

# "Arrivals, Departures, Omens"

## Chapter 2

"You know I value your input, Ezri," he said thoughtfully. "So tell me honestly, what do you think?"

"I think that's too much."

"Oh? Why?"

"Because if we order that, I won't be eating at all — I'll be too busy being sick."

Bashir looked up from the menu at Dax. "What? Oh, right, you don't care for *gagh*..." He glanced back at the menu, then looked at Loron. "All right, let's make it a small side order of cilian *gagh*, but no blood sauce, and the mixed platter for two, hold the *tarq* drippings."

"To welcome back a good customer like you, doctor, I'll put a half order on the side, and I'll bring it to your table myself," the heavysset Klingon restaurateur assured the human in his booming, gravelly voice, poking at the human's shoulder and adding, to Bashir's obvious embarrassment, "You must rebuild a warrior's strength!"

Then Loron grinned fondly at Dax, laughing deep in his throat. "And for you, Ezri, heir of Dax, there will be sweet *yuch traq'hot* for dessert — I had a shipment brought in special from the homeworld, and I have been saving the best for you!"

Dax perked up at mention of one of the few Klingon foods she actually loved, and had enjoyed even before being joined. "I'm sorry I haven't been here more often, Loron, but..."

The jagged-toothed grin widened. "You will make it up to me!"

Bashir and Dax took a table in the corner, as quiet and private as any place could be, in the Klingon restaurant. For several minutes they sat in silence, sipping sweetened raktajino.

Over her mug, the Trill studied the human's face. A strange and distant stillness had come over him, and she wondered where his thoughts strayed. They didn't appear to be in the moment or on their evening. From the shadow of green in his eyes, he was watching vistas far from the station.

"Julian?" she prodded.

He seemed entranced by the depths of his mug.

"*Jules*?" she said more strongly.

"Hmm?" He looked up. "What was that?"

"Are you here with me?"

"What?" He stared at the odd question.

"Because you look like you're a couple dozen light-years away."

"I'm sorry." He set down the mug and clasped his hands on the table, leaning forward. His gaze fixed on her face. "It's good to be back, but I guess I'm not used to it yet."

"Hmm." She leaned forward, searching his face with equal intensity. "So why does that make it hard to stay here with me?"

Bashir's eyes shifted, staring over her shoulder. "I guess.... No, that's not it," he changed his tone and confessed. "I'm having problems leaving the infirmary at the infirmary, if you know what I mean. Habit. The last few months, I haven't really been able to stop thinking of the mission and what we were doing, what had to be done to help the people back to their feet. Not even for a minute. One crisis after another...."

He glanced down moodily for a second, then back at her, forcing a lilt to his voice. "So, here I am. Back with you. Back on the station. Back to everyday events. Let's see. Hmm. I've heard Girani extolling the virtues of the addition to the medical staff in my absence. What do you think of her?"

"Her—? You mean Monrow?"

"Of course. She's the only new person I'm aware of."

"I thought she was supposed to be temporary!"

Bashir rocked back. "That sounded rather ... vehement! What's wrong with her?"

Dax made a face. "Nothing! That I know of. We ... haven't really hit it off well."

"Oh?"

"She scowls at me. Or she glares at me. When she deigns to notice me at all."

"You two really *didn't* hit it off well! But surely you're exaggerating. According to Girani, Dr. Monrow gets along well with everyone. From her record she's an excellent doctor. It sounds like she's well-respected all over the station, my nursing staff is in awe of her, and her cooking compares favorably to Captain Sisko's — she even has Morn wrapped around her little finger, to the envy of more than one woman here! Or are you one of them and I've lost your heart to that Lurian rogue?" he teased melodramatically.

"Don't be silly! Monrow...." Now it was Dax's turn to stare uneasily into her mug. "She doesn't get along well with me. And I have no idea why. Endar doesn't like her either. But then, he doesn't like doctors in general."

"Endar. I haven't seen much of him yet."

"He's been pretty busy, with everything going on with this arts festival or whatever Minister Lizin is calling it."

"I saw your diagnosis for him," Bashir said more seriously. "PTSD and ODD. Difficult combination. I'm actually surprised, with that diagnosis, that he's still here. Especially with the other reports I've been reading about him."

Ezri shifted a little uncomfortably. "It hasn't been easy," she acknowledged. "I've been trying to treat Endar and be a buffer between him and Nerys."

Bashir frowned.

