What were they saying?" Kira asked.

"It was hard to hear exactly over the shouting, but it sounded like accusations against the government, against the ministers. Wild claims Shakaar is handing Bajor over to aliens. That the ministers are no better than the occupation government puppets. That the vedeks are blasphemers who've betrayed the Prophets and the people. That we've forgotten who we are." He swallowed, his gaze sliding nervously from side to side as if he expected a renewed attack at any moment. "And threats. That we deserved to burn in the ruins of our own decadence. That we were nothing but voles who should be hunted down by hara cats. That the day would come when sinoraptors would shred the flesh from our faces and rip out our eyes...." The man's voice kept rising into a near-wail.

Kira couldn't help staring at the matching slashes on Valim's pale face.

"What did they throw?" Emyr interrupted flatly.

"Snowballs." The aide's voice turned indignant. "But the first one that struck my face, I realized there were rocks inside! And ice! It hurt! And there were grasshopper eggs! Old eggs — do you know the stench of rotten grasshopper eggs?" Valim flung out his arms. "The Minister and I were both struck, multiple times. Our lives were threatened! Our coats were ruined! And I am certain I saw weapons among those madmen! If Che'Sinn's officers hadn't intervened when they did, pulling us to safety and dispersing the crowd, I have no doubt there would have been shooting!"

"And neither you nor the Minister heard anything that might suggest why you were the targets of this anger, or where it had come from?" Emyr pressed. "Or why it might have erupted there, at the opening of an exhibition of artifacts with, as you noted, such historical and religious significance for Bajor?"

"No, no reason at all." Valim seemed to collapse back into himself. "But when you are in peril for your life, you don't always think to ask why someone is trying to kill you."

"Very true. Thank you for taking time to give us your personal report, Valim," Kira told him seriously. "I assure you, we'll take all possible precautions here on the station for the festival. But you should have your injuries tended to. Convey my regards to Minister Lizin, and my relief you both weren't more seriously injured."

"Thank you, Colonel." Valim looked more mollified.

"We'll see you both here on the station in a few days, when you've had time to recover."

"Of course."

The viewscreen side with the minister's aide went dark, then vanished while the other image expanded to take up the entire screen.

"Che'Sinn?"

"We dispersed the crowd around the museum, but either they just decided to make trouble elsewhere in the city, or there were other conspirators in place ready to start riots timed to coincide with this one." Che'Sinn, head of Civilian Security for the city of Ilvia, looked understandably harried as he ran a hand over his balding scalp. "We had to break up four separate mobs in public areas of the city. There were three suspicious fires near the local commissioner's hall and the transport center. And we'll be cleaning graffiti off walls for at least two days, more likely three."

"Do you have any leads?" Emyr asked.

He shook his head. "No, not yet, constable. Unfortunately. We've only been able to apprehend a number of citizens who obviously were caught up in the mob mentality, no-one we're certain had any role in beginning the riot." Anticipating criticism, he added, "With winter clothing and hoods, identifying the instigators hasn't been easy."

Emyr mused, "The use of snow and rocks in the initial attacks *could* mean this was spur of the moment, that the protesters used what they had at hand. Or perhaps the hope was the larger crowd would become involved as well by emulating the protesters with easy-to-hand weapons. The eggs suggest planning. *Fresh* grasshopper eggs would be easy to come by, at any market, but *rotten* ones suggest deliberate planning."

"There's a very small chance this could have been spontaneous," Che'Sinn agreed, "but like you, I believe this was planned. That it began in so many parts of the crowd suggests the instigators were placed to maximize confusion and incite as much widespread anger as possible."

"Agreed."

"We'll be reviewing transport records into the area over the last few weeks and monitoring all other methods of travel in the next few days, to see if we can trace any outsiders with records of disruption anywhere else, or suspicious patterns. But Ilvia is a shrine and a popular northern destination, with its history, and so many recreational activities, and the museum, even more so with the excitement of the B'hala exhibit. We may have forty-five thousand visitors in the city this week alone."

"You'll assign extra security at the museum?" Emyr asked.

"Already done." Che'Sinn's already serious expression turned grimmer. "I can't see any of our people damaging such priceless artifacts, but theft is possible, even if just to embarrass the First Minister and the government."

"There is always a possibility of outside agitation, to cover theft by non-Bajorans," the constable noted.

Che'Sinn nodded once without comment.

"You'll keep us up to date on your investigation?" Kira asked.

"We will."

"Thank you, Che'Sinn."

The screen went dark.

Kira and Emyr looked at each other.

"Do you think it's related to the attempt to steal the Orb of the Hidden?" Kira finally asked quietly. Since that shocking attempt, the colonel had concluded Emyr's perception of how the outside universe viewed their sacred objects might be clearer than hers, and should be taken into consideration.

The constable shrugged. "Hopefully Che'Sinn will find out. At least he's not fool enough to think sacred still means safe, on Bajor."

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Bashir knew Dr. Girani was a competent doctor and quite capable of overseeing the infirmary. However, he fully expected most of his experimental work to have been ignored in his long absence on Cardassia. He was surprised to find the results of several ongoing medical research projects on Bajor had been neatly maintained and updated, along with notations as to variables to consider for future experiments and observations about the current results.

He didn't know whether to be pleased that someone had kept his research going for him, or disturbed that someone had interjected himself or herself into work he had organized and for which he'd overseen every previous detail.

"I see someone's been following my immuno-therapy experiments," he noted aloud.

"That would be Alex's doing," Girani noted with a smile.

"Alex...?" Bashir reflexively checked the medical personnel roster. "Ah, yes. Dr. Monrow. I met her at the party, I believe. She's been updating the supplemental medical logs as well?"

"Yes. She's been a boon to the department in your absence."

"Really?"

"As busy as we've been with the influx of refugees, and with you gone, it's been difficult to find time to handle anything but our daily patients and medical supply distribution for the zone colonies. But Alex volunteered to jump right in and help with anything she could. She recognized immediately what you were trying to do in your second-stage immuno-therapy project. And on top of her theoretical understanding and research skills, Alex is an excellent doctor — her surgical abilities are almost as good as yours. And," Girani flashed a very appreciative smile. "You'll be amazed the first time you taste her cooking."

"Her cooking?" Bashir crossed his arms and sat back in his chair, chuckling. "It sounds like the two of you are getting along famously!"

"We are. Believe it or not, she's the first non-Bajoran I've ever met who not only appreciates the taste of hasperat, but has taken the time to learn how to prepare it properly!"

"That," Bashir returned emphatically, "is one food I think I'll continue to pass on!"

"If you discover a cure for Orkett's Disease, I'll forgive you that failing," Girani quipped back. Then her

expression turned more serious. "I think you'll be disturbed when you read about the situation with Laas and his New Link."

"Why?"

"They had the Founders Disease."

He nodded slowly. "We have the cure for that."

"We did." A second's pause. "When Alex ... Dr. Monrow and I went to the databanks for the information on the cure, we discovered it was gone."

"Gone?" he repeated, frowning. "What do you mean?"

"All information regarding the cure, beyond the fact of its existence and its role in ending the war, was gone. There's nothing in the Starfleet medical database or your own logs about what the cure was, or how to synthesize it."

Bashir stared at her, appalled. "Somebody's been tampering with our computer information and my personal logs?"

Girani nodded. "That's our assessment. Colonel Kira believes it must have been removed for security reasons. She advised us to keep it confidential."

Bashir felt a cold stony lump settle into his stomach. "And I thought the *Cardassian* government had played god with their history and what their people were entitled to know," he breathed. "Section 31. It has to be. But—"

"Section what?"

The coldness spread; his expression turned grim. "Never mind, Girani, never mind. I'm sure Kira's right."

"I know you won't have forgotten your research and the formula of the cure," the Bajoran doctor continued, refocusing her attention. "But under the circumstances, I assume you won't be re-entering the data into our system?"

He hesitated a fraction of a second, then replied, "No, I won't. At least not until I talk to Kira and Starfleet Medical. Check the current protocols and such...."

It was better his staff didn't know what he suspected. He had always known it was a near-certainty Section 31 had agents on the station. If he hadn't been so focused on the bloody aftermath of the war and the reconstruction mission to Cardassia, it might have occurred to him those agents might retaliate against him for having lured Sloan to the Station, and to his death. Troubling as it was to contemplate, it was probably inevitable Section 31 would try to steal back from him what he had forcibly taken from them.

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She had to get away from Ops for a few minutes. On impulse, she even turned off her combadge, mutinously feeling the need for a small act of rebellion. Making her way above the Promenade, Kira paused to study the crowd. Hands wrapped tightly around the railing, she gazed down from the overhead crosswalk at the bustling collection of personnel and visitors on the Promenade.

There was more than the usual cross-section of strangers. Lizin, the Minister of Culture and Arts, had invited artists from a number of worlds to visit Bajor — make that, to visit the station. Kira hadn't been consulted in advance. But the minister was currently a strong supporter of Shakaar; the colonel wasn't about to make waves about the "cultural event" for him, as tense as things were on Bajor at the moment.

Lizin was supposed to be here to handle the publicity and diplomatic interaction with the artists, but he'd

delayed his arrival for the opening of the B'hala exhibit at the Ilvian museum. It meant Kira had spent a good deal of time the last few days welcoming those artists and dealing with artistic temperaments and assignment nightmares, when her schedule was already overflowing. Hopefully the minister wasn't really injured in the riot, or at least that he didn't use it as an excuse not to come to the station....

At the moment, there were a number of visual artists displaying assorted paintings, holos, and sculptures of various types. She could also see some of the artists demonstrating their styles to eager observers, and she knew there were several musicians and dancers who would be performing over the next few days.

One cluster of observers was noticeably smaller than the others — a Cardassian water sculptor was at one of the display areas. Only a handful of Starfleet and station personnel had gathered to enjoy the melodic fluid trickles of her sculpture and listen to Nilom describe Cardassian aesthetics. One Bajoran, Deputy Brilgar, hovered nearby, probably assigned to ensure the Cardassian woman's safety. He did, however, at least seem mildly interested in her remarks.

Briefly diverted, Kira wondered why the minister had invited a Cardassian, and why the woman had come. Considering the still-dire situation on Cardassia, maybe Nilom just wanted to get away from what was left of her home for a while.

"Nerys! Here you are!"

Distracted, Kira glanced up as Dax approached. "Ezri! Hello! Yes, here I am. What is it?" She almost didn't want to know.

"We just heard from Bajor — Vedek Nane will be arriving tomorrow morning."

Kira couldn't help a delighted, relieved smile. "Vedek Nane! It'll be wonderful to talk with him again! I haven't seen him since ... well, since Ziyal's memorial."

Dax leaned over the railing with her. "I've never met Vedek Nane. What's he like?"

"He's a very spiritual man. A talented artist and a patient teacher. He's become a role model for so many of his students." Kira turned pensive, remembering one of those students, Tora Ziyal, the half-Cardassian, half-Bajoran girl who had become something between sister and daughter to her. "He took Ziyal in as if she were his own daughter. She lived in his abbey, at the university, for several months."

"That was quite a favor, for a Bajoran vedek to take in Dukat's daughter. I think I'll like him."

"I just asked him to give her a chance, to help her settle in — it was her talent and who she was that earned her a place in his heart." Kira pushed away from the railing to stand erect. "I suppose I have to get back to Ops," she said briskly. "I'm sure between them, the senior staff have a stack of reports on my desk that will take all day to get through, and hopefully it'll include the arrangements for the reception tomorrow evening. And I'm expecting another call from Bajor."

"About the riots in Ilvia this morning?"

Kira's expression sharpened. "I didn't think that was public knowledge yet. How did you hear?"

Ezri shrugged apologetically. "Quark."

"That figures," the colonel growled, casting a baleful glance over the railing toward Quark's bar. "I suppose that means the whole station already knows about it."

"Probably." Ezri studied her carefully. "You look stressed."

"And why wouldn't I be?" Kira complained. "Minister Lizin dumps a station full of temperamental artists from over a dozen different worlds on me, without any notice—"

"I'm sure it's not that bad."

"They're worse than diplomats, at least diplomats try to be ... diplomatic, these artists don't even care when they irritate you—"

"I think they just don't notice."

"And now I'm apparently the last person on the station to hear about a major riot at Ilvia—"

"Quark has his own sources, don't take it personally."

Kira tightened her grip on the railing. "I suppose," she said, low-voiced, "what's really worrying me is this seems to be happening all over Bajor."

"I thought it was just scattered disturbances."

Kira shook her head soberly. "I thought so too, until a few days ago. The more I hear, the more I worry. Somebody's behind what's happening. Directing things. I can feel it. And I wish there was something I could do besides ... host parties up here. It's as though nobody on Bajor is listening to me anymore, not even Shakaar." After a few seconds, Kira took a deep breath and changed the subject. "Doing anything for dinner tonight?"

"Meeting Julian at the Klingon restaurant," the Trill replied. "And I hope there's something I can stomach on Loron's menu! Preferably something not moving...."

"So let Jadzia order for you."

"That's what I'm afraid of!"

Kira forced a chuckle.

"Care to join us?"

"No, I don't want to interrupt your personal time together. Besides, I don't like my supper moving any more than you do!"

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Chapter 2

"You know I value your input, Ezri," he said thoughtfully. "So tell me honestly, what do you think?"

"I think that's too much."

"Oh? Why?"

"Because if we order that, I won't be eating at all — I'll be too busy being sick."

Bashir looked up from the menu at Dax. "What? Oh, right, you don't care for *gagh*...." He glanced back at the menu, then looked at Loron. "All right, let's make it a small side order of cilian *gagh*, but no blood sauce, and the mixed platter for two, hold the *tarq* drippings."

"To welcome back a good customer like you, doctor, I'll put a half order on the side, and I'll bring it to your table myself," the heavysset Klingon restaurateur assured the human in his booming, gravelly voice, poking at the human's shoulder and adding, to Bashir's obvious embarrassment, "You must rebuild a warrior's strength!"

