

"The Ties That Bind"

Chapter 2

There was a buzz of excited conversation and tension at the central ops table when Kaoron arrived. He spotted Colonel Kira and Lieutenant Commander Alden, studiously managing to not quite look at each other, with Lieutenant Nog sitting between them. Constable Emyr stood beside the colonel, looking like she was thinking fast, with a pair of her deputies flanking her. The higher-ranking Bajoran station officers were also present, along with several of the engineering operations staff.

Kaoron quietly took his position at the science table, observing the discussion.

"I am assured by Minister Jolorn this is a positive step for Bajor and for the station," Kira continued with whatever she was saying. Her tone suggested she didn't entirely believe it herself. "If Cardassia recognizes Bajor's important enough to establish a formal embassy—"

"Might just mean they recognize how unimportant they've become," one of the security officers muttered snidely.

"Brilgar!" Emyr hushed her deputy sharply.

Kira's eyes flashed, but Alden just barely hid amusement.

A Cardassian embassy on the station? That would indeed be a change.

"They can't be trusted," one of the engineers, Pryen Bennu, interjected aggressively. "They haven't wanted to set up an embassy in eight years — why now?"

"It's a first step. They're worming their way back onto our world," another suggested.

"I'm sure I don't need to mention there are Cardassian embassies on every major world in the Federation, and have been for years," Alden said smoothly. "And they have not succeeded in taking over the Federation."

Kira looked surprised but gratified at the support, and had just opened her mouth when Kuhlman interrupted from across Ops.

"Colonel?"

"What is it, Ensign?"

"We have an incoming message. It's the Federation starship *Mal'kom*. ETA thirty minutes."

"Thirty minutes! I wasn't aware of any scheduled starship arrivals today!"

"They acknowledge being unscheduled, Colonel."

"Why are they here?"

"They didn't say. But they do want to talk with you, privately."

Kira looked even more irritated. "I'll take it in my office." She left the table. The door to the command office seemed to close behind her with a decidedly annoyed swish.

Kaoron couldn't help being thoughtful. "Indeed," he mused aloud. "I wonder as well what that ship is doing here."

Alden must have overheard. "What's so significant about the *Mal'kom*?"

Seeing he had everyone's attention, Kaoron reported evenly, "Admiral T'Lara of Vulcan often travels aboard that vessel."

Several of the crew exchanged looks.

"So?" Alden prompted impatiently. "What's significant about this admiral?"

It was Nog who answered. "Admiral T'Lara is with the Starfleet JAG office. The last time she was here, she presided over an extradition hearing for a Starfleet officer. If she's coming to Deep Space Nine, somebody's in trouble."

"Extradition! To who?"

"The Klingons."

Alden's expression hardened.

"There's no reports of anybody ... having done anything..." Pryen asked apprehensively.

"No." Emyrn shook her head. "Nothing that's been forwarded through my office." She glanced at each of the Starfleet officers around the table in turn.

"You don't suppose Admiral T'Lara just wants to talk to Shakaar about our relay station on the other side of the Celestial Temple, do you?" Pryen continued, turning to Nog.

He shrugged helplessly — his own involvement in the relay station was minimal.

"I do not believe the admiral would be involved in any discussion or negotiation regarding the relay station," Kaoron offered. "It is not within her jurisdiction."

"So what is her jurisdiction?"

"Briefly, jurisdiction itself," he explained evenly. "The admiral tends to be involved in judicial matters both within Starfleet and between Federation planets and other worlds. Including extradition, as Lieutenant Nog noted."

Alden was still studying Kaoron. "How do you know so much about this admiral?"

Kaoron met his gaze steadily. "I have had opportunity to become acquainted with Admiral T'Lara." To their questioning expressions, he added, "However, speculation may be premature. We do not at this time know if the admiral is aboard. The vessel does occasionally handle other missions than transporting flag officers. It may simply be another arrival for the artists' gathering on the station."

Kaoron calmly turned his attention to his station.

The commanding officer's door swished open and Kira stepped out. "We have a guest arriving." She studied the Ops personnel appraisingly, then made a decision. "Lieutenant Kaoron, you're with me."

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The *Mal'kom* docked without incident, and the admiral disembarked. The Vulcan was a formidable looking woman. The formal white military uniform only accentuated her dark brown, sharply cut hair and sallow complexion. Her piercing blue eyes and narrow, tight mouth struck Kira as stern and somehow critical.

"Admiral T'Lara," Kira greeted the Vulcan officer respectfully. "Welcome back to Deep Space Nine."

"Thank you, Colonel," the admiral replied in a polite but detached tone.

Kira gestured at Kaoron. "This is Lieutenant Kaoron, the Starfleet science officer assigned to the station."

With no change in expression, T'Lara nodded briefly. "Lieutenant."

"Admiral."

"As you requested, Admiral," Kira continued after an awkward second, "I've contacted Bajor for a courier ship to transport you. I'm afraid, however ... due to very hectic current schedules and events, an incoming ship won't arrive for several days." At least, that was the excuse they'd given her; Kira wasn't sure she believed it, or the admiral would accept it.

However: "I appreciate the prompt arrangements, Colonel. And I assure you, a brief layover on your station will not be an imposition. As you may recall, it has been some time since I last visited here. It will be interesting to see what changes have occurred."

"We do have a ... cultural gathering aboard the station at the moment. A number of painters, sculptors, musicians, dancers, and such, displaying their various talents and creations." For the first time, Kira was actually glad of the visitors; it might save her from having to entertain the admiral for the next few days. "I believe there are several musical performances scheduled for this evening as well, and dancing tomorrow, along with other events."