"They ... didn't start off well at all," she admitted.

"I remember."

"Well, it hasn't really gotten much better," she explained in a rush. "And with some of the things he's done.... That near-breakdown when he first arrived. His attitude and anger. Triggering that failsafe. Kidnapping Quark and going AWOL. Risking a war with the Ferengi. For a while, it just seemed to escalate. Having a diagnosis didn't make it any easier for Nerys and Endar to work together. I even thought about locking them in a room together, figuring they'd have to reach some kind of accommodation — that, or kill each other. Then they got stuck in the turbolift. They didn't kill each other — but they didn't talk either!"

Bashir stared at her in amazement. "Surely you're exaggerating!"

"Seriously, Julian, if the war were still going on, I don't think I could have talked Nerys into letting him stay. And I know it wouldn't have been the right thing to do, and maybe it would have been an unreasonable risk." The words spilled out more urgently. "But the treatment centers are all so full of war-traumatized patients now, so I don't know where he'd go if I wanted him to be treated somewhere else, and we're not at war now, so we've got a bit of a break. He trusts me, and I don't think he trusts easily, and he's making progress, I can tell, and I think he'd lose that if we sent him away. He might shut down completely. I mean, here, he's got something to fight for, a reason to want to get better, and—" She paused for a breath.

"Whoah," Julian finally interrupted with a chuckle, "you sound like you're trying to convince *me*."

Ezri exhaled slowly. "I think maybe I am," she admitted, trying to relax. "There were days it felt like I was the only one Endar trusted, and the only one who was willing to give him a chance. But he's making friends here, and working hard at his therapy and his responsibilities, most of the time. And I know it'll help, too, now you're back."

"Here you are!" The deep voice startled them both, as Loron appeared beside their table. Three plates, one large, two small, hit the table with a clatter; it was a miracle nothing fell or crawled off. Their raktajino mugs almost bounced. "Eat to satisfy a warrior's hunger! And then," he held up a finger triumphantly, "there will be *yuch traq'hot* to savor!"

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The trio at the table would have stood out just about anywhere. Seeing a Ferengi, a human, and a Tellarite drinking together wasn't unheard of, but their attire was what really set the young men apart. Baseball uniforms were rare on almost any planet except certain Earth colony worlds, and anywhere but Deep Space Nine, no Ferengi would have knowingly been caught in one, unless there was profit in it. However, the three young Starfleet officers had plans for the evening, and were biding their time at Quark's as they waited for their holosuite. Nog wore his own Niners uniform; Kalcheb had followed suit and fabricated a uniform from the same team; Kuhlman, on the other hand, wore a uniform from an old Earth team called the San Francisco Giants.

"...And as soon as the festival is over, we're back to fixing up every little broken-down freighter that comes limping through here!" Kalcheb griped.

His friends listened with some amusement; Tellarites were known for their argumentative nature and grumbling, and this was nothing they hadn't heard before.

"And half the Romulan fleet seems to be stopping for repairs and supplies while complaining we're not working fast enough for them," he continued, shaking his head. "Probably spying on us while they're here, too."

That was a more alarming complaint.

"Let's leave tomorrow's duties for tomorrow," Nog interrupted, carefully looking around to see who among the customers at Quark's might be listening to them. There were a number of Romulans among the crowd. "And we probably shouldn't be discussing that here, of all places."

"Afraid your uncle has listening devices under the table?" Kuhlman said impishly, taking another drink of synthale from his mug.

"No," the Ferengi replied absently. "I make sure they're disabled every time I sit down. But there's a lot of ... ears around, and with all the visitors...." He glanced around again.

"So let's finish our drinks and see if that holosuite's available," Kuhlman suggested. "I'm in the mood to toss a few." One hand patted the baseball glove lying on the table beside his mug.

The Ferengi laughed; the Tellarite snorted.

"You're always in the mood to toss a few!" Nog teased.

"You two would play baseball every night if you could!" Kalcheb grumbled good-naturedly.

"Nah, just every other night," Kuhlman grinned. "The rest of the nights, I'd be at Vic's playing the piano!"

"It's been great having more people to play baseball," the Ferengi chuckled. "I can't wait until Jake gets back — he'll be amazed we've almost put together a whole new team!"

"I hope he gets back soon too. I think I've worked out a way around his curve ball, and I can't wait to test my bat against the real thing," the human noted.