Then Loron grinned fondly at Dax, laughing deep in his throat. "And for you, Ezri, heir of Dax, there will be sweet *yuch traq'hot* for dessert — I had a shipment brought in special from the homeworld, and I have been

saving the best for you!"

Dax perked up at mention of one of the few Klingon foods she actually loved, and had enjoyed even before being joined. "I'm sorry I haven't been here more often, Loron, but...."

The jagged-toothed grin widened. "You will make it up to me!"

Bashir and Dax took a table in the corner, as quiet and private as any place could be, in the Klingon restaurant. For several minutes they sat in silence, sipping sweetened raktajino.

Over her mug, the Trill studied the human's face. A strange and distant stillness had come over him, and she wondered where his thoughts strayed. They didn't appear to be in the moment or on their evening. From the shadow of green in his eyes, he was watching vistas far from the station.

"Julian?" she prodded.

He seemed entranced by the depths of his mug.

"*Jules?*" she said more strongly.

"Hmm?" He looked up. "What was that?"

"Are you here with me?"

"What?" He stared at the odd question.

"Because you look like you're a couple dozen light-years away."

"I'm sorry." He set down the mug and clasped his hands on the table, leaning forward. His gaze fixed on her face. "It's good to be back, but I guess I'm not used to it yet."

"Hmm." She leaned forward, searching his face with equal intensity. "So why does that make it hard to stay here with me?"

Bashir's eyes shifted, staring over her shoulder. "I guess.... No, that's not it," he changed his tone and confessed. "I'm having problems leaving the infirmary *at* the infirmary, if you know what I mean. Habit. The last few months, I haven't really been able to stop thinking of the mission and what we were doing, what had to be done to help the people back to their feet. Not even for a minute. One crisis after another...."

He glanced down moodily for a second, then back at her, forcing a lilt to his voice. "So, here I am. Back with you. Back on the station. Back to everyday events. Let's see. Hmm. I've heard Girani extolling the virtues of the addition to the medical staff in my absence. What do you think of her?"

"Her—? You mean Monrow?"

"Of course. She's the only new person I'm aware of."

"I thought she was supposed to be temporary!"

Bashir rocked back. "That sounded rather ... vehement! What's wrong with her?"

Dax made a face. "Nothing! That I know of. We ... haven't really hit it off well."

"Oh?"

"She scowls at me. Or she glares at me. When she deigns to notice me at all."

"You two really *didn't* hit it off well! But surely you're exaggerating. According to Girani, Dr. Monrow gets along well with everyone. From her record she's an excellent doctor. It sounds like she's well-respected all over the station, my nursing staff is in awe of her, and her cooking compares favorably to Captain Sisko's — she even has Morn wrapped around her little finger, to the envy of more than one woman here! Or are you one of them and I've lost your heart to that Lurian rogue?" he teased melodramatically.

"Don't be silly! Monrow...." Now it was Dax's turn to stare uneasily into her mug. "She doesn't get along well with me. And I have no idea why. Endar doesn't like her either. But then, he doesn't like doctors in general."

"Endar. I haven't seen much of him yet."

"He's been pretty busy, with everything going on with this arts festival or whatever Minister Lizin is calling it."

"I saw your diagnosis for him," Bashir said more seriously. "PTSD and ODD. Difficult combination. I'm actually surprised, with that diagnosis, that he's still here. Especially with the other reports I've been reading about him."

Ezri shifted a little uncomfortably. "It hasn't been easy," she acknowledged. "I've been trying to treat Endar and be a buffer between him and Nerys."

Bashir frowned.

"They ... didn't start off well at all," she admitted.

"I remember."

"Well, it hasn't really gotten much better," she explained in a rush. "And with some of the things he's done.... That near-breakdown when he first arrived. His attitude and anger. Triggering that failsafe. Kidnapping Quark and going AWOL. Risking a war with the Ferengi. For a while, it just seemed to escalate. Having a diagnosis didn't make it any easier for Nerys and Endar to work together. I even thought about locking them in a room together, figuring they'd have to reach some kind of accommodation — that, or kill each other. Then they got stuck in the turbolift. They didn't kill each other — but they didn't talk either!"

Bashir stared at her in amazement. "Surely you're exaggerating!"

"Seriously, Julian, if the war were still going on, I don't think I could have talked Nerys into letting him stay. And I know it wouldn't have been the right thing to do, and maybe it would have been an unreasonable risk." The words spilled out more urgently. "But the treatment centers are all so full of war-traumatized patients now, so I don't know where he'd go if I wanted him to be treated somewhere else, and we're not at war now, so we've got a bit of a break. He trusts me, and I don't think he trusts easily, and he's making progress, I can tell, and I think he'd lose that if we sent him away. He might shut down completely. I mean, here, he's got something to fight for, a reason to want to get better, and—" She paused for a breath.

"Whoah," Julian finally interrupted with a chuckle, "you sound like you're trying to convince *me*."

Ezri exhaled slowly. "I think maybe I am," she admitted, trying to relax. "There were days it felt like I was the only one Endar trusted, and the only one who was willing to give him a chance. But he's making friends here, and working hard at his therapy and his responsibilities, most of the time. And I know it'll help, too, now you're back."

"Here you are!" The deep voice startled them both, as Loron appeared beside their table. Three plates, one large, two small, hit the table with a clatter; it was a miracle nothing fell or crawled off. Their raktajino mugs almost bounced. "Eat to satisfy a warrior's hunger! And then," he held up a finger triumphantly, "there will be *yuch traq'hot* to savor!"

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The trio at the table would have stood out just about anywhere. Seeing a Ferengi, a human, and a Tellarite drinking together wasn't unheard of, but their attire was what really set the young men apart. Baseball uniforms were rare on almost any planet except certain Earth colony worlds, and anywhere but Deep Space Nine, no Ferengi would have knowingly been caught in one, unless there was profit in it. However, the three young Starfleet officers had plans for the evening, and were biding their time at Quark's as they waited for their holosuite. Nog wore his own Niners uniform; Kalcheb had followed suit and fabricated a uniform from the same team; Kuhlman, on the other hand, wore a uniform from an old Earth team called the San Francisco Giants.

"...And as soon as the festival is over, we're back to fixing up every little broken-down freighter that comes limping through here!" Kalcheb griped.

His friends listened with some amusement; Tellarites were known for their argumentative nature and grumbling, and this was nothing they hadn't heard before.

"And half the Romulan fleet seems to be stopping for repairs and supplies while complaining we're not working fast enough for them," he continued, shaking his head. "Probably spying on us while they're here, too."

That was a more alarming complaint.

"Let's leave tomorrow's duties for tomorrow," Nog interrupted, carefully looking around to see who among the customers at Quark's might be listening to them. There were a number of Romulans among the crowd. "And we probably shouldn't be discussing that here, of all places."

"Afraid your uncle has listening devices under the table?" Kuhlman said impishly, taking another drink of synthale from his mug.

"No," the Ferengi replied absently. "I make sure they're disabled every time I sit down. But there's a lot of ... ears around, and with all the visitors...." He glanced around again.

"So let's finish our drinks and see if that holosuite's available," Kuhlman suggested. "I'm in the mood to toss a few." One hand patted the baseball glove lying on the table beside his mug.

The Ferengi laughed; the Tellarite snorted.

"You're always in the mood to toss a few!" Nog teased.

"You two would play baseball every night if you could!" Kalcheb grumbled good-naturedly.

"Nah, just every other night," Kuhlman grinned. "The rest of the nights, I'd be at Vic's playing the piano!"

"It's been great having more people to play baseball," the Ferengi chuckled. "I can't wait until Jake gets back — he'll be amazed we've almost put together a whole new team!"

"I hope he gets back soon too. I think I've worked out a way around his curve ball, and I can't wait to test my bat against the real thing," the human noted.

Nog thought he heard whispers somewhere, but it was hard to be sure in the din of the bar, even for Ferengi ears.

Kalcheb sighed deeply. He'd first heard of the old Earth game upon coming to the station, and only begun to play in the last few months, since beginning to work with Nog. "I suppose that means I must resign myself to the intricacies of the 'squeeze play' and the 'sacrifice bunt' again."

That caught Nog's attention again. "Don't make fun of it! The bunt," he reminded them proudly, "is the hit my father made in the game against the Logicians that scored our only run!"

"I wonder if they'd be up for a series," Kuhlman pondered.

"The Logicians?" Nog's spirits nose-dived. "Not without Jake and Captain Sisko," he sighed. "Wouldn't be right...."

"Excuse me," a tentative voice interjected.

The group glanced up. Several young people had approached their table. One of them was male, tall and stocky, with shadowy dark hair, obviously of mixed Bajoran and Cardassian heritage, from his pale gray complexion, neck ridges, and indented forehead, wearing a plain metal earring of dedication to the Prophets. The other two were female Bajorans, both dark-complexioned. One was slender and tall with a mass of tight dark curls spilling out of a hairclasp of the same metal as her simple earring and cuff. The other was short and a little on the plump side, with a reddish cast to her dark braided hair and especially pronounced nasal ridges; her earring glittered with several small bright stones. None of the group stood out for attire or expression.

It was the slim female who'd spoken.

"Do you play the Emissary's game?" the woman continued.

"You mean baseball? Yes, we play baseball," Kuhlman responded.

The newcomers exchanged excited looks with each other.

"I told you that's what they were talking about!" the other girl hissed, her dark eyes bright and eager.

"We watched one of the Emissary's games today. But it was so complex, there was so much we didn't understand. You are like the Emissary, you play the game — teach us," entreated the apparent spokesman for the group.

The officers looked at each other.

"Sure," Nog said with spirit. "We're always happy to have more players. It's more fun that way."

"On one condition," Kuhlman cut in. His gaze was fixed on the attractive Bajoran girl.

Taken aback, the woman replied, "What's that?"

"You have to tell us your names."

She ignored the flirtatiousness in his tone. "My name is Wani." She indicated the other young woman. "This is Nallan." She nodded at the youth. "And this is Jord. We're students of Vedek Nane."

Nog frowned. "Vedek Nane doesn't arrive until tomorrow."

"He allowed us to come ahead while he tended to some other matters," Wani replied. "And now, will you tell us your names?"

"I'm Lieutenant Nog. This is Ensign Kalcheb," he gestured. "And that's Ensign Kuhlman."

"David Kuhlman," the human interjected, with a charming smile at Wani. "Let's play ball."

* * * *

Kira had received a letter from Keiko O'Brien two days before. She hadn't had time to listen to it until this evening, taking a few minutes to try to relax at the end of a very long and stressful day. This, at least, she knew would have nothing to do with politics or world-shaking matters. Wrapped in her robe, she requested a ginger tea from the replicator and prepared to settle down.

"Computer, play Keiko personal letter number ... oh yes, number four," she ordered softly.

"Hello, Nerys." Keiko's face appeared on the screen. She was growing her hair out and wore it in a new style, more upswept. It suited her, Kira thought.

She lay back on her couch, eyes closed, enjoying the letter from a friend far across the galaxy.

"I know how busy you must be, so don't worry if you haven't time to write, I understand...."

Kira felt a stab of guilt. Yes, she'd been busy, but so was her friend, with a husband, two children, a cat, a teaching position, research, a home, a garden, and a book to write. And yet Keiko found time to send her letters. She resolved to write back the next day.

"The spiny basil finally seems to have decided it wants to grow here, although the spines along the stems are a little thicker than they should be, and I think that's how Chester keeps scratching his nose. Probably still thinks he can nibble at it like he did my plants at the station, and he's always surprised the stems aren't as flimsy and tender as he's used to."

"I keep remembering the time he got into my collection of Gamma Quadrant myren herbs — it's amazing he hasn't poisoned himself with everything he eats. Sometimes I think that cat's going to live forever. Nine lives were just the start."

Kira's mind wandered over what she would say in her response — planetary and interstellar political problems? The ongoing refugee situation? The looming Bajoran religious crisis? The stalled kai election? Riots and art festivals? Personnel issues? Bashir was back, of course, but Julian would no doubt be sending his own missives to the O'Briens. There had to be something more personally significant, more intimate to share....

"...Yoshi's spending a couple of days with his grandparents — Miles's father and stepmother. You remember Miles plays the cello, don't you? And his father wanted him to go to the Aldebaran Music Academy? Well, knowing I play the clarinet too, although far from Miles's level of talent, Michael insists to anybody who'll listen that Yoshi must have musical genes. So he gave Yoshi a bodhran, of all things! I doubt it'll last until the new year, but at least the noise isn't in our house, this week anyway."

"If Yoshi does take after his father with musical talent, I have no doubt Michael will push us to send him to the Aldebaran Music Academy. And my aunt's talking about a shamisen as a gift for him at the next opportunity. That would give Chester some competition in the noise department!" Keiko laughed.

Kira smiled too, despite having no real idea what either a bodhran or a shamisen were, beyond some sort of Terran musical instruments, or why they might be competition for a cat. At least she remembered seeing the cello and the clarinet during the months she'd lived with the O'Briens while carrying Yoshi, and the couple had each played for her a few times. Miles was indeed a gifted musician as well as engineer, and Keiko was quite a talented musician too, despite her modest denials. A shared interest in music had been one of the things that first brought them together.

Kira realized her attention had strayed again, and brought it back to Keiko's voice.

"...Children say the most remarkable things. The other night, Molly was etching a design on a block of glass when she looked up at me, and said, 'If Julian and Ezri don't get married, I'll marry Julian when I'm old enough.' My jaw dropped for a second, but I was able to tell her that's something she would have to decide if or when the time came."

