

"Arrivals, Departures, Omens"

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."

Emyr 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."

Emyr 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 Emyr anticipated.

Chirp.

"Kira here."

"Incoming message for you in Ops, Colonel."

She sighed. "On my way."

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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.

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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."

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

"Syrllynor," 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.

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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.

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"Colonel Kira."

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

her office.

"Syrlynor." 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.

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