Nog thought he heard whispers somewhere, but it was hard to be sure in the din of the bar, even for Ferengi ears.

Kalcheb sighed deeply. He'd first heard of the old Earth game upon coming to the station, and only begun to play in the last few months, since beginning to work with Nog. "I suppose that means I must resign myself to the intricacies of the 'squeeze play' and the 'sacrifice bunt' again."

That caught Nog's attention again. "Don't make fun of it! The bunt," he reminded them proudly, "is the hit my father made in the game against the Logicians that scored our only run!"

"I wonder if they'd be up for a series," Kuhlman pondered.

"The Logicians?" Nog's spirits nose-dived. "Not without Jake and Captain Sisko," he sighed. "Wouldn't be right...."

"Excuse me," a tentative voice interjected.

The group glanced up. Several young people had approached their table. One of them was male, tall and stocky, with shadowy dark hair, obviously of mixed Bajoran and Cardassian heritage, from his pale gray complexion, neck ridges, and indented forehead, wearing a plain metal earring of dedication to the Prophets. The other two were female Bajorans, both dark-complexioned. One was slender and tall with a mass of tight dark curls spilling out of a hairclasp of the same metal as her simple earring and cuff. The other was short and a little on the plump side, with a reddish cast to her dark braided hair and especially pronounced nasal ridges; her earring glittered with several small bright stones. None of the group stood out for attire or expression.

It was the slim female who'd spoken.

"Do you play the Emissary's game?" the woman continued.

"You mean baseball? Yes, we play baseball," Kuhlman responded.

The newcomers exchanged excited looks with each other.

"I told you that's what they were talking about!" the other girl hissed, her dark eyes bright and eager.

"We watched one of the Emissary's games today. But it was so complex, there was so much we didn't understand. You are like the Emissary, you play the game — teach us," entreated the apparent spokesman for the group.

The officers looked at each other.

"Sure," Nog said with spirit. "We're always happy to have more players. It's more fun that way."

"On one condition," Kuhlman cut in. His gaze was fixed on the attractive Bajoran girl.

Taken aback, the woman replied, "What's that?"

"You have to tell us your names."

She ignored the flirtatiousness in his tone. "My name is Wani." She indicated the other young woman. "This is Nallan." She nodded at the youth. "And this is Jord. We're students of Vedek Nane."

Nog frowned. "Vedek Nane doesn't arrive until tomorrow."

"He allowed us to come ahead while he tended to some other matters," Wani replied. "And now, will you tell us your names?"

"I'm Lieutenant Nog. This is Ensign Kalcheb," he gestured. "And that's Ensign Kuhlman."

"David Kuhlman," the human interjected, with a charming smile at Wani. "Let's play ball."

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Kira had received a letter from Keiko O'Brien two days before. She hadn't had time to listen to it until this evening, taking a few minutes to try to relax at the end of a very long and stressful day. This, at least, she knew would have nothing to do with politics or world-shaking matters. Wrapped in her robe, she requested a ginger tea from the replicator and prepared to settle down.

"Computer, play Keiko personal letter number ... oh yes, number four," she ordered softly.

"Hello, Nerys." Keiko's face appeared on the screen. She was growing her hair out and wore it in a new style, more upswept. It suited her, Kira thought.

She lay back on her couch, eyes closed, enjoying the letter from a friend far across the galaxy.

*"I know how busy you must be, so don't worry if you haven't time to write, I understand..."*

Kira felt a stab of guilt. Yes, she'd been busy, but so was her friend, with a husband, two children, a cat, a teaching position, research, a home, a garden, and a book to write. And yet Keiko found time to send her letters. She resolved to write back the next day.

*"The spiny basil finally seems to have decided it wants to grow here, although the spines along the stems are a little thicker than they should be, and I think that's how Chester keeps scratching his nose. Probably still thinks he can nibble at it like he did my plants at the station, and he's always surprised the stems aren't as flimsy and tender as he's used to.*

*"I keep remembering the time he got into my collection of Gamma Quadrant myren herbs — it's amazing he hasn't poisoned himself with everything he eats. Sometimes I think that cat's going to live forever. Nine lives were just the start."*

Kira's mind wandered over what she would say in her response — planetary and interstellar political problems? The ongoing refugee situation? The looming Bajoran religious crisis? The stalled kai election? Riots and art festivals? Personnel issues? Bashir was back, of course, but Julian would no doubt be sending his own missives to the O'Briens. There had to be something more personally significant, more intimate to share....