"Miles, on the other hand — he had to sit down. I could see him trying to swallow!" Keiko was laughing between words. *"And when Molly turned back to her glass, he just looked at me and said, 'I don't care, I'm not calling him son!' and headed out to his workshop!"*

Kira laughed aloud at Keiko's imitation of Miles's words and accent.

Fond memories turned thoughtful. *"Later," Keiko finished, "I asked Molly why she thought she wanted to marry Julian. Do you know what she said? She said, 'I don't want him to be alone, and I think he must be lonely without any brothers and without Da there to play with anymore.' Out of the mouths of babes...."* She shook her head. *"I know Miles misses everybody there, especially Julian. And I miss you too."*

"Take care, Nerys. Good bye."

"Take care, Keiko," Kira said softly. "Lights, dim."

As the lights dimmed to a pleasant glow, Kira got up and walked to her windowport. Outside, she could see the stars, clear and unblinking, in all directions out to infinity. Looking up, she could see the belly of the *Tecumseh*, berthed at one of the upper pylons. The *Defiant* was berthed to her left; she could just see the edge of the port nacelle. She had seen the view so many times in almost eight years, it was usually familiar and comfortable.

Tonight, after listening to Keiko's letter, full of little details about her family and her life, it looked vast and empty. And Kira felt alone.

* * * *

"Put your fingers a little closer together, yes, like that...." Kuhlman wrapped his hands over Wani's, his arms around her to "better demonstrate the proper placement of the hands on the bat," as he justified it.

The better to keep his arms around her and enjoy the spicy perfumed scent of the thick hair escaping beneath the batter's helmet, Nog thought impatiently as he waited in his catcher's crouch.

"I think I have it figured out," the young woman murmured.

"If you're sure...."

"Yes."

Nog rolled his eyes and sucked in an impatient breath.

As Kuhlman released her and backed away with obvious reluctance, Wani turned her attention to the pitcher, a holo-player patterned on "Fingers" Jordan, a historical favorite of both Benjamin and Jake Sisko, and Nog's usual choice for pitcher in Jake's absence.

"I'm ready!" she announced.

"Right here, Fingers!" Nog yelled, grinding a fist into his glove. "Right across the plate!"

"Plate?" Wani repeated, distracted.

Jordan wound up.

The pitch came in.

Wani swung, too early.

Crack.

The ball flew foul.

Kuhlman tried to dodge.

He failed, and went down hard, spread-eagled on the grass.

Nallan shrieked; she, Jord, and Kalcheb froze, huddled at the entrance to the dugout. Nog threw down his catcher's mask and raced to Kuhlman's side. Wani spun around, still awkwardly holding the bat, and realized what she'd done.

"Infirmary! Medical emergency in the holosuite!" Nog leaned over the ensign, who showed no sign of consciousness. "Computer, end program!"

* * * *

Chapter 3

Several weeks before, a woman named Sindelar Y'ras had brought five orphaned children from Bajor to the station, none of them older than seven. Each was being reunited with relatives or family friends from other worlds, now the war was over. Kira had befriended Sindelar over those weeks, and knew she was leaving that morning, since all of her charges had been handed over to their new guardians. She stopped by the caregiver's quarters on her way to Ops.

"Nerys," the elderly woman greeted her. Other than a pair of small duffel bags, she had no luggage.

"Y'ras, I just wanted to say good bye before you left," Kira replied, taking her hand. "I'm sorry to see you go."

"It is appreciated," Sindelar replied with grave courtesy. "We must thank you, again, for allowing us to use your station. It makes it easier, what we are doing." Her gaze warmed. "Counselor Dax and your medical staff have been the blessings of the Prophets to the children."

"I'm pleased we can help."

"No one questioned us being here, not even the Starfleet staff," the older woman observed. "I was surprised."

The colonel shook her head. "All I put in the record was these children were orphans, retrieved from the war zone and being repatriated to other family members and guardians with the aid of the Bajoran government."

"We had the protection of the Prophets."

"It's the truth, Y'ras. That they are also children of the Maquis doesn't matter." Kira held her hands for a moment longer. "What you're doing is necessary, and a good thing."

The old woman smiled wanly. "I feel like I lose my own children all over again, every time I say farewell." She sighed. "But I know it's best for them."

"Will you be back?"

She nodded. "We've made contact with several more families. I expect I may be back before the Ha'mara festival."

"I'll look forward to seeing you then."

"I'll be glad to see you, too."

Kira walked Sindelar as far as the docking ring, then watched her weave through the small crowd of people boarding or loading the small transport.

One of the crew came out to oversee the loading, a dark-haired younger Bajoran woman in a pilot's uniform. Catching sight of Sindelar, she quickly relieved the woman of her bags and shouldered them herself, escorting the older woman inside. The colonel waved as the two women disappeared through the airlock into the ship.

"Good morning, Colonel."

Kira started a little. "Ahh, good morning, Lt. Kaoron." How long had the Starfleet officer been standing near? How much had he heard or deduced? She waved off-handedly at the closing airlock. "Just saying good bye to a friend," she explained casually.

"So I observed." The Vulcan science officer stared at the closed airlock thoughtfully. "I believe I recognize that woman."

"Sindelar?" Kira felt a stirring of unease at his intense stare, and deliberately played obtuse. "You should. She's been on the station for several weeks with the orphans from the Federation colonies."

"I was referring to the pilot, the female crewman who assisted Sindelar aboard."

"Oh?"

"Is her name Ro Laren?"

Kira froze for a moment as a chill washed through her, then shook her head. "I couldn't say. I don't remember ever seeing the woman on the station before."

"If I am correct, she was with the Maquis."

Instinctive wariness took over. "I ... wouldn't know. I don't know the names and personal histories of all the people who come to the station."

"Hmm. Perhaps I will check that vessel's crew roster."

"By all reports, the Dominion wiped out the Maquis, except for a handful of survivors rescued and taken into custody by Captain Sisko."

"I doubt even the Dominion could be so thorough as that," he observed.

"Well," the colonel said, very business-like, "we'll consider that issue when there's time. At the moment, I think we should get to work." As if that settled the matter, Kira deliberately turned away from the airlock, heading for the turbolift. "Are you coming, Lieutenant?"

* * * *

"So Kuhlman has a minor concussion...." Kira looked up from the medical update in disbelief, and stared at Bashir across her desk. "From playing baseball?"

"Any sport has the potential for injury," the doctor noted. "How many people have been hurt playing springball?"

"Mmm. I have to concede that. But what about the holosuite failsafes?"

"They were set at minimum — power conservation. But without the failsafes, he might have been dead, a baseball to the head like that. And actually, Nerys," Bashir smiled, "I have a sneaking suspicion he's not as badly injured as he would like it to appear, at certain moments."

"Oh?" she replied a bit sharply.

"The young woman who was innocently responsible for his injury — one of Vedek Nane's students, I understand — has been hovering about the infirmary all night, and Kuhlman seems to be keeping a very close eye on when she's in his vicinity. Then he varies between brave endurance and exaggerated helplessness."

"I see...."

"I expect we'll release him later today."

"Will he be able to return to duty then?"

Bashir shook his head. "Tomorrow. He should really rest a day first."

"All right." She put down the report PADD and reached for her raktajino. "Anything else?"

"Not really."

"You have the new personnel assignments for your department?"

"Yes. I don't see any problem with them."

"Good." She smiled at the human, more warmly than she realized. "All right then. The formal briefing's over. It's good to have you back, Julian. Although," she gestured at his face, "it's going to take me a while to get used to that beard."

He traced the edges of his goatee with his thumb and forefinger. "I felt like a change."

"It's definitely different, on you. What does Ezri think of it?"

"Last night she told me she had to make sure none of the *gagh* from dinner had escaped into my beard before she'd ... say good night." At Kira's laughter, he shook his head ruefully. "Hard to believe the previous Dax hosts were so enamored of all things Klingon."

Still grinning, Kira asked, "I trust we kept your infirmary reasonably intact for you?"

"For the most part."

At his odd intonation, she studied him closely. The humor faded. "The disappearance of the Founders Disease information."

"Yes," he acknowledged with stark simplicity. "I know it's not your doing, you wouldn't have allowed it if you had any knowledge of it. But somebody.... Well, it's unsettling."

"My first thought was Section 31," she said quietly.

"Mine, too," Bashir agreed grimly. After a second, he continued. "Girani said you believed the missing information to have been removed for military and security reasons."

"They needed some explanation."

He nodded. "If I didn't know about the existence and purpose of Section 31, I might even believe it." He drew a long slow breath. "I'm going through the database and my old medical logs, to see if I can spot anything else missing or tampered with."

"That'll take quite some time."

"I know. But hopefully it'll give me some clues about who did this." He rubbed his forehead for a second.

Kira nodded, stifling a yawn before taking another sip of her beverage. For a moment the two officers sat in thoughtful silence, each lost in private contemplation.

Chirp.

"Here," Kira replied with a sigh.

"Colonel, one of our guests would like to speak with you, right now."

"All right, Pryen, I'll be right there. I think we're finished with the medical update." She sent a questioning glance Bashir's way

He nodded agreement and stood up to leave.

"Let me know if you find anything more," she told him, "or if there's anything I can do to help figure out what happened."

He smiled briefly, obviously gratified. "I will."

By the time Kira had finished responding to the Romulan sculptor's complaint about being located too near the Andorian holophotographer's display, by quickly rearranging the Promenade locations of several yet-to-arrive visitors, she was ready for a drink. But she knew it was far too early in the morning for alcohol, and also too early to expect she could get through the rest of the day without further issues.

However, she didn't expect them from her own staff.

"Colonel? Do you have a moment?"

She frowned. "Yes, Kaoron, what is it?"

"I have a concern regarding the transport pilot...."

"Transport pilot?" She stared blankly for just a second, then remembered. "What about her?" she asked as casually as possible.

"I checked the crew list of the ship. The pilot of that transport is identified as Surmak Aldos. It is my understanding Aldos is a Bajoran male name."

"It is," she confirmed. "The woman must have been crew, then, not the pilot."

"I have gone through the entire crew roster. The woman we saw is not listed among the crew of that ship."

Kira raised her eyebrows. "She was obviously aboard the ship. Perhaps she was another passenger, being considerate of an old woman."

"And yet she wore the same attire as other ship's crew."

"That clothing isn't uncommon on Bajoran civilian vessels."

"The insignia was that of the *Prophet's Hand*," he reproved.

"Lieutenant," she interrupted impatiently, "can I ask why you're so curious about this woman, and why you're spending your on-duty time trying to identify someone who's left the station, and who doesn't appear to me to be relevant to anything we're doing at this time?"

"As I mentioned, Colonel," he replied with dignity, "I believe her to be a former member of the Maquis, named Ro Laren."

"Really." Kira leaned back in her chair, resting her chin on her one hand. "To be honest, Lieutenant, the Maquis are hardly a threat, at this point. I'm not aware of the Bajoran government even bothering to investigate if any of them are still alive and in our space."

"Colonel, Ro Laren was a Starfleet lieutenant, but abandoned her mission to join the Maquis, and as part of them, she acted against Starfleet and against the Federation. I believe there are multiple military charges

pending against her."

"Starfleet...." The chin raised and the hand dropped. "Are you certain? I wouldn't want to make an issue of this and be mistaken, especially as unsettled as things are at the moment between the Federation and Bajor. I doubt the Ministers would take well to us harassing a Bajoran civilian with Starfleet military charges, if they should prove to be ... based on mistaken identity...."

"I requested and reviewed Lt. Ro's records from Starfleet. If it is not her, the likeness is uncanny."

Kira sighed as if in resignation. "All right. Do you want me to contact the ship and ask? Or perhaps call Y'ras directly and ask her if she happened to get the name of the woman who helped carry her bags this morning?"

Kaoron considered for a long moment, then shook his head. "No, Colonel, that would not be necessary. As you noted, if this is not the woman I suspect her to be, we might open ourselves to ... difficulties. And there may be other, more discreet opportunities to investigate, if she returns to the station."

"Agreed. I'll talk to the Constable about it as soon as we have an opportunity," she finished briskly.

"Thank you, Colonel." Kaoron inclined his head, then left.

Kira frowned at the closed door. Kaoron had spotted Ro, and recognized her. This was an unexpected complication. Should she try to muddy the waters, as Captain Sisko would have said, to make it more difficult for him to track her? Perhaps just warn Sindelar to be more careful with her assistants? Gamble the Vulcan science officer would become absorbed in some other endeavor before the woman could return to the station?

There were times Kaoron's curiosity, single-mindedness, and sharp memory could be ... a nuisance.

* * * *

"...And now I have the ever-so-critical duty of organizing receptions," Alden declaimed as they left the replimat after a quick lunch. "The host with the most, that's me. The diplomat with the hasperat. Hey, I'm feeling better already. The planner with the spanner ... the cook with the book ... the caterer with ... hmm, can't come up with a good rhyme—"

Dax just laughed.

Alden grinned. The grin faded a little as he looked at Bashir, who appeared to be a million mental light-years away as they threaded their way across the Promenade. There was a slight, thoughtful frown on his face and a pucker to his brows. His shoulders were unusually tense and set, after what should have been a relaxing lunch with friends.

"Anyway," Alden continued, settling down, "the plans for the reception tonight are finished. Vic's musicians are gonna play, so the musical guests can just enjoy the party, unless they wanna join them on stage. Catering's on the clock. Morn brought in some, *ahem*, special beverages, with his last shipment."

"Why do I get the feeling that includes Romulan ale?" asked Dax, still not able to keep a straight face, trying to maintain a lighter atmosphere between them.

"There's some blue stuff, but he assured me it was kanar."

"Did he wink when he said it?"

"Now that you mention it...." Alden wagged his fair eyebrows. "But it's legal now, so there's no problem. I'd better go make sure Quark hasn't stashed half of it away for himself. I'll stop by the infirmary in a bit, Doc, I wanna check on how Kuhlman's doing. The kid was helping me with some of the plans."