She thought she saw a glimmer of enthusiasm in T'Lara's eyes. "I look forward to it. There is much we can learn about other cultures from what they value in art, dance, and music."

Kira was happy to feed into the interest. "We have guests from several Federation worlds and colonies, Bajor of course, the Romulan Empire, Cardassia, even an Aldean."

"Indeed. An Aldean sun weaver?"

"I believe so. I've been given to understand this is somewhat remarkable, that the Aldeans seldom leave their world."

The admiral nodded. "Yes, despite the clamor and curiosity of those who have heard the ancient tales of that people and their creations. I look forward to a closer observation of their legendary highest art form. It appears a most unique fusion of light and sound."

"I haven't had opportunity to see it myself yet," the colonel had to admit, irrationally feeling guilty. "Things have been rather hectic on the station."

"Of course."

"Syrlynor of Vulcan is also among the visiting artists," Kaoron stated quietly.

T'Lara looked at him. "It has been long since I encountered Syrlynor. He is a gifted mathematician and artist. His work is quite precise and logical." She turned her attention back to Kira. "I presume you have arranged quarters for my stay here."

"Yes, although probably not to your usual standard — with so many guests here, we're a little cramped just now...." Kira apologized.

"I quite understand, Colonel. But I assure you, I do not expect to spend much time there, and my needs are simple. I am sure you have many additional responsibilities today, especially with so many visitors. Perhaps your lieutenant can show me to my quarters, and you can return to your duties."

Feeling dismissed, Kira nodded. "Certainly, Admiral."

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Kaoron led T'Lara toward the habitat ring. The first few moments passed with unremarkable small talk, including comments on some of the current visitors to DS9, and how the station had come to play host to them. Then:

"I have read your report on the incident with the Wormhole closure," the admiral remarked after a brief lull in the conversation. "I must agree with your assessment the Romulans' primary goal was not scientific research."

"May I inquire, Admiral, if any additional information has come to light on that issue?"

"It would be better if you did not."

"Then my inquiry is withdrawn."

"That is appreciated."

They walked on.

Kaoron couldn't resist his curiosity. "Does your visit to Bajor suggest Federation concerns about potential Romulan intelligence activity in this sector?"

Annoyance showed only in the slightest tightening of the admiral's mouth. "Lieutenant, your ... interest in the Romulans is understandable, in light of your heritage, and I do not begrudge it. However, you do not have the necessary clearance level to discuss this matter."

"My apologies, Admiral." A second later, he paused before a door. "If they are satisfactory, these will be your quarters for the duration of your stay on the station." The door slid open.

"I am sure they will be." The admiral glanced inside.

"However, I must advise you, these quarters are very near those assigned to several of the visitors for the arts festival."

She turned back to him. "In what manner is that a concern?"

"It may perhaps be ... uncomfortable. Colonel Kira thought you might wish to be located near the Vulcan artists. Syrllynor's quarters are three doors down, on the right."

The admiral stared thoughtfully down the corridor, but made no response.

"I thought you should know." Kaoron bowed his head. "I am due back in Ops. I will arrange for your personal gear to be transported here. If you have no plans for dinner this evening, I can recommend several restaurants on the Promenade. Or perhaps you will dine with Colonel Kira and the senior officers, or other dignitaries on the station?"

"No, I will eat in my quarters this evening. I have matters to review. I assume the replicators are operational? But I anticipate attending several events tomorrow. And I also wish to speak with you again. There is a matter we must discuss."

"As you wish." A stirring of uneasiness in his thoughts, Kaoron returned to Ops.

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His sleep had been unsettled, and he woke early. With several hours before he was due on duty, Kaoron elected to spend time at the science lab, hoping to glean a few more tidbits of useful information from what he'd come to consider "his" debris. His expression set and focused, the lieutenant lowered himself onto his heels to peer through the force screen at the magnified fracture patterns of the thick metal panel.

"A rather unusual alloy, in a Breen ship," he murmured to himself. "And yet if...."

He heard steps entering the lab. The pacing was measured and familiar.

"Admiral," he greeted, rising.

"Lieutenant." She sounded reproofing.

"After your long trip, I expected you would want to rest this morning, or I would have stopped earlier."

"I am accustomed to rising early, as you may recall. Sixty-five years in Starfleet have served to hone my personal discipline," the admiral replied with no hint of boasting in her neutral tone. "And I had hoped to encounter and speak with you privately."

"I am of course at your disposal. Do you wish to speak here, or perhaps over breakfast? Or do you begin your day with athletic activity?"

"I find early activity increasingly beneficial as the impact of age becomes more pronounced," she observed, "and I doubt you have failed to recognize my apparel."

"You have not yet reached ninety years of age, Admiral," Kaoron said. "I'm sure the impacts are not yet so pronounced."

"Attempts at flattery are illogical," T'Lara said dryly. "And I would have expected, as we have privacy and are obviously off the record, we could address one another other than by rank."

Kaoron bowed, his lips twitching slightly. "Of course, mother. What is your current preferred morning exercise? I will certainly join you."

"Whether familiar or not?" She sounded both approving and exasperated at the same sound — Kaoron had never understood how she could manage that.

"I am willing to attempt most activities, once."

"So I have noted. But we have a serious matter to discuss, my son."

He raised an eyebrow.

"A family matter."

There was a long silence.

"I shall change into more appropriate attire and join you," he said evenly.

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