

"Arrivals, Departures, Omens"

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 Syrylnor 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, steeping 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, Kaaron, 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](#)