"Endar, remember what I said about...." Dax looked warningly at Bashir.

"Not this time. Kira gave me *carte blanche* to use whatever personnel I needed," Alden replied cheerfully. "Guess this was too important to risk not having it right! I gotta go. See you shortly, Doc, and see you at the reception, Ezri — and I'll be accepting accolades then."

"See you there, Endar."

Whistling, the lieutenant commander strode off.

Dax had to shake her head. "He's certainly in high spirits."

Bashir didn't respond. He didn't even break stride or look at her to suggest he'd heard.

"Julian?"

"Hmm?"

"Jules, you're brooding again."

"Oh, uh, sorry, what were you saying?"

"Julian, you barely said two words to either of us, just sat there staring into your raktajino. Last night, by the time we finished dinner, I couldn't get more than monosyllables out of you the rest of the evening, even with the bad joke I made about *gagh* setting up a lair in your beard. You didn't even say good bye to Endar just now. What's bothering you?"

"I'm sorry, Ezri, I'm just tired. With the emergency in the holosuite last night, I didn't get much sleep."

"Julian, you look tense, not tired."

Bashir shook his head. "I need to get back to the infirmary. See you at the reception this evening?"

"Sure...."

Dax watched Bashir walk back to the infirmary, distraction obvious in every muscle.

Alden all but materialized at her side, watching Bashir intently. "What's botherin' Doc?"

"He says it's adjusting to being back here, after everything that happened on Cardassia, and he's tired." Dax shook her head. "But I think there's more. His mood swings... I don't know what's going on in his head."

"I think you're right. It's more. But if anybody can figure it out, you can," Alden assured her. "He'll tell you when he's ready. After all, you're our counselor. And he loves you."

"I hope you're right, Endar. I hope you're right."

* * * *

Chapter 4

Nog stopped in the infirmary to visit Kuhlman before heading to Ops. Bashir's preoccupied expression concerned him for a few minutes, but the doctor assured him all was going well. His friend was in good spirits and would be released in a few hours.

Leaving, Nog was engrossed in reviewing station schematics, when he heard voices call his name.

"Lieutenant Nog!"

The young Ferengi looked up.

Wani and Jord, two of the young art students he'd met the evening before, were approaching, looking anxious.

"You were in the infirmary?" the youth asked.

"Yes," he acknowledged. "Why?"

"How is David?" the girl interrupted anxiously.

"Dr. Bashir says they'll be releasing him later today. His injury isn't severe."

"Thank the Prophets," Wani breathed.

Nog almost grinned. He'd heard the girl was hovering about the infirmary half the night, until the doctors had told her to get out of their way and go to bed. It looked like Kuhlman had won another female heart. Then he sighed. Females didn't hover over him that way.

"Can he have visitors?" Jord asked.

"I suppose so. They let me see him."

"Will he be able to play baseball again?"

Nog smothered a laugh at Wani's blurted question. "He'd better, or Jake's gonna be furious with us all."

"The Emissary's son?"

"Yeah, that's Jake."

Jord nodded sagely. "It would not be right to disappoint the Emissary's son."

Wani nodded too, but her eyes were on the infirmary entrance.

"Taban! Korena!" Nallan waved to them across the Promenade, then all but raced over to join them. "Vedek Nane is arriving! We must be there to greet him!"

"We have to go!" Jord said hastily.

"Yes, thank you, Nog," Wani said quickly. "We'll return later to see David."

The two of them hurried after Nallan.

Nog shook his head. "The girls fall all over Kuhlman, and the Bajorans look at Jake like they expect him to start spouting prophecy," he muttered. "No one notices me like that. I may as well get back to work." He turned his attention back to the schematics.

* * * *

The Bajoran ship docked without incident, and began to disgorge its passengers onto the station. Vedek Nane was among them, a lean, elderly man with a fragile, ethereal air. His eyebrows and fair hair, uncovered, were thinning, heavily shot with silver; his eyes were a pale blue, almost gray; his complexion and skin tone were equally pale, especially compared to the blue robes of his order, trimmed as they were with a surprisingly deep, jewel-tone amethyst.

The three young students greeted their teacher with profound respect.

"Vedek."

"Honored one."

"Teacher."

He accepted their welcomes with a contented smile on his thin face. "Jord, Nallan, Wani. I'm pleased you arrived safely. I trust you have made good use of your time here." His words were warm, but a stern undercurrent made it clear he expected they had been studying as well as enjoying their trip.

The students had barely begun to assure him of that fact, with a few guilty glances between them, when another Bajoran joined them.

"Vedek Nane," Kira greeted him with equal parts respect and warmth.

"Kira." The elderly monk reached out a slim, age-spotted hand, and touched her ear. She meekly bowed her head. His grip was stronger than it looked; his gaze was shrewdly perceptive.

"It's good to see you again," he said after a few seconds. "But your *pagh* is disturbed."

"I'm ... afraid I've been rather busy. Things are ... stressful here."

He caught her quick glance at the young people. "I understand. We'll talk later. For now, please lead me to my quarters. It has been a long journey, and I am an old man...."

Not nearly as frail as he would pretend, she knew. However, she nodded and led the way. Moving beside her, he seemed a ghostly creature, gliding with high-supernatural grace.

The young Bajorans respectfully fell in several steps behind them.

"That's Kira Nerys!" Wani whispered to Nallan, awestruck.

"We knew she was the commander here, now the Emissary's gone to join the Prophets," the other girl whispered back.

"I know — but I didn't think we'd really get to meet her!"

* * * *

Strolling above the Promenade to get an overview of all that was happening, Lt. Kaoron was surprised to find Dr. Monrow standing at one of the windows, a Mona Lisa smile on her lips and a faraway expression in her dark blue eyes as she stared out at the starfield rather than down at the bustle of visitors.

"Dr. Monrow."

"Ah, Kaoron, hello." Her expression brightened. "It looks we have a full house of visitors."

"Indeed. You seem pleased — but hardly focused on what's happening below."

Her smile widened. "I suppose not. Dr. Bashir just informed me — it appears I'm being assigned here."

Kaoron studied her quizzically. "You've been assigned here for several months."

"My initial posting was temporary, while Dr. Bashir was gone. This looks like a regular assignment." Monrow's brow furrowed and her expression grew thoughtful.

"Does this displease you?"

"No, just the opposite. I was thinking, though, trying to remember the last time I had a regular posting. It's been one short-term assignment after another, one emergency situation after another, for ... so many years."

She turned and leaned on the railing, looking out over the Promenade, and spoke more quietly. "I haven't had a place I could call home, or made friends I knew I would still be seeing in another month or two, for a long time. I hadn't realized ... well, I hadn't remembered how ... great it is, to feel like I belong somewhere!"

Kaoron almost smiled himself. "It is indeed a good feeling, doctor."

"Kaoron?"

He raised an eyebrow.

"Call me Alex." Monrow looked around. "I think it's time I started treating this place like home."

"You will have to share the news with Morn," he remarked, affecting innocence.

She glanced back at him with an impish expression, and grinned, dimples forming on both sides of her mouth. "I'll see you at the reception."

"Most certainly."

Laughing, she moved on, descending the spiral staircase to mingle with the Promenade crowd.

Kaoron continued his perusal of the crew and visitors passing beneath his vantage point. He found himself focusing more intently than usual on the Bajoran civilians, and realized he was subconsciously searching for the one he'd seen assisting the elderly caregiver in boarding the civilian transport — the woman he was certain was Maquis and a traitor to her Starfleet oath.

"The transport has left," he murmured to himself. "She is no longer on the station."

He spotted Kira moving through the crowd with an elderly Bajoran monk, trailing several young people.

Colonel Kira certainly hadn't seemed very interested in Ro's identity or possible presence on the station — to the contrary, she'd seemed irritated by his interest. There could be many simple reasons. Perhaps the colonel really did not believe a Maquis member had survived the Dominion massacre. Perhaps she shared the Bajoran government's claimed disinterest in the Maquis at this point. Perhaps she placed greater significance on the woman being Bajoran than in her being a turncoat Starfleet officer, and would protect her for that reason.

Still, if the Bajoran was one-time Starfleet Lieutenant turned Maquis deserter Ro Laren, Kaoron felt sure the woman would have a great deal of possibly useful information and underground history of the Maquis, their bases, and their fate; she might know if other surviving renegades were still hidden among the Badlands or in other Federation colonies. And there were several more personal questions he would like to put to her. Musing, he continued on his way.

* * * *

The doctor ran one last scan of his patient, comparing the results with those of a few hours prior. Satisfied, Bashir smiled at the man.

"Ensign, you can return to duty tomorrow morning," he assured Kuhlman. "If you notice any dizziness or nausea, call the infirmary at once, and we'll check you out again. But you appear to be fine. And with that ... you're free to go!"

"Thank you, doctor." The young officer looked gratified, and glad to be getting out of the infirmary. Appearing quite chipper, he strode toward the entrance that opened onto the Promenade.

The doctor smiled — then suddenly frowned.

Standing at the entrance, Kuhlman's entire appearance had changed. Suddenly, his smile had turned into a

valiant but long-suffering expression and his easy loping steps had shifted into a slow, somewhat halting gait. Just outside the door, he paused for a moment, shielding his eyes against the light of the Promenade as if it were too bright.

Before the doctor could step out and ask if something was wrong, a slim figure appeared beside him, making concerned, sympathetic noises. It was the young Bajoran woman, Wani, who'd spent so much of the night before first in the infirmary, and then hovering around the door when she'd been told to go home.

As Bashir watched, the young pair spoke for a moment, then Wani drew Kuhlman's arm over her shoulders. Kuhlman leaned on her with a grateful expression as they walked slowly off through the crowd. The doctor had to laugh, shaking his head. *Ahh, young love. Or at least young infatuation.*

Bashir headed back to his office to update Kuhlman's chart, fondly recalling certain moments of his own younger days. He met Dr. K'Pak stepping out of his office.

"Doctor."

"Doctor," she returned evenly.

"Were you looking for me?" he asked.

"No," she shook her head efficiently. "I was merely updating the infirmary treatment records for our patients in the last thirteen hours."

"Ahh, thank you."

"It is part of my duty. I recall at Starfleet Medical, we were expected to document every shift with meticulous detail. While I find the Bajoran medical staff here to be thoroughly competent, they do, at times, place less emphasis than they might on maintaining records with the detail I was trained to expect."

He nodded agreement with a smile. "I used to think the only people who kept more detailed records than Starfleet Medical are the Cardassians," he agreed humorously. "But I appreciate your help. I presume you'll be at the reception later?"

"Yes, I will be. If you will excuse me, doctor."

Bashir watched her walk out of the infirmary without looking back. Normally, he would have thought nothing of one of his medical staff dropping into his office to update information. But after what he'd learned the day before, he felt unsettled at remembering his people felt they had free rein to wander through his office when he wasn't there and the door was open. It would have been far too easy for any of them to access his personal files.

He stepped inside and closed the door behind him — one of the few times he had done so, when not in a meeting or involved in particularly delicate research. As he sat down, he remembered something he'd discussed with K'Pak in the past, and it clicked.

He called up her service record.

Dr. K'Pak had come to the station shortly after his captivity in the Gamma Quadrant, just about the time he'd been forced to publicly acknowledge his genetic enhancements.

Before that, she had been at Starfleet Medical for about six years — which included the years during which he believed the Founders Disease to have been created.

And before *that*, the Vulcan had served under Ross, before he became an admiral.

Admiral Ross had worked with Section 31.

Bashir stared at his own hands, suddenly clammy. A lead weight settled in his stomach.

Was that the timing and connection he was afraid of? Was K'Pak an operative? Or was it all coincidence and he was imagining currents within currents of deceit?

How long had Ross sacrificed personal and Federation principles for Section-defined expediency? Had K'Pak done so as well? Part of her duty, that's what she'd said. Had her "call to duty" at times included participation in some of Section's shadowy missions, then, and perhaps more recently? Maybe here on the station, perhaps only months before?

Bashir slumped in his chair, resting his face on his hands.

How could he harbor such suspicions against friends and fellow officers? But how could he not?

Would he ever be able to look at the crew around him again without wondering?

* * * *

If there was one thing Kaoron had discovered he could count on, it was just about every bit of news on the station would ultimately pass through Quark's, and maybe even get to the Ferengi before it arrived through official channels.

If anyone else on the station had recognized Ro, or spoken with her, the bar would be the place to hear about it. The challenge, he knew, would be to obtain information without publicizing his own interest and possibly warning the renegade or her compatriots, or giving Quark reason to find the information valuable.

Additionally, he would have to tread carefully so as not to alert Kira. She had not expressly forbidden him from following up himself, but after her reaction this morning, he strongly suspected she would not appreciate him investigating the Maquis himself, where it concerned a Bajoran national. And that of course made it impossible to bring the potential security issue to the constable's attention.

Quark's was busier than usual for the time of day. With the guest artist delegations, the crews of vessels who'd brought them, tourists from Bajor, and the continuing stream of refugees, there were more visitors to the station than normal. Kaoron found a quiet seat at the end of the bar, a bit apart, and waited.

It didn't take long before he was spotted and approached.

"Well, Lieutenant!" came a hearty voice. "What can I get for you?"

Quark himself. So much the better, Kaoron thought.

"Bolian synthale," he said, knowing Quark would have little time for him unless he was a customer.

"And a good choice. Coming right up."

"I am curious," Kaoron began a moment later when the Ferengi returned with the foamy mug. "There was a woman on the station this morning. Bajoran, one of the crew from the freighter that left. I was wondering if she had been in here last night or this morning."

"From the *Prophet's Hand*? A couple of the crew were in here. Why?"

"I was hoping you might recall their names. Especially the name of a pale-skinned woman with dark eyes, dark hair, this long." Kaoron made a quick swipe between his jawline and shoulder. "Straight, no braids or curls. Slim. I believe she would be considered attractive. Wears her earring on the left side."

