

"Arrivals, Departures, Omens"

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. Emyn was already at her desk, reviewing daily assignments.

"Constable."

"Colonel."

"Any problems since yesterday?"

Eryn 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," Eryn 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 Eryn'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...."

Eryn 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...."

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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...."

THE END

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