*"...Yoshi's spending a couple of days with his grandparents — Miles's father and stepmother. You remember Miles plays the cello, don't you? And his father wanted him to go to the Aldebaran Music Academy? Well, knowing I play the clarinet too, although far from Miles's level of talent, Michael insists to anybody who'll listen that Yoshi must have musical genes. So he gave Yoshi a bodhran, of all things! I doubt it'll last until the new year, but at least the noise isn't in our house, this week anyway.*

*"If Yoshi does take after his father with musical talent, I have no doubt Michael will push us to send him to the*

*Aldebaran Music Academy. And my aunt's talking about a shamisen as a gift for him at the next opportunity. That would give Chester some competition in the noise department!"* Keiko laughed.

Kira smiled too, despite having no real idea what either a bodhran or a shamisen were, beyond some sort of Terran musical instruments, or why they might be competition for a cat. At least she remembered seeing the cello and the clarinet during the months she'd lived with the O'Briens while carrying Yoshi, and the couple had each played for her a few times. Miles was indeed a gifted musician as well as engineer, and Keiko was quite a talented musician too, despite her modest denials. A shared interest in music had been one of the things that first brought them together.

Kira realized her attention had strayed again, and brought it back to Keiko's voice.

*"...Children say the most remarkable things. The other night, Molly was etching a design on a block of glass when she looked up at me, and said, 'If Julian and Ezri don't get married, I'll marry Julian when I'm old enough.' My jaw dropped for a second, but I was able to tell her that's something she would have to decide if or when the time came.*

*"Miles, on the other hand — he had to sit down. I could see him trying to swallow!"* Keiko was laughing between words. *"And when Molly turned back to her glass, he just looked at me and said, 'I don't care, I'm not calling him son!' and headed out to his workshop!"*

Kira laughed aloud at Keiko's imitation of Miles's words and accent.

Fond memories turned thoughtful. *"Later,"* Keiko finished, *"I asked Molly why she thought she wanted to marry Julian. Do you know what she said? She said, 'I don't want him to be alone, and I think he must be lonely without any brothers and without Da there to play with anymore.' Out of the mouths of babes...."* She shook her head. *"I know Miles misses everybody there, especially Julian. And I miss you too.*

*"Take care, Nerys. Good bye."*

"Take care, Keiko," Kira said softly. "Lights, dim."

As the lights dimmed to a pleasant glow, Kira got up and walked to her windowport. Outside, she could see the stars, clear and unblinking, in all directions out to infinity. Looking up, she could see the belly of the *Tecumseh*, berthed at one of the upper pylons. The *Defiant* was berthed to her left; she could just see the edge of the port nacelle. She had seen the view so many times in almost eight years, it was usually familiar and comfortable.

Tonight, after listening to Keiko's letter, full of little details about her family and her life, it looked vast and empty. And Kira felt alone.

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"Put your fingers a little closer together, yes, like that..." Kuhlman wrapped his hands over Wani's, his arms around her to "better demonstrate the proper placement of the hands on the bat," as he justified it.

The better to keep his arms around her and enjoy the spicy perfumed scent of the thick hair escaping beneath the batter's helmet, Nog thought impatiently as he waited in his catcher's crouch.

"I think I have it figured out," the young woman murmured.

"If you're sure...."

"Yes."

Nog rolled his eyes and sucked in an impatient breath.

As Kuhlman released her and backed away with obvious reluctance, Wani turned her attention to the pitcher, a holo-player patterned on "Fingers" Jordan, a historical favorite of both Benjamin and Jake Sisko, and Nog's usual choice for pitcher in Jake's absence.

"I'm ready!" she announced.

"Right here, Fingers!" Nog yelled, grinding a fist into his glove. "Right across the plate!"

"Plate?" Wani repeated, distracted.

Jordan wound up.

The pitch came in.

Wani swung, too early.

Crack.

The ball flew foul.

Kuhlman tried to dodge.

He failed, and went down hard, spread-eagled on the grass.

Nallan shrieked; she, Jord, and Kalcheb froze, huddled at the entrance to the dugout. Nog threw down his catcher's mask and raced to Kuhlman's side. Wani spun around, still awkwardly holding the bat, and realized what she'd done.

"Infirmary! Medical emergency in the holosuite!" Nog leaned over the ensign, who showed no sign of consciousness. "Computer, end program!"

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