"Hmm. Don't remember anyone from the ship matching that description being in here." Quark gave him a second look, then grinned, his sharp pointed teeth glinting. "Interested in a female, hmm? I wouldn't have expected that, from a Vulcan."

"I thought she looked ... familiar," he replied carefully.

"And you'd like to get ... more familiar?" Quark chuckled. "Must be the Romulan in you. I can keep my ears open, maybe hear something, or ask around. As a favor. What's the name I should be listening for?"

Kaaron deliberately took a drink, briefly considering a response. Then he replied, "I am not sure. I have already learned the name I was given is not her true name."

"Oh-ho!" Quark leaned on the bar; his eyes lit up. "I think I'd like to hear more!"

"I am afraid I have nothing more to tell you."

"How am I supposed to know if I see the female, if you don't tell me what I'm looking for?"

The Vulcan shrugged. This was getting him nowhere. "It appears I do not know myself what I am looking for," he admitted.

Quark obviously reached his own conclusions, and he nodded. "If you can't find that female, and you're looking for a little ... companionship," the Ferengi said knowingly, winking, "I've got some holosuite programs that might interest you. Maybe Vulcan Love Slave, part one, two, or three? Or all of them? They're very popular with the Romulan officers just now."

He leaned closer, grinning lasciviously, and slid several holoprogram rods from out of his sleeve onto the bar. "I've got others, too. Risa Jungle Adventure? Captive of the Orion Animal Woman? Mudd's Harem? Hmm? Or perhaps Priestess of the Fire Caves?" The Ferengi winked again. "Some of the Cardassian guls *really* liked that one...." He ran one finger caressingly along one of the rods.

Diverted, Kaaron couldn't help asking, "Does Colonel Kira know you have that program?"

Quark leered. "What do you think?"

"She would confiscate it and destroy it if she did."

The bartender shrugged.

Kaaron decided he wasn't going to learn anything from Quark about Ro. "I must return to duty. Thank you for the offer of the holoprogram, but I must decline." He pushed back the mug.

"You didn't finish your drink. There's no refunds, you know."

"Good bye, Quark."

Quark shrugged again. "So long, Lieutenant."

* * * *

Chapter 5

The station shrine was quiet at mid-afternoon. It was a perfect time and place, Kira thought, for a few moments of peaceful contemplation and mental relaxation. And she was in need of a little personal meditation time. She felt considerably less stressed when she came out of the shrine.

Constable Emyr was waiting on the Promenade outside. "Colonel."

"Constable. What's—" Kira remembered. "Oh. I'm late. You were going to give me a security update on our artistic gathering. I'm sorry, I find so much peace there, sometimes I lose track of time. You could have come inside and let me know you were waiting."

Emyn stared back at the open, inviting archway. "You know why I couldn't, Colonel."

"You've been inside the shrine before."

"Only to respond to crime," Emyr finished decisively. "Any other time, I don't belong there."

"I believe Ranjen Shayl would say anyone is welcome to come before the Prophets. But that has to be your choice." The two women fell into step as they crossed the Promenade. "Anything significant to report?"

"Not really. However, I'm rearranging the security assignments for today," Emyr quietly informed her superior.

Kira tensed. "What happened?"

"The Andorian complained, delicately, that Tarrn is distracting — she talks too much."

"Well, he's not the first to think so," the colonel admitted, relaxing. If that was the worst of their security issues....

"So I've switched Brilgar to the Andorian, and assigned Tarrn to the Cardassian."

Kira's mouth twitched. "I suppose by the end of the day we'll have the same complaint from Nilom."

"Perhaps. If so, tomorrow I'll assign Tarrn back to the night shift and have Federation security officers take over responsibility for the Cardassian."

Kira considered. "If I understood the minister correctly, he would rather we had Bajoran security for the artists, all of them, to reinforce this is a Bajoran event, not Federation."

"The minister doesn't have to balance the appearance of welcome cordiality with the emotional reality some of my deputies can't hide," the taller woman replied flatly.

"I wish the added security wasn't necessary," colonel said regretfully. "But in light of what's happening on Bajor, I can see why the ministers want it."

Emyn said firmly, "They'd be fools not to. I'm glad the minister sent a few extra deputies for the festival. The revised security assignment roster for the next few days will be on your desk by this evening, Colonel."

"Thank you, Constable," Kira replied automatically.

With a clipped nod, the tall redhead turned back to her office, crisscrossing through the afternoon crowd of the Promenade.

Not feeling especially ready to face the pile of work on her desk, Kira decided her duties also included a public appearance among their visitors. Minister Lizin would be arriving the next day; until then, she was the face and voice of the Bajoran government and people.

It was a good time to mingle; most of the artists due to arrive that day, already had. Wandering through the crowd, Kira exchanged greetings with a number of acquaintances and personnel. She made a point of pausing at each of the displays, staying long enough to observe each artist as they demonstrated their particular style and significance, and trying to come up with some perceptive comment or question that didn't sound either pretentious or trite, or worse, ignorant. Kira couldn't help regretting, not for the first time, her own lack of artistic talent. If the old *d'jarras* system had still been in place, she was sure some would have questioned her parentage.

A human woman worked with sand, slowly and carefully trickling small colored grains through her fingers to build patterns, while another human, tattooed across one side of his face, played an instrument similar to a *t'fan*, providing both inspiration and a certain serenity. She could hear the woman murmuring under her

breath, so didn't interrupt.

A Romulan sculptor, government-sponsored if she recalled the minister's briefing materials, was carefully shaping metal into something suggesting soaring. The man's assistant explained the work had been inspired by the Ralhanan Canyons on Romulus, and the colors in the metal alloys were intended to suggest dawn. Kira watched for a few moments, decided she might find the work more impressive when it was closer to completion, and moved along.

An Andorian holophotographer was discussing a series of holos exploring ice on his home world. Standing in the midst of so many realistic views of cold, hearing the artist extol the majesty and invigoration of ice, Kira suddenly felt herself shivering.

Next was the Cardassian water sculptor. The woman had taken advantage of the ice holophotography display next to her for her own work. The large piece gave the impression of multiple streams of water melting off the ice to run down through representations of the seasons, ending in a steaming hot spring. The sound of running water was soothing. To Kira's surprise, Nilom seemed to be deep in quiet conversation with Tarrn, the Bajoran deputy. Maybe security and appearances were going to be less of a problem than Emyn anticipated.

Chirp.

"Kira here."

"Incoming message for you in Ops, Colonel."

She sighed. "On my way."

* * * *

Arriving at Ops, Lt. Kaoron quickly reviewed the updated reports from stellar cartography and the still-incomplete Gamma Quadrant sensor array. Some interesting data, but nothing so unusual or intriguing as to require his immediate dedicated attention. Instead, he took the opportunity to peruse everything in their data banks about the Maquis. Beginnings. Personnel. Locations. Activities. Connections. Destruction. He was already familiar with most of it.

Then specifics, as he intently reviewed the known biographical data and service record of Ro Laren. Born on Bajor, daughter of Ro Gale and Ro Talia, both deceased — one had been tortured to death by Cardassians, the other had died of illness and privation. No siblings. Childhood and adolescent years divided between Bajor and the Valo II refugee camps.

Attended Starfleet Academy, sponsored by Admiral Demora Sulu, who, like her father, was known to have argued vehemently in support of providing assistance to the Bajoran refugees during the occupation, and had sponsored a number of applicants in similar circumstances. Nothing exceptional in Ro's Academy record, good or bad, but there were a pair of minor reprimands and a reference in her personality profile that she tended toward willful independence and a quick temper.

A series of ship assignments, starting with the *Ramius* and ending with the *Wellington* — disciplinary infractions aboard each of them, finally leading to the Garon incident, court martial, and her imprisonment in the stockade on Jaros II. He skimmed past those details.

Approximately three years later, released and given a second chance aboard the *Enterprise*, for reasons unspecified — but apparently earning a commendation and the full support of Captain Jean-Luc Picard. Between Sulu and Picard, Ro obviously had the ability to impress superior officers, when she chose.

Two years later, after successfully completing Starfleet's elite Advanced Tactical Training school — at which she did very well — she abandoned her resurrected career and disappeared among the Maquis.

Where her fate had been unknown, until a day ago.

Unknown, at least, to Starfleet. Kaoron suspected certain Bajorans might know a great deal more about their countrywoman. His gaze strayed across Ops and up to the commanding officer's door.

* * * *

The message was from the Vulcan starship *T'Jan*, reporting their imminent arrival, and an artist named Syrlynor would be disembarking for the festival.

"Thank you, Captain," Kira acknowledged. "We'll prepare for your docking."

"T'Jan out."

Kira pursed her lips for a second, then stepped out into Ops. She immediately spotted the Federation science officer at his post. "Lt. Kaoron, the *T'Jan* is arriving with the Vulcan three-dimensional fractal artist Syrlynor. I'll have to greet our guest, of course, but I trust you won't mind escorting him to his quarters?"

For just a fraction of a second, he seemed to hesitate before replying, "Of course, Colonel."

They met the Vulcan artistic delegation at the docking port.

It was difficult to determine Syrlynor's age. He was of average height, and his physique was erect and unbowed. His hair was unusually light-colored for a Vulcan, as far as Kira could tell, a medium brown with perhaps a hint of red. His features were smooth and unlined. His dark penetrating eyes, however, suggested an awareness of the universe that came with age, experience, and observation.

Syrlynor was accompanied by several other Vulcans of varying but equally hard-to-pinpoint ages, presumably other artists, perhaps students or family members. On observation, they appeared to be responsible for transporting his luggage and a collection of carrying cases presumably housing some of his works of art.

"Syrlynor of Vulcan, welcome to Deep Space Nine and to Bajoran space," she began with words which had become routine in the past few days. "I'm Kira Nerys — Colonel Kira, after the Bajoran naming protocol — in command of this station."

"Thank you, Colonel." His tone was neutral, well-modulated, but uncomfortably distant.

"We're very pleased you've come to share your talent and artistic insight," she continued, "and we hope you'll also find enjoyment and common grounds for understanding in experiencing Bajoran arts with us."

"That is my hope as well," he responded coolly.

She didn't think she was making much of a positive impression, and decided to skip the rest of the platitudes.

"This is Lieutenant Kaoron, our science officer."

Syrlynor appraised the Starfleet officer for a long moment, his expression inscrutable. "Lieutenant," he finally said, his voice as devoid of emotion as his face.

"Syrlynor," Kaoron replied politely.

An awkward moment.

"I'm afraid I'm due back in Ops. Just a minor situation, but it does require my attention," Kira said. "Lt. Kaoron will show you all to your quarters."

Kira beat a hasty retreat, feeling rather foolish, but hoping Kaoron would make a better connection with his own people than she seemed to have done.

* * * *

Bashir looked around the empty racquetball court. There were a few more scuffs on the walls and floor from other players' games, but otherwise the court was unchanged from when he and Miles had last played. It brought back a lot of memories, of matches with Chief O'Brien, shared laughter and conversations, friendly competition. Today, he just wanted a solitary refuge, and time to think. It had been a long time since he'd played; surely no one would think to look for him here unless there was an emergency.

Bashir bounced the ball off the floor, catching it a few times experimentally before serving against the wall.

At an unexpected noise behind him, he spun and the ball went wild.

Dr. K'Pak stood in the entry, wearing racquetball attire and carrying a racquet. She caught the ball in the air as it flew toward her abdomen. "Dr. Bashir. My apologies. I did not mean to intrude on your game."

"No, I'm sorry," he scrambled. "I should have sealed the door." He gestured at the court. "I haven't played in over two years, I think it's been. I guess I forgot court etiquette."

K'Pak scanned the court. "Knowing your eidetic memory, I find it difficult to conceive of you forgetting anything about this sport."

"Well, what Chief O'Brien built here is a little ... off-standard."

"Indeed. But eminently playable."

"Yes." An awkward moment, then he asked, "Are you here for a game?"

She nodded. "I am expecting Alex Monrow."

"Is she a good player?"

"Adequate. Not in your league however," was the Vulcan's calm assessment. She tossed the ball back to him. "I am familiar with your career at the medical academy, athletic as well as medical. As I recall, you won the sector finals your senior year."

"Our team did," he clarified. "Although I must admit I did win the final match that gave us the championship."

"I have a brother currently at Starfleet Medical Academy. Apparently the match has become somewhat legendary," K'Pak informed him. "Are you expecting an opponent?"

"No," he admitted. "Just ... touch of nostalgia maybe. Haven't played in so long, thought I'd see if I still could."

"Then, as Monrow appears to be late, perhaps we could ... indulge ourselves?"

"Uh...." There seemed no courteous way around it, and he could beg off as soon as Monrow showed up. "As long as you make allowances for my not having played for so long...."

Over two hours later, Bashir stood in his shower, letting hot water wash away the tension of the match and soothe out-of-shape muscles while he tried to think.

For all that the Vulcan was more athletic and in better shape than he was, he'd managed to win, with the benefit of his genetically-enhanced physique. But he knew he'd feel it in the morning.

Monrow had never appeared, but that didn't really surprise Bashir. He had just talked with her a short time before, passing along the news she was permanently assigned to the station. She hadn't mentioned anything about meeting K'Pak afterward. True, she could easily have forgotten. Suspiciously, though, he couldn't help wondering if there had really been a match planned between the two doctors, or if it had been an excuse by

K'Pak to keep him under surveillance. If he turned around fast enough, would he see someone in the corridor behind him, just by chance going his direction?

K'Pak knew he had played racquetball at the academy, and that his team had won the sector championships — hardly common knowledge outside of those who'd been at the academy at the time, despite her remark about a brother. She was familiar with his athletic as well as his academic achievements. Had he talked so much about his background, or was it evidence she had investigated him in advance, perhaps under orders?

