

"Arrivals, Departures, Omens"

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?"

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"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.

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"...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 waggled 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."

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