

"Arrivals, Departures, Omens"

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...."

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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!*

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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, Syrlynor. 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.

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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 a 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.

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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.

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