Bashir stepped out of the shower and reached for a towel. Meeting his own grim reflection in the mirror, he realized he desperately wanted K'Pak gone.

He had some friends at Starfleet Medical. Maybe he could talk to one of them. Perhaps K'Pak could be reassigned to another post, or promoted to her own medical command. All things considered, she had probably earned it, if not for his questions about Section—

Or would that be a mistake? What if K'Pak wasn't the one? What if promoting her off his station didn't get rid of the Section mole? Or potentially worse, what if whoever he contacted at Starfleet Medical worked with them too? Or was being monitored by Section? What if a request for K'Pak's transfer just tipped them off he'd figured out they were watching him?

And why, he thought with a flash of resentment, should she be rewarded with a promotion, maybe essentially putting the entire medical staff of a station or starship under the direct command of Section 31? Let Section promote their own if they felt she'd earned it!

But if she wasn't....

Would it be better to keep K'Pak here, and monitor her closely — figure out for sure if it was her, and if it was, keep an eye on the one who was there to keep an eye on him? Make sure she had no chance to spread Section's tentacles among another crew who wouldn't know what she was? And who knew if Section might send somebody to replace her, who he wouldn't recognize? After all, sometimes, as the expression went, better the devil you know than the one you don't.

And too, there was the other old saying about keeping your friends close and your enemies closer....

It was a nightmare. And he was going to have nightmares about it. It would eat him up.

But he wasn't sure he had a choice.

* * * *

"Colonel Kira."

Kira glanced up at the precisely modulated voice. Syrylnor, the Vulcan fractal artist, stood at the doorway of her office.

"Syrylnor." She pasted on a smile. "Welcome. Please come in. What can I do for you? Would you like a tour of Ops?"

"I regret I must request other accommodations."

Taken aback, Kira asked, "Oh? Is there something wrong with your quarters? I'll have our chief—"

"The quarters are adequate, except for their proximity to the Romulan delegation."

"I beg your pardon?"

"The quarters you have assigned me are too close to the Romulan delegation."

"Has there been an incident?" she pressed, confused.

"No."

"Too much noise? Different internal clocks?"

"I do not wish to be lodged next to the Romulans," he repeated firmly. "I would not expect a change of quarters to be such a difficult matter."

"That sounds ... rather vehement, and could be taken as an insult," she said slowly. "Considering one of the purposes of this festival is to build better relations and understanding among species, and that the Romulans have become allies to the Federation—"

"The Romulans may be allies to the Federation, at this moment, but in my observation, we would not be wise to trust them," he replied with a curious chill in his voice. "And I would prefer not to be lodged next to them."

"I see." A beat. "Of course. We'll take care of that right away."

"Thank you, Colonel." A clipped nod, and Syrlynor about-faced without further remarks.

So, she considered, was it plain old-fashioned distaste for a former enemy motivating the Vulcan? It occurred to her it might have been a mistake to have Kaoron escort Syrlynor to his quarters, maybe even something of an insult. Kira had found some Vulcans could cling to their claim of being purely logical beings to the point of absurdity, and, yes, even pride, but generally found the species to be less antagonistic toward other races than most, although frequently more arrogant.

Of course, she reminded herself, she had dealt primarily with Vulcans in Starfleet or Federation service — those who deliberately sought a career bringing them regularly into contact with alien species and cultures. Syrlynor was a civilian, an artist. Perhaps he wasn't used to dealing with the emotional universe beyond his homeworld. Perhaps he deliberately avoided it.

Or maybe, she thought, intrigued, there was a more personal rivalry at work.

Maybe she needed to broaden her expectations of what a Vulcan could be.

* * * *

Chapter 6

"This thing is going swimmingly," Endar noted with pride, looking around at the mixture of races at the artists' reception, and the pleasantly animated conversations going on. He saw no frowns, only smiles and interested expressions.

Vic's lounge had been turned into a reception hall for the evening. On stage, a quartet was playing something understated and relaxing. The holographic host was taking a break from singing for the evening, to accommodate mingling at the party. Several sculptures and ornamental panels had been artistically scattered about, dividing chairs and tables and sofas to create private viewing space and cozy conversation nooks. An assortment of floral arrangements graced the room with delicate perfume and color. The double buffet line carried a wide variety of foods from every world represented at the gathering. Quark himself was overseeing the beverages, and no doubt, Endar thought, taking the opportunity to plug his own establishment and holosuites.

So what. As long as the guests are happy, he thought. And that meant the colonel would have nothing to upbraid him for. And that meant Ezri would be able to relax.

And he actually felt quite at ease, despite the crowd of strangers.

Alden took another sip of synthetic scotch. Time to mingle....

He spotted a slim, older Bajoran man in simple clerical robes, blue trimmed with a shade of purple, contemplating a holopicture on the wall, and approached him.

"Ah, Vedek Nane, I presume?"

The Bajoran monk smiled serenely. "I am. And you are?"

"Lt. Commander Alden. I've only been here a few months." He gestured about the room. "This is an amazing gathering of talent. Frankly, I'm awed. I can barely choose a pair of pants and a shirt that go together. If it weren't for uniforms I'd be mismatched in every culture."

The vedek chuckled genially. "Oh, surely not every culture, Commander — I understand the Vorta are all but colorblind!"

An image of a day from his time aboard *Armistead* seared the back of his eyelids. "But they bruise in spectacular colors," he muttered.

"What was that?"

He shook the thought away. "Oh, nothing really. Just ... the Vorta, the war, memories. Not something to think about tonight," he continued with forced heartiness. "I must admit, I find myself wondering, when artists such as yourself gather at events like these, does it feed and encourage creativity, or do you feel like you need to hoard your ideas so no one else uses them first?"

"That's an individual thing," Nane replied thoughtfully. "I'm sure there are some who feel a sense of rivalry. For me, as a teacher, I find sharing ideas enriches them, and helping my students aids in my own creativity. But when it is time to work, I prefer to be alone and focused."

"That makes sense."

"Are you considering taking up an art form, Commander?"

"Me? No, no, I'd rather appreciate art than do it. I'm afraid I'd give the term a bad name!" He spotted an anxious-looking Bajoran woman hovering nearby. "It appears this young lady would like your attention, Vedek."

"One of my students, Wani Korena. Korena, this is Lt. Commander Alden."

"Commander." She nodded nervously, keeping her gaze on Nane.

Endar smiled politely, but recognized the girl wanted the vedek's time privately. "A pleasure to meet you, Ms. Wani. Now I'm sorry to have to run, but there are some things I need to check on," he quickly prevaricated. "If you'll excuse me. I hope you enjoy the evening, both of you."

He stepped away, pausing to study a floral arrangement of Bajoran vines and blossoms. It kept him close enough to hear, although he couldn't have explained why he wanted to know what they were saying. *Just making sure there's nothing wrong*, he told himself.

"Endar—"

"Shh," he quickly shushed Nog.

The Ferengi stared back, puzzled, watching as Endar picked up a fallen petal lying beneath one of the flowers, peering at it as intently as if he'd arranged the blooms himself, and stashed the stray petal away up his sleeve.

"Vedek Nane?" the girl began.

The spry, slender Bajoran studied the face of his young student. "Yes, Korena?"

"I want to talk to you."

He smiled. "You seem to be doing so, my child."

"I would like to stay aboard the Emissary's station, for a time." The words rushed out. "I feel it's important for me, for my *pagh*. I want to walk where he walked, play the Emissary's game where he played it, see the stars as he saw them, watch the gates of the Celestial Temple open and close as he watched them...."

"Truly, my child?" He searched her expression.

"I want to learn more about myself, and I think I can best learn it here. With your consent...?"

"I couldn't leave you here alone — how would I explain that to your parents?"

Her expression fell.

Nane spotted someone in the crowd. "Come. I may know someone who can watch over you."

They walked off.

Endar finally turned to Nog, who was watching the two Bajorans.

"I bet I know who she'd like to have watching over her!" Nog muttered.

Endar just chuckled. "Were you listening in on a private conversation?"

Nog grinned back. "No more than you were, Commander!"

"Yeah, but I don't have Ferengi ears." He glanced around again. "Everything looks good. I think I've done enough hosting. Vic's around here somewhere, let's go find him...."

* * * *

Across the lounge, Vedek Nane approached Colonel Kira, with Wani tagging behind him. The Bajoran officer had set aside her uniform for the evening, choosing a comfortable and very becoming civilian outfit of several layers of sheer colored fabric overlaying a simple russet-colored gown.

"Colonel," he greeted her.

"Vedek Nane." Her face wreathed in smiles, Kira held out her hands to welcome him. "It's so good to see you. I'm sorry I wasn't able to spend more time with you today—"

"I understand completely, Nerys," he assured her, switching immediately to more personal mode. "And I know you've obligations with this reception, so I won't distract you long — but I will want to talk with you tomorrow."

"Certainly, Vedek. Nothing troubling you, I hope?"

Still holding one of her hands, Nane reached for the hand of the student beside him. "Wani Korena wishes to spend some time on the station. I am hopeful I will be able to assure her parents that I have left her in good care." He joined their hands.

Kira nodded at her, smiling graciously. "Of course. You're welcome here, Korena, for as long as you choose to stay. Any student of Vedek Nane is welcome."

The girl smiled back a little hesitantly, obviously tongue-tied.

"We'll discuss arrangements tomorrow, Korena," Nane instructed. "Go, enjoy the party."

Grinning in elation, Wani vanished into the crowd — but Kira was quick to note Ensign Kuhlman waiting for her at the buffet line.

"We have left students in each other's care before, Nerys. I trust this one will be as welcome to you as Ziyal was to me."

"I'm sure she will be." *And a lot safer than Ziyal was, without Dukat for her father, and no war in progress, she thought. Although it appears I may have to keep an eye on our young officers!*

* * * *

It was expected the senior staff and officers, Bajoran and Starfleet, would attend the evening reception, along with as many of the other social and "mingling" events that would occur as possible, over the next week or so. From several years spent growing up in various embassies and ambassadorial residences, the social amenities were second nature to Lt. Kaoron; he had more than enough experience at this type of gathering to feel quite at ease moving among the clusters of personnel, artists, and other visitors to the station. He was able to appreciate and participate in both intense artistic discussions and lighter, less consequential chit-chat.

In the midst of an animated comparison of several holo-artists, Kaoron had a sudden conviction he was being stared at.

"Will you excuse me?" he murmured, stepping away as the Andorian holophotographer continued to expound on the themes behind his own latest endeavors to the fascinated viewers.

Looking around, Kaoron at first could detect no-one overtly watching him. Then he caught a glimpse of a member of the Vulcan delegation to the arts festival — specifically, Syrylnor. There was something cold in the man's eyes.

Kaoron formally and deliberately nodded in the other man's direction. The artist quickly averted his eyes as if he hadn't noticed, and turned away.

Feeling unexpectedly rebuffed, Kaoron considered approaching the delegation. However, by the time he made his way through the crowd to reach the Vulcan guests, Syrylnor had disappeared. Looking around the chamber, he was not to be seen.

"It is Syrylnor's custom both to retire early and to rise early," one of the younger Vulcans responded to his polite query. The slightest shift in his gaze revealed even the student was puzzled at the abrupt departure. "And it has been a lengthy trip."

Kaoron politely agreed with the observation, then changed the subject. But over the remainder of the evening, he kept both eyes and ears open.

* * * *

Nog tracked down Kuhlman later at the reception. As he'd expected, the handsome young human still had a girl on his arm — Wani, the Bajoran who'd nearly brained him with a foul ball, and who seemed to be hovering quite protectively over the young human. From the look on the ensign's face, Nog reconsidered joining them — Kuhlman looked like he wanted to find a private corner with just his companion — but by then Wani had seen him as well.

"Hello, Nog!" Her dark eyes shown with excitement. "Have you heard? I'm staying here!"

Taken aback, he lisped, "Here? You are?"

"Yes! You and David will have to teach me all about baseball — and I've already promised not to try to ...

katterbean him again?"

"It's just 'bean'," Kuhlman corrected good-naturedly, accepting that Nog was joining them.

"And," she continued excitedly, "Vedek Nane has talked to Colonel Kira, and she's agreed to be my mentor here! Me! With Kira Nerys!"

Kuhlman's eyes widened at the image of his commanding officer as guardian of the attractive Bajoran girl. "Uh, she's not an artist ... is she?" he appealed to Nog.

Nog almost chuckled, imagining how the colonel might react at hearing she was going to be personally overseeing Wani while she was on the station, and wondering if the girl expected her to be an instructor — or how she would react if Kuhlman and the young Bajoran became involved.

"No," he admitted. "Kira's family *d'jarra* was the arts, but she's not an artist."

"It doesn't matter that she's not an artist or a teacher!" Wani said earnestly. "I'll learn so much just being here with her! She worked with the Emissary for so many years! One of the prylars in my village said the Prophets sent her to the station to be his right hand. Without Colonel Kira, the Emissary wouldn't have understood his role, because she was the vessel of the Prophets to guide him!"

Nog's eyes nearly bugged out.

"And she led the resistance against the Dominion, here and on Cardassia. She created the underground here on the station, and on Cardassia she taught them how to fight as we did during the Occupation. Without her leadership and training, the Cardassians would never have revolted, and the Federation would never have won the war."

Kuhlman stared in fascination at this single-handed attribution of victory.

The girl's voice grew increasingly reverent. "And everyone knows she was the one who saved Li Nalas. We all heard how she flew to that prison camp, against orders, and smuggled a basket of weapons into the camp. Then she and Li single-handedly attacked the guards and led the survivors to their ship. When Li was shot, she dragged him back to safety herself...."

"That's not exactly how I heard the story—" Nog started to say.

"Korena!" a voice called.

"Veeka! Come! I have to tell her!" She scurried off to join her friend.

"I wonder if Chief O'Brien realizes he wasn't even there?" Nog muttered.

"Come on!" Kuhlman muttered back, and hurried after the young woman.

Nog followed.

None of them had noticed the trio of station officers on the other side of the floor-to-ceiling stained glass panel.

"Well, well," Bashir said lightly, "I didn't realize just how big a hero we had in our midst, did you, Ezri?"

"Should we be asking for her autograph, or bowing homage?" the Trill came back impishly. "It's a good thing she was here to save the Federation from the Dominion."

"Indeed! Without the vessel of the Prophets, where would we be?"

"You both know better than that!" Kira couldn't help shifting uncomfortably. "Mentoring her? I thought I was just keeping an eye on her — I'm going to have to explain some things to that girl, and then I'm going to find

out who's been fabricating my life story...."

"Nerys," Dax reproved, "remember how you complained about being here on the station and nobody on Bajor listening to you? I'd say Bajorans are hearing plenty!"

"But that's not what I'm saying!"

"If this is the image your people have of you, boldly facing down the Cardassian horde beside Li Nalas himself, back to back, weapons firing while you wipe out whole Cardassian brigades and save entire planets, just think how your people will react when they see you in person!"

"That's not the way it happened and you know it!" she protested.

"Don't disillusion her too quickly, Nerys," Bashir added more quietly, his entire attitude shifting.

"But it's not the truth!"

"I know," he acknowledged. "But some truths are more important than others. Don't hit her too hard with it, until she's ready to deal with it." He stared past them both. "If you'll excuse me...."

Kira and Dax looked at each other as Bashir walked away.

* * * *

He had spotted the Vulcan doctor with a glass of something orange, talking with one of the new arrivals among the Vulcan artistic delegation. Bashir waited a few minutes until she moved away and was, for the moment, alone, before approaching her.

"Dr. K'Pak."

"Dr. Bashir."

"The reception is quite a success, it appears," he remarked.

"Indeed. It is more cordial than I expected it to be," she noted. "With civilian artists of so many worlds, some involved in disputes, I had concerns personal rivalries and planetary arguments would carry over into their contacts here."

"Yes, I had concerns on that score myself." He took a drink from his glass. "I was actually hoping to discuss another matter with you, K'Pak, if you have a few moments."

"Certainly. What is it?"

"There are quite a number of new starships being commissioned in the next few months, replacements for vessels we lost in the war." He paused, steeling himself to continue, and keep his words casual. "They'll need crews. Experienced people. If you're interested, I'd like to recommend you for one of them. As chief medical officer."

Was that a change in her expression? Was it eagerness, or suspicion, or merely thoughtfulness?

"You've definitely proven yourself, K'Pak. I know you're more than capable. If you're interested."

"I would indeed be interested in such a posting," she acknowledged. "I believe it would be an appropriate use of the skills and experience I have gained. With your reputation and accomplishments, a recommendation from you would indeed be an honor. I would appreciate it."

He smiled. "I'll contact Starfleet Medical tomorrow. I'm not sure how rapidly it can be accomplished, but under the current circumstances, I would expect in a few months you'll have your own ship."

But that night, he lay awake, unable to sleep and staring up at the ceiling, trying not to disturb Ezri slumbering beside him.

* * * *

Chapter 7

From Kira's observations the next morning, the reception had been a success. That was one less thing to worry about — two, actually, she thought wryly. The reception had been successfully accomplished, and Alden hadn't incited an interstellar incident in the process. He had in fact been a near-perfect host and diplomat, from her observations and comments she'd overheard.

There was of course the matter of making arrangements for Vedek Nane's student to remain on the station, but she had no doubt Kuhlman would be willing to take on the responsibility for both accommodations and introducing her around.

"Hello, Colonel," she heard a familiar honeyed tone behind her as she passed the shrine.

"Hello, Quark," she replied drily. After the late night, his garish coat and headpiece almost hurt her eyes. "If you're looking for payment for catering the reception last night, you know you have to submit an invoice to the Bajoran government. And no, I'm not interested in any special accommodations toward the bill."

"Now, Kira, what makes you think—"

She turned a reproving look on him.

"All right, all right." He held up his palms in traditional Ferengi surrender, then sidled closer. "I hear there's news about the Ilvian riots."

"News? How would you know if there's news?"

"Well, I do have a few connections...", he began modestly.

Kira sighed, hoping Quark wasn't about to play games, any more than usual, anyway. "What have you heard?" she asked, resigned.

"I heard," he said, leaning close, "that they've arrested one of the possible instigators of the riots." He rocked back on his heels.

"And?" she prompted.

"He swears he wasn't involved, of course."

"And?" she repeated more emphatically.

"It turns out the man's a brother to one of Vedek Ungtae's monks."

Kira raised her eyebrows in shock.

Looking around as if to be sure no one was listening, he dropped his voice even more. "Considering who was responsible for the attempted theft of the Orb last month, some people think this might be ... more than just coincidence. Too many fingers pointing back to the same order could mean the one who leads them is ... corrupt."

She caught her breath incredulously. "Vedek Ungtae?"

He shrugged, an insinuating expression on his sharp features. "He denies it, of course. But whether others

believe it...."

"Ungtae...", she repeated, aghast, running the fingers of one hand through her hair distractedly.

"Some people are pointing out he managed to keep his monastery intact and relatively prosperous during the occupation. Even when he was hiding members of the resistance and providing food and medicine to the people," Quark continued. "They wonder how he got his hands on all those supplies, and if maybe he might have been paying to keep the Cardassians out ... or worse."

"Ungtae, a collaborator? No, I can't believe that!"

"They're asking what kind of contacts he might have made then. What he might owe those people now."

"A rumor like this could destroy his chance to become kai," she said slowly.

"There are whispers some of the other vedeks are already privately urging him to withdraw his name from consideration."

She was too stunned to reply.

"I'd be happy to share anything else I hear," he added knowingly. "Just come to the bar sometime. After hours, maybe, if you'd prefer to keep our discussions more confidential ... or personal...."

The colonel didn't even respond to the provocative invitation. After watching her for a moment, the Ferengi shrugged again. Running his gaze over the small crowd in the Promenade, he headed back to his bar.

She couldn't help remembering the impact of rumors on the previous kai election, even though Bareil, the vedek under suspicion, had been innocent, and could have proved it. Instead, he had deliberately stepped aside to protect the reputation of their previous kai, the beloved Opaka. A flash of old pain, grief, and anger flared up as she remembered those events, and what had come of them.

Kira turned toward the shrine entrance. Was it coincidence that she stood here? Her feet began to move of their own volition, and she walked inside.

* * * *

Kira obviously didn't remember calling Bashir when he showed up at her office. She was sitting at her desk and holding Captain Sisko's baseball between her cupped hands, staring at it as if it were some kind of oracle crystal.

"Kira?" he interrupted her thoughts.

"Ahh, doctor." She collected herself and set aside the baseball, then turned her attention to the PADD on her desk. "Please sit down. We received another personnel transfer order from Starfleet command."

"Oh?" He sat down.

"It appears Dr. K'Pak is being transferred."

"Really...." He leaned back in his chair. So the matter had been taken out of his hands.

Kira studied him quizzically. "Is that going to be a problem?"

"Oh, no, no problem.... Just a bit ... unexpected." But maybe it shouldn't have been.

"I suppose it was too much to hope for, that we'd be able to keep our temporary staff, now you're back," the colonel said, contemplatively. "I'm surprised, though, that we're keeping Monrow and losing K'Pak."

"Where's K'Pak being assigned?"

Kira checked the PADD. "There are several new starships being commissioned over the next few months, at Utopia Planitia. Apparently she's being assigned to one of them, as chief medical officer." She handed it to Bashir.

Bashir studied it for a long moment, absorbing the words confirming the suggestion he'd made just the night before, while looking for clues to what might lay behind the transfer and its timing.

He looked up to see the faraway expression in his superior's sharp brown eyes.

"Nerys, you look as troubled as I am," he said impulsively. "I know mine is Section 31, and whether K'Pak has been their agent in my department. I don't imagine that's yours?"

Kira came back with a guilty start. "No, I'm afraid my troubles are on Bajor." She sighed. "Complications. Riots. Rumors. I'm starting to wonder if we'll ever elect a new kai. Or if it'll be in time...."

"In time for what?"

"To save Bajor."

Bashir lowered his gaze. "I suppose it seems petty, me worrying who might be spying on me, when your home is in such turmoil."

"No," she replied thoughtfully. "It's not petty. Issues with Section 31 involve the whole Federation. And even though Bajor isn't part of the Federation yet, that means it involves my world too. As well as this station that's home to us both."

He couldn't help sighing. "A home where we may not be able to trust the people next to us."

She looked at him squarely. "Let's work together to find out who our friends are, and who we *can* trust."

"It's a deal."

* * * *

Freed of social duties, and having no desire to run into Syrlynor again, Lt. Kaoron returned to his quarters, intending to take advantage of the time to settle down with some favorite poetry.

There was a sound, so low perhaps only the sharp ears of a Vulcan or a Ferengi would have picked it up. He paused and looked around sharply. A woman stood in the door to his bathroom, studying him with a poor attempt at impassiveness.

"Lieutenant Kaoron."

Kaoron almost jumped to his feet, but he saw her tense and realized if he moved too fast, she would either be gone or pull a weapon on him. Instead, he eased back into his chair and simply surveyed the Bajoran — average height, dark hair hanging just below her jaw, and dark haunted eyes, a little on the thin side. Simple civilian clothing, subdued colors, nothing resembling a uniform, but she still wore the earring which had earned her a reprimand aboard the *Wellington*. She looked older, worn-down, and weary, as though she'd been through hell.

And maybe, to have survived a Dominion massacre, she had been.

"Ro Laren," he acknowledged. "It has been a long time."

"Since you saw me yesterday? Not so long."

"Ah." He tilted his head a little. "You have thorough contacts here. Or did the Colonel herself inform you?"

"The Colonel?" Ro shook her head. "We try to stay away from official notice, those few of us who survived."

"Quark, then? Or do you monitor computer databank use?"

"Do you really think I'd admit it to you?"

Kaaron accepted she wasn't about to reveal her informant. "I will assume you also have no intention of informing me how you entered my quarters without my permission and without triggering any internal security systems."

She only smiled briefly; the expression didn't rise to her eyes.

"Very well, then. What does the Maquis want with me?" he asked without preamble, steepling his hands and letting his forefingers tap against each other.

"The Maquis no longer exist."

"If that is your assertion. Then what do *you* want with me?"

"To find out what *you* want with *me*. And what you're going to do about knowing I'm alive."

He considered for a second. "I will have to report I have spotted a renegade Starfleet officer."

"Oh, now that's a big surprise!" Ro replied sarcastically. "You have to submit a report. Just like you did at Garon II."

"Your impetuous actions, in violation of direct orders, embarrassed Starfleet Command and resulted in the deaths of eight members of our away team," he said emphatically. "It very nearly resulted in our first officer's death as well."

"And yours and mine too," she said drily. "I know what happened, I was there."

They surveyed each other.

"You never explained your actions."

"You never asked me to," she shot back, taking a single step into the room. "You just filed your damn report putting the blame on me. The commander was in no condition to refute it, the captain accepted it without question, Starfleet rubber-stamped it, and I was on the way to the stockade!"

"My report contained the only logical explanation for what happened," he refuted.

"Was it?"

"You offered no other scenario to explain your violation of orders and the deaths of eight Starfleet personnel."

"Everybody had already made up their minds. I wasn't going to beg for anything then and I'm not going to beg now."

"Beg for what?"

Her lips tight together, Ro just stared at him.

An eyebrow lifted. "Very well. Do you now offer another explanation for what happened?"

After a second, she laughed, a sharp bitter sound. She crossed her arms before her chest, studying him.

"You still want to hear, don't you?" she asked. "You made up your mind what happened ten years ago, but you still want to hear it from me. Tell me, Kaoron, is it vanity or curiosity?"

"Explain your query," he replied restively.

"Do you just want me to confirm your Vulcan logic, or has your curiosity been getting the better of you for ten years?"

They looked at each other for long seconds, then she turned away as if she couldn't bear to look at him anymore. She raised a hand to catch the doorframe and rested her forehead against it. With a heavy sigh, she said, "I spent years in the stockade for that report. Your vanity and your curiosity will both have to stay unsatisfied."

"Did silence satisfy your pride or lighten the chip on your shoulder, after Garon II?"

Silence remained the only answer.

"I wondered how you came to be released and to serve aboard the *Enterprise*," he probed after a few moments. "Your service record is somewhat lacking in explanations."

She slowly lifted her face to him again. "You don't think I deserved a second chance," she challenged.

"I don't know. Perhaps you can enlighten me."

It was another long moment before Ro said introspectively, "No one but Picard was ever willing to leave the past in the past, where I was concerned." Her tone softened. "He gave me another chance. He trusted me." For a second, her face contorted in pain. "Look what I did to that trust...."

"I have noted it is not easy to earn trust, but very easy to lose it," Kaoron said, trying to sound neutral in hopes of keeping her talking. He didn't expect an opportunity to summon security, or for her to remain if he did, but she was correct in one thing. Certain she intended him no harm, curiosity overwhelmed everything else — about what had really happened on Garon II, and how she had come to be aboard the *Enterprise*, and why she'd deserted to join the Maquis, and where she had been since their destruction.

"Sometimes," she said, "it's impossible to be true to every obligation you have."

He cocked an eyebrow again. "Then perhaps you should not have taken up the second obligation."

"I had no choice. It was an order, a mission. I thought I could do it. But once I was there, I realized it was wrong, and then I had no choice."

"There is always a choice."

"No, there isn't. Haven't you ever been in a situation where you realized no matter what you did, you were going to let down someone? But that there were greater causes that had to be served and you'd have to live with the consequences for the rest of your life?"

"You understand choices have consequences, and the duties we take on lay certain obligations upon us. We choose which obligations to accept, and which to reject, and must endure the consequences of those choices. It is still our choice," he chided.

"Conscience doesn't always give you an option."

"Nor does duty," he replied seriously.

She snorted derisively.

"As noted, I will have to report that I believe I have seen you."

"I expected as much," Ro replied, a layer of contempt in her tone.

"However," Kaoron continued thoughtfully, "if you return to Bajor, and do not come to this station again, there will be no opportunity for ... ramifications to your having been here."

"Is that a warning or your version of a favor?"

Now he shrugged. "I may not be the only Starfleet officer to have seen and identified you."

She flushed a little. "I assure you, none of you will see me again."

Both eyebrows lifted. "That's not exactly what I said," he reproved.

"That is all I can offer," she came back challengingly. "Because I don't intend to make promises I can't keep, not again. You do what you have to. And I'll do what I have to."

"And if our needs conflict?"

"Then we have to make choices. And endure the consequences." She walked back into his bathroom.

Kaoron bolted from his chair, but by the time he reached the bathroom door, the small chamber was empty, and Ro was gone. She had obviously transported away.

"Which suggests she has an accomplice to aid her presence here," he mused, followed by the unexpectedly relieved thought that at least she wasn't alone.

For a second he stared at himself in the mirror. A blended face looked back at him. Black straight hair, Starfleet regulation cut, framed a sharply planed face with sallow complexion, high cheekbones, thin mouth and a determined chin. Dark, deep-set eyes peered from under slanted dark brows, with the heavier forehead bones of his Romulan father.

Half of his physical heritage wasn't completely obvious unless one knew, but it flooded his veins. Curiosity, humor, and occasional anger revealed Romulan passions barely balanced by Vulcan control, but sometimes reigning supreme anyway.

The events of ten years ago replayed in his mind. The Garon mission. Ro had disobeyed orders, leading to disaster and an incident whose ramifications were still rippling through Starfleet. Eight Starfleet officers and crew died. Three more were injured, including himself. He'd made his report. And then.... Had he been wrong? Had other factors affected his perception of the situation? Emotions? His own physical condition at the time?

He could not undo the past, nor could reliving it change anything. And besides, he was certain he had not been wrong.

It would do no good to summon security at this point, he decided. He was sure there would be nothing of Ro or the Maquis for them to find.

* * * *

Chapter 8

On Bashir's return to the infirmary, K'Pak was the first person he ran into.

"Dr. K'Pak." He paused. "I understand you've received new orders."

The Vulcan physician nodded efficiently. "Yes. The orders were relayed to me. I am being assigned as chief medical officer to one of the new starships being built at Utopia Planitia."

"I guess I'm not the only one who realized you were ready for a promotion. It appears Admiral Ross already put in a good word for you."

"It has been nine point five years since I served under Admiral Ross, but we have maintained contact. He has frequently expressed the opinion I deserved such a post." A beat. "I believe this is with your blessing and recommendation as well. Thank you."

"It's a well-earned promotion, K'Pak, well-earned. But I'm sure I speak for everyone here when I say we'll be sorry to see you go." Bashir hoped she couldn't read through his expression. He all but bit his tongue to keep from blurting out his suspicions and questions.

"I will ... miss you and the staff here as well. It has been an honor to serve with you, Dr. Bashir. But we all must answer duty's call."

He found a tight smile. "I suppose after three years here, it was easy to forget we're all at the mercy of Starfleet, as to where we're assigned and how long we'll stay at any given post."

She nodded again. "Very true. But we all must follow orders. I understand I will be traveling to Utopia Planitia aboard the *Tecumseh*."

"Yes, so I've been informed."

"I believe they anticipate departure early tomorrow morning."

"Yes, so I heard.... Has anybody said anything about a farewell? I know things are a little hectic just now, but we can't let you go without saying good bye properly."

"Dr. Monrow has planned a brief gathering this evening. She stated it was the least she could do, as it appears she has essentially been assigned to take my place here."

"I'll be there."

He watched the Vulcan walk out of the infirmary for what might be the last time, then entered his office, feeling not the slightest bit of guilt, nor any expectation he would miss her.

* * * *

Her words still rang in his ears. *"You do what you have to do. And I'll do what I have to."*

Deliberately setting the memory aside, Kaoron reviewed the information he had ready to forward to Starfleet. He wasn't the most senior Starfleet officer on DS9, but he was the science officer, and he had certain responsibilities. He also had several private orders, in light of certain senior officials' concerns about the situation on Bajor and the chain of command on the station after Sisko's disappearance. It meant he provided regular reports to Starfleet Command, not always through station channels. None of those reports had been as difficult as this one.

"You do what you have to do...."

Kaoron filed his report as neutrally as possible, merely noting Ro's brief presence on the station and adding that Colonel Kira intended to follow up appropriately with Bajoran security.

Was Kira aware of his private reports? Would she intercept it? Would he be called on the carpet for it?

He hadn't been before. Obviously not this time either.

Less than fifteen minutes later, after he'd barely settled down with a volume of one of his favorite poets,

Kaoron had a surprising communiqué from Admiral Ross, the Starfleet senior officer who'd been so prominent in the final phases of the Dominion war. He hadn't expected to receive anything beyond a routine acknowledgment — certainly not a response from an officer at that level, and so immediate.

"Lieutenant."

"Admiral."

"I just reviewed your report on the possibility of Bajor harboring Maquis survivors."

His dark brows lifted. "I believe I merely identified one possible Starfleet deserter who may have briefly been aboard the station, although I cannot be certain without further evidence. I will of course follow up, should more information become available."

"I trust you will."

"It may not be significant," Kaoron felt a need to add. "A brief glimpse of a Bajoran, from a distance, may be a mistaken identification. We may be jumping to further conclusions, if this was who I believe it was, to assume Bajor is deliberately harboring fugitives."

"Considering your previous service with Ro, I expect your identification is accurate — and to be honest, it is not a surprise to us. As to Bajor's role, well, we've had suspicions for some time, based on other information. I appreciate the report, Lieutenant," Admiral Ross replied decisively. "We may not be able to act upon it, under the current political circumstances, but we'll certainly forward it appropriately."

"I understand, Admiral."

The admiral paused at his tone. "You seem a bit ... troubled, Lieutenant."

"I ... am not used to ... what would be deemed going behind my commanding officer's back," he admitted a portion of the truth.

Ross smiled a little indulgently. "Off the record, Lieutenant?"

"Certainly, Admiral, if you wish."

"Colonel Kira is one hell of an officer. But she had a reputation, when we first took over administration of Deep Space Nine, for trying to go over Benjamin Sisko's head whenever she disagreed with him. For those of us who had to deal with her then, it's merely ... poetic justice."

* * * *

Kira stopped at the security office that morning on her way to Ops. Emyr was already at her desk, reviewing daily assignments.

"Constable."

"Colonel."

"Any problems since yesterday?"

Emyr flicked a quick glance from her gray eyes. "No," she replied neutrally.

Kira dropped into the chair opposite the constable. "Any word from Che'Sinn or the ministers?"

"Nothing more about Ilvia, beyond what Quark has no doubt brayed to every sentient being on this station who came near his bar," was the dry response.

Kira leaned back and stared up at the ceiling. "It's hard to believe Vedek Ungtae could be behind the riot," she admitted, not realizing how desperate she sounded until she heard her own voice.

"I don't believe he is," Emyr replied simply.

The colonel looked at her intently. "You don't?"

"No."

"Why?"

"I saw his reaction when he learned one of his prylars was part of the plot to steal an Orb. Unless he has changed at his core, I believe he would have no part of a riot or a theft."

Kira found Emyr's opinion strangely comforting, but had to say, "He doesn't seem to think as well of you."

The other woman shrugged. "Right now, he has greater concerns on his mind than me."

"After all the good he and his order did during the occupation," Kira burst out, "some of our people are so quick to believe the worst of him, just because of something a relative of one of his monks might have done — something he may know nothing about...."

Emyr froze, her face empty of emotion. "People can judge others on very little evidence."

Kira flushed, feeling irrationally guilty. "Hopefully when they think about it, they'll keep an open mind."

The constable looked skeptical, but she didn't object.

The colonel took a deep breath. "I'd better get to Ops...."

* * * *

Dr. Bashir said his formal farewells to Dr. K'Pak, as one chief medical officer to another. Though she had been on the station for several years, the send-off was restrained — she was, after all, a Vulcan, and displays of great emotion would have been distasteful to her. It made it easier for the human.

After seeing the Vulcan physician off, he sought a convenient location to watch the *Tecumseh's* departure. On some level, it felt as though he would not be sure she was gone until he had seen her ship disappear.

Half an hour later, Dax found him still standing at the window port, when the ship was long gone.

"Hello, Julian," she greeted.

"Hello, Ezri."

She looked out the window port. "Anything exciting?"

"No. Blessedly, no."

With the seemingly enhanced senses of the last few days, he felt her eyes on him. He wondered if she was trying to read his mind, or just his expression and body language. Either way, he discovered he couldn't bring himself to look away from the stars.

"What's on your mind, Julian?" she asked. "Talk to me."

The pleading in her voice made him feel guilty; she'd asked that question so many times since he'd returned from Cardassia. The answers he'd given her hadn't always been the truth. After a moment, he reluctantly admitted, "I find myself remembering Sloan."

"Sloan?" she repeated, taken aback. "Why Sloan?"

"You know about all the information on the Founders Disease vanishing from my files?"

"Yes."

"I can't help feeling...." He paused, unsure what to share, looking for the right words. "Sloan was my first brush with Section 31. He was the one who thought I might have become a traitor, after my time in the Dominion prison camp. He would have killed me if I failed his 'test' — and no doubt crafted some incontrovertible cover story to explain my tragic loss," he concluded fatalistically.

She shook her head, considering. "He wouldn't have killed you, not right away. You would have disappeared, of course, and been interrogated until he was sure he'd learned everything useful you might know. Probably in ways the Federation publicly disavows," she said with darkly absolute certainty. "Then I guess it would have been a question of whether to quietly dispose of you, or ... find some other use for you."

His smile was grim. "Mentally reprogrammed, perhaps. Given a chance to 'prove' myself with some redeeming suicide mission or other. Working for them, one way or the other. Just like he did when I proved innocent of treason."

"Sloan wasn't above that."

"Not if the Romulan conference was any indication. He was willing to throw anybody in the line of fire for the success of his mission."

"Including himself," she reminded him quietly.

"He had a way out. I didn't, if the Romulans decided I was guilty of espionage, after their interrogation. And Senator Cretak certainly didn't have a way out," he brooded.

"Sloan's dead."

"I first thought he was dead during the Romulan mission, until I had time to think about it and confronted Admiral Ross. Then Sloan appeared in my quarters again, almost ... mocking me with his survival, while sanctimoniously claiming what he did protected the ideals of people like me." He couldn't keep the loathing from his voice. "And then he showed up with the information about the Founders Disease."

"You had a body. I saw it. You confirmed it. Sloan is dead," Dax said emphatically.

"I know, I know...." Bashir shook his head. "But did I? Maybe I've just seen too many dead men come back from the grave."

"Only the ones you brought back," the lieutenant said, linking her arm through his and trying to interject a note of humor, dark as it was, to help his mood. Her hand massaging his forearm didn't help the tension in his muscles.

"So why does it feel as though, if I turned around fast enough, I'd see him standing behind me? Or if I walked into the infirmary at an unexpected time, I'd find him sitting at my desk?" He stared out into the starfield. "Somebody on this station was watching me. That's what made him decide I must be a traitor — and if not a traitor, I just might make an appropriate Section agent. Somebody here reported to him, or reported to somebody who reported to him. I don't know who that person was, or is."

Dax just let him talk.

"Am I being paranoid?" Bashir sighed. "K'Pak arrived not long before my first encounter with Sloan. She was at Starfleet Medical for a time. She served under Admiral Ross for a time — and I'll never be able to really trust him the same way again. Maybe it's unfair to K'Pak, but I keep wondering. Was she working for

Section? She could have modified the medical databanks. She could have accessed my personal logs. Was it her? I've never had any problem with her, never suspected her of anything underhanded, but now I'm so glad she's gone...."

"How many personnel have come and gone between then and now, Julian?" she reminded him.

"Between the revelation of my genetic enhancements and now, you mean. Assuming my suspicions are correct that Sloan began investigating me then, preparing to make his move." His lips tightened angrily for a second before continuing. "Are they still investigating me ... monitoring my every move ... reviewing all I do? Are they looking for the chance to take me down? Just making sure I don't learn too much about things they don't want me to know? Making sure they know where I am the next time they decide to use me?" He laughed mirthlessly, looking haggard. "Am I going to be tied to Sloan and that damned Section 31 for the rest of my life?"

"You resent that you're questioning your own staff because of him. But Sloan is dead. You don't know when your medical records were tampered with — it might have been at the same time his body was removed. There's been no evidence of anything else being wrong."

"I know, but...."

"And from the sound of it," Dax reminded him, "anybody who worked with Sloan would have had a clean background. You would never have known they worked together."

"That's what worries me most —I may never know for certain who it was."

"Can you really live your life that way, distrusting everyone around you? Second-guessing everything you do for fear you're being watched or pursued by a dead man?"

"No, not easily," he admitted. "But I have to be alert to possibilities."

Dax nodded. "Alert, yes. But not to the point of living with paranoia. You could wind up thinking just like him. I wouldn't want that to happen to you." A beat. "Maybe we should talk about this more, maybe professionally. I can't change what happened, but maybe talking about it will help. I'm a counselor, you know."

Bashir stared moodily out into the distance. He finally turned away from the starry view, shifting so Ezri's hand had to drop from his arm. He leaned against the wall, his expression deadly serious. "I feel besieged here, Ezri. And I can't help feeling Section 31 isn't done with